

EVANS

AUGUSTA JANE

DEVOTA

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A telegram, Madam. The messenger waits for an answer."

The butler held out a silver salver, and Mrs. Rexford Churchill laid aside her embroidery and took the ominous yellow envelope.

Glancing over the contents, her face brightened.

"No answer, Ramsay. Tell Hansel to take the dog-cart to the station in ample time to meet the 5.42 train, as Miss Lindsay is coming. The trap and victoria are in the hands of the fishing party who may be late returning home."

The hostess turned toward her companion, an elderly woman whose white hair was partly covered by a lace cap.

"This is certainly a charming surprise, and will be as welcome to you and the Bishop as it is to me.

"Listen, Mrs. Roscoe:

"I sail on Saturday. Decided suddenly to run up for a night only to say good-bye. Expect me by 5.42 express. If bungalow is crowded put cot in nursery. Must return on 8.20 train to-morrow morning.

'Devota Lindsay.'

"When I planned this house party she promised to join us, but afterward wrote cancelling the engagement, which she said she could not keep because her uncle insisted on sailing abroad earlier than she had anticipated. Only three days ago I received farewell notes and a box of souvenirs for my children who simply worship her."

"Are you an old friend of Miss Lindsay?" asked the Bishop's wife, peering over the top of her gold-rimmed glasses.

"I made her acquaintance about three years ago – under circumstances that proved her an angel of mercy to me and mine. While in Switzerland, my husband was called home on urgent business, leaving us to follow him a few weeks later. Two days after we sailed, a frightful storm set in, and I and my elder children were so sea-sick we could not hold up our heads, even when my baby boy developed malignant diphtheria. His nurse deserted us, fellow passengers shunned us as if we were lepers, and only the steamer's surgeon ventured to assist in caring for the stricken child. Then Miss Lindsay, though a total stranger, came to the rescue – gave up her stateroom to my two children, Grace and Otto, whom she placed in charge of her maid, an admirable woman of middle age, and, though we had never met before, Miss Lindsay shared my room and nursed my baby day and night. We were three days overdue, and when my husband met us at the pier, he carried the older children to their grandmother, but that dear, blessed girl, Devota Lindsay, went with me to the isolated ward of an infirmary, and remained until my poor little one was pronounced well. Do you wonder we have all lifted her to a pedestal as high as the court-house clock tower?"

"Probably your great intimacy with Miss Lindsay enables you to fully understand her character, which seems to most of us an enigma."

"My dear madam, an attempt at intimacy with her would prove as satisfactory and responsive as a flirtation with the Sphinx. Dearly as I love, and warmly as I admire her, I should never presume to intrude on personal matters. Her beauty and gracious magnetism draw one very close, yet I am always conscious that some invisible bar is never let down, and that impalpable barrier hedges her from

curious questioning. She is the only woman I know who absolutely declines personal confidences, abhors gossip, and never talks about herself. One afternoon at a 'reception,' where a scandalous record was severely criticised by an intimate associate of the indiscreet lady under fire, I heard Miss Lindsay say: 'That shrewd cynic's advice was wise, "Live with your friends remembering they may one day be your enemies."' She certainly accepts his rule of conduct."

"She has refused so many conspicuously eligible offers, that no one believes she will ever marry, and it surely is regrettable that her great fortune should not be consecrated to Christian philanthropy. Dr. Bevan, her rector, dined with us recently, and he and the Bishop deplored her complete indifference to church work. Dr. Bevan said he had made her president of the 'Charity Guild,' and when he called to urge upon her, acceptance of the responsible position that involved an individual investigation of needy sufferers, she waved him off, exclaiming: 'Slumming! Please be so kind as to excuse me from that variety of church picnic, of Guild outing. Assess me as you think proper, or as the charity needs demand, but "slumming" includes draggled skirts, and soiled, defaced ideals; and no laundries exist for the purification and repairing of besmirched ideals.' She seems utterly incapable of any spiritual exaltation, and her rector assured us she paid promptly her church and charity dues just as perfunctorily as her real estate taxes, and her insurance policies – "

"Dr. Bevan appears to have forgotten the costly new reredos she erected for us in St. Luke's," interrupted Mrs. Churchill.

"Not at all, my dear, but he deplores the fact that she gave it with no more enthusiasm than she would have shown in ordering a new roof, or a plate glass front for one of her office buildings."

"I fancy gushing enthusiasm in Miss Lindsay would surprise us quite as much as a lava flow on the Jungfrau. This is the era of sensational fads and whimsies, and of spectacular philanthropic feats, but I believe my noble friend fondles no pet 'mission,' has no fetich – unless it be the splendid pipe organ in her music room, or my own young barbarian Rex, whose life she saved by careful nursing."

"Of course you know her family history is rather peculiar."

"She has never referred to it, but social gossip always traces outlines as regards millionaires' domestic laundries."

"The facts are well known to a few persons. Hugh Lindsay, this woman's father, was a remarkably handsome, dashing young man with barely money enough to pay his tailor and board bills, when a rich college chum carried him in his yacht to England. There he met Lady Shirley – , who had been betrothed by her father and mother to an elderly, gouty, widowed earl, with the expectation that a marriage settlement would enable her parents to reclaim a certain estate that was heavily encumbered. The girl was young and headstrong, infatuated with Hugh Lindsay, and one day at Monte Carlo, while her parents were in the casino, Lady Shirley met Lindsay, whose friend's yacht was lying off Monaco, and she ran away with the impecunious, good-looking young athlete. An American clergyman went with them to the front of the Church of Ste. Devota, and married them there – while the January festival procession in honor of the saint thronged the church. That explains the singular misnomer of your friend's baptismal label – Devota. The soul of the girl martyr, whose burial was dove conducted, was supposed to hover in benediction over the nuptial ceremony, hence the only child of this marriage was christened Devota. Ludicrously inappropriate for a character devoid of spirituality! Very naturally the bride's family disowned so disobedient a child, and the young couple soon confronted poverty. Lindsay went manfully to work as clerk in a law office, and they lived humbly and quietly for nearly two years, when lo! his brother Ormond died suddenly, leaving an enormous fortune in gold, silver and copper mines located in a western territory. Ormond was a bachelor, an adventurous prospector in regions where a great railroad was only partly finished, and as he left no other heirs his vast estate was divided between Hugh and another brother, Hollis Lindsay, giving millions to each. Then began social exploitation and 'yellow journal' comments on 'princely expenditures' for town and country houses, yachts, etc., etc., all kept up on lavish lines of strictly English methods. Mrs. Lindsay's titled parents suddenly remembered her existence, and made cordial overtures for a reconciliation, which

were spurned by the resentful daughter who refused even an amicable correspondence. She was an extremely beautiful and haughty woman, but most devotedly attached to her handsome, loyal husband, and he never recovered from the shock of her death. They were returning from a ride, and on the stone drive-way near the front door, their only child Devota, about five years old, was romping with her dog. Suddenly she darted from behind a clump of dense shrubbery, and as her white skirts fluttered, Mrs. Lindsay's horse shied, reared and threw her to the ground, killing her instantly. Hugh Lindsay became a morose, morbid recluse, avoiding the sight of his poor, innocent child whom he regarded as the cause of his wife's tragic death. Three years later he died, leaving Devota to the guardianship of his brother Hollis, who at once shut up the houses, sold yacht, horses and hounds, and placed his niece in the hands of an old maid aunt, sister of his mother. She lived in a small town in a distant part of this State near the mountains. Devota was kept there in comparative seclusion, trained by governesses and tutors until she was about eighteen; then Hollis took her abroad, and as he has long been a globe-trotting 'scientist' – heaven save the mark! – the girl was dragged hither and yon among byways and jungles, and only God knows what heathen holes. Hollis Lindsay has no more religion than the Java "pithecanthropus" he declares is the biological Adam, and which he accepts as his own ancestor."

"She is tenderly attached to her uncle, and, Mrs. Roscoe, I heard your husband say Hollis Lindsay ranked high as a scholar and scientist," ventured Mrs. Churchill.

"Yes, more's the pity. Do you know what he has the effrontery to assert as proof of his 'monism' sophistries?"

Mrs. Churchill bit her lip to restrain a laugh, and bent over her embroidery hoop.

"No; and bless my poor ignorant soul, you must excuse me if I confess that I don't much care; because we women never understand tiresome wrangles over fossil bugs, snakes and beasts that were kind and decent enough to crawl into the earth and become extinct before they had a chance to worry us. The agreeable fact that appeals to my sympathy is that Mr. Lindsay is an extraordinarily handsome man, a delightful talker, and most charming host."

"As head of a Christian household, you will at least admit that it is part of your duty to guard the sanctity of Bible records. Hollis Lindsay declares Cain took for his wife 'a highly developed female animal,' of course a beast; doubtless a monkey! Think of such a man as suitable to guide the training of a young woman! It is monstrous that atheism should prowl through the world, clothed in purple and fine linen, panoplied with wealth and fashionable influence – and sowing poison at every step. Heresy is just as contagious as smallpox – and vicious environment produces depravity."

"But, Mrs. Roscoe, luckily there are exceptions. Sometimes it happens that 'breed is stronger than pasture.' Romulus and Remus were baser than beasts if they had not dearly loved and toddled after their four-footed foster mother, yet no fable tells us they imbibed carnivorous tastes or pranced around as weir wolves. Last winter I met an English gentleman in Washington who told me something I should like to verify. He admired Miss Lindsay immensely, but he censured severely her treatment of her grandmother in London. Mrs. Roscoe, do you know the circumstances?"

"Yes, I have the facts from the wife of our minister who presented Devota at Court. It appears that Lady Shirley's mother saw your friend on that occasion, and so startling was the girl's resemblance to her own lovely mother, that the dowager grandmother almost swooned at sight of her. Next day she wrote a most affectionate note imploring the young woman to come to her, and sent her carriage and maid to the hotel. The note was read and returned with this cruelly curt response: 'I am leaving London to-day. Permit me to say that the recognition withheld from my mother will never be accepted by her child.' Can you imagine the implacable, rancorous revenge that could so harshly reject overtures from an aged, white-haired grandmother? That girl has the wrought-iron will of Lady Shirley. Not long ago Horace Bingham told my son that when it was reported a young English nobleman – lacking money to repair his Elizabethan manor house – was trying to marry Miss Lindsay, Horace asked her when she would wear the ancestral diamonds his lordship offered her, and she replied icily: 'I do not buy my jewels from titled peddlers.' There! I hear the Bishop coughing and he needs his lozenges."

As the door closed behind Mrs. Roscoe, her hostess laughed softly and murmured:

"Dear old, pre-sanctified cat!"

An exceedingly pretty woman, dowered with a kind and sunny nature, Mrs. Churchill was a devotedly tender wife and mother, loyally attached to her church, and undeniably fond of her card club, opera box and gay house-parties – the latter an unusually attractive feature of summer sojourns at her villa, "The Oleanders."

Two hours later in the day, she sat before the oval mirror of her dressing-room, watching the nimble fingers of the maid pile her black hair into a towering pompadour, while Miss Lindsay leaned back in an easy chair close to the onyx toilet table.

Behind the blue crest of a distant peak the sun had disappeared, but the vivid light of afterglow streamed through the open window framed in riotous clusters of *réve d'or* roses; and beyond the eastern rock-bound shore line stretched a breeze-dimpled yellow sea, where sail boats swung like gigantic white butterflies over a wind-swept field of jonquils.

"Mrs. Churchill, where are the children? As I must leave after an early cup of coffee in the morning, I should like to see as much as possible of them this evening."

"All gone to a dog show in the village, and afterwards to a birthday tea at the Whiteheads'. I tried to buy off Rex, and offered sundry bribes, as he is rather too young yet; but he is such a persistent, wilful little sinner, and besides, the governess, seconded by Grace and Otto, stood security for his good behavior at the tea-party. There, Anice – my head is sufficiently like the tower of Babel! Get things ready for Miss Lindsay and shake out her dinner gown."

The maid fastened a diamond crescent in her mistress's hair and withdrew.

"Now, why must you hurry away on that first train?"

"Uncle Hollis wishes to read a paper on the opening day of a congress in Geneva, and any delay in our sailing day after to-morrow would cancel his engagement. So many matters remain unfinished I decided only at the last moment to run up for a night, and I very much doubt the wisdom of coming at all." She rose, closed the door of the dressing-room and resumed her seat.

"Miss Devota, how wonderfully well you look! Each year seems to add to your fresh loveliness and you appear younger than when I first saw you. Tell a needy friend how you manage to placate wrinkling, sallowing, greying time?"

"My health is perfect; my hair and teeth remain very loyal, and as I never insulted my complexion by any attempts to improve it, there seems no grievance for it to redress. With thanks for your friendly compliments let us dismiss my personality. Now, I owe you an explanation which your clock warns me must be brief. I am sure you will not doubt my sincere desire to see you all before going abroad – even when I tell you that a very different motive compelled this visit. I came here especially to see Governor Armitage, who, I am told, is still your guest."

"Yes, he remains with us until Saturday; but you knew he would belong to this house-party, for it was after I sent you a revised list of friends who had accepted, that you suddenly declined joining us."

"At that time there existed no reason for any wish to meet him."

"Is it possible you have never seen him?"

"I have seen him several times; once or twice at the opera he sat quite near my box – but I have not even a bowing acquaintance with him."

"You have not been to the State Capitol?"

"Not during his incumbency. You know all the horrible conditions that surround our unfortunate friend Amy Clinton. The date of her husband's execution is only five days distant, and every effort to delay it or secure a pardon has failed. Poor Amy's baby is critically ill, and old Mrs. Clinton is so prostrated since her unsuccessful journey to the Governor, in her son's behalf, that neither she nor the wife can make a farewell visit to the prison. This morning an urgent message over the telephone called me to the Clinton home, where I found Amy frantic with grief and dread. She showed me a telegram from her husband: 'I have no hope. Chaplain says only one last chance; insists you send Devota Lindsay

to Governor. She may save me. For God's sake get her help.' Can you imagine my painful perplexity? Amy could not give any reason for the chaplain's belief – she said he was a new man in the prison work and she could not recall his name. I tried to convince her it was utterly impossible that I could succeed where vastly more powerful influences had repeatedly failed; but in her frenzied condition she listened to no refusal. Knowing the hopelessness of the attempt, I resisted all appeals until she lifted her gasping baby close to my face, and almost screamed: 'Can you die in peace if you refuse to try to save my darling's father from the gallows? Will you see her in her coffin disgraced because you would not lift a finger?' So I am here, on a fool's errand, confronting humiliating defeat."

Mrs. Churchill's eyes were full of tears, and leaning forward she softly stroked Devota's beautiful hands.

"Oh, my dear – what a frightful ordeal for you! I would encourage you if I dared, but while the Governor is bland as May sunshine he is simply inexorable when once he decides a matter. Feminine wiles and feminine wails make no more impression on him than summer dew on an iron-clad; and his cool, smiling way of shieing at every suggestion of marriage makes me absolutely sure that some pretty, vixenish kitten of a girl has clawed and frazzled his heart strings. How I wish I could help you! Poor Amy – it is heart-breaking to think of her awful fate."

"You can help me by manœuvring to secure an opportunity for a brief presentation of Amy's appeal."

Mrs. Churchill clasped and unclasped a jewelled serpent at her wrist, and her brows contracted.

"That could easily be accomplished by his taking you in to dinner, but unluckily I am handicapped by the Bishop's wife who arrived only this morning and has precedence. Oh, the eternal unfitness of ecclesiastical ingredients in secular pie!"

"I am very glad he escorts Mrs. Roscoe, because I could not possibly broach my distressing business in the presence of a chattering dinner party, and I must obtain a private interview."

"I have arranged to consign you during dinner, to the tender mercies of your avowed naval worshipper, Captain Winstead, who is spending the week with his mother, and comes to us for this evening. The Governor and his secretary have exclusive use of the library, and sometimes they are shut up there after dinner. We can watch his movements, and you must storm the citadel and expel Mr. Walton who lives at his typewriter."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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