

Le Queux William

The Mystery of the Green

Ray



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CHAPTER I.

BESIDE STILL WATERS

The youth in the multi-coloured blazer laughed.

“You’d have to come and be a nurse,” he suggested.

“Oh, I’d go as a drummer-boy. I’d look fine in uniform, wouldn’t I?” the waitress simpered in return.

Dennis Burnham swallowed his liqueur in one savage gulp, pushed back his chair, and rose from the table.

“Silly young ass,” he said, in a voice loud enough for the object of his wrath to hear. “Let’s get outside.”

The four of us rose, paid our bill, and went out, leaving the youth and his flippant companions to themselves. For it was Bank Holiday, August the third, 1914, and I think, though it was the shortest and most uneventful of all our river “annuals,” it is the one which we are least likely to forget. On the Saturday Dennis, Jack Curtis, Tommy Evans and myself had started from Richmond on our yearly trip up the river. Even as we sat in the two punts playing bridge, moored at our first camping-place below Kingston Weir, disquieting rumours reached us in the form of excited questions from the occupants of passing craft. And now, as we rose from the dinner-table at the Magpie, Sunbury, two days later, it seemed that war was inevitable.

“What I can’t understand,” growled Dennis, as we stepped into one of the punts and paddled idly across to the lock, “is how any young idiot can treat the whole thing as a terrific joke. If we go to war with Germany – and it seems we must – it’s going to be – Good Heavens! who knows what it’s going to be!”

“Meaning,” said Tom, who never allowed any thought to remain half-expressed, “meaning that we are not prepared, and they are. We have to step straight into the ring untrained to meet an opponent who has been getting ready night and day for the Lord knows how many years.”

“Still, you know,” said Jack, who invariably found the bright spot in everything, “we never did any good as a nation until we were pushed.”

“We shall be pushed this time,” I replied; “and if we do go to war, we shall all be wanted.”

“And wanted at once,” Tom added.

“Which brings me to the point which most concerns us,” said Dennis, with a serious face. “What are *we* going to do?”

“It seems to me,” I replied, “that there is only one thing we can do. If the Government declare war, it is in your cause and mine; and who is to fight our battles but you and me?”

“That’s it, old man, exactly,” said Dennis. “We must appear in person, as you lawyers would say. I’m afraid there’s not the slightest hope of peace being maintained now; and, indeed, in view of the circumstances, I should prefer to say there is not the slightest fear of it. We can’t honourably keep out, so let us hope we shall step in at once.”

Jack’s muttered “hear hear” spoke for us all, and there was silence for a minute or two. My thoughts were very far away from the peaceful valley of the Thames; they had flown, in fact, to a still more peaceful glen in the Western Highlands – but of that anon. I fancy the others, too, were thinking of something far removed from the ghastly horror of war. Jack was sitting with an open cigarette-case in his hand, gazing wistfully at the bank to which we had moored the boat. There was a “little girl”

in the question. Poor chap; I knew exactly what he was thinking; he had my sympathy! The silence became uncomfortable, and it was Jack who broke it.

“Give me a match, Tommy,” he exclaimed suddenly, “and don’t talk so much.” Tom, who had not spoken a word for several minutes, produced the matches from a capacious pocket, and we all laughed rather immoderately at the feeble sally.

“As to talking,” said Tom, when our natural equanimity had been restored, “you all seem to be leaving me to say what we all know has to be said. And that is, what is the next item on the programme?”

“I think we had certainly better decide –” Dennis began.

“You old humbug!” exclaimed Tom. “You know perfectly well that we’ve all decided what we are going to do. It is merely the question of putting it in words. In some way or other we intend to regard the case of *Rex v. Wilhelm* as one in which we personally are concerned. Am I right?”

“Scored a possible,” said Jack, who had quite recovered his spirits.

“In which case,” Tom continued, “we don’t expect to be of much assistance to our King and country if we go gallivanting up to Wallingford, as originally intended. The question, therefore, remains, shall we go back by train – if we can find the station here – or shall we punt back to Richmond?”

“I don’t think we need worry about that,” said Dennis. “I vote we go back by river; it will be more convenient in every way, and we can leave the boats at Messums. If things are not so black as we think they are we can step on board again with a light heart, or four light hearts, if you prefer it, and start again. What do you say, Ron?”

“I should prefer to paddle back,” I replied. “It would be a pity to break up our party immediately. I don’t want to be sentimental, or anything of that sort, but you chaps will agree that we have had some very jolly times together in the past, and if we are all going to take out our naturalisation papers in the Atkins family, it is just possible that we – well, we may not be all together again next year.”

“And you, Jack?” asked Dennis.

“Oh, down stream for me,” said young Curtis, with what was obviously an effort at his usual light-hearted manner. “Think of all the beer we’ve got left.” But the laugh with which he accompanied his remark was not calculated to deceive any of us, and I am afraid my clumsy speech had set him thinking again. So we went “ashore,” and had a nightcap at the Magpie, where the flippant youth was announcing to an admiring circle that if he had half a dozen pals to go with him he wouldn’t mind joining the army himself! Having scoured the village in an unavailing attempt to round up half a pound of butter, we put off down stream, and spent the night in the beautiful backwater. No one suggested cards after supper, and we lay long into the night discussing, as thousands of other people all over the country were probably discussing, conscription, espionage, martial law, the possibilities of invasion, and the probable duration of the war. I doubt very much if we should have gone to sleep at all had we been able to foresee the events which the future, in its various ways, held in store for each of us. But, as it was, we plunged wholeheartedly into what Tommy Evans described as “Life’s new interest.” We positively thrilled at the prospect of army life.

“Think of it,” said Jack enthusiastically, “open air all the time. Nothing to worry about, no work to do, only manual labour. Why, it’s going to be one long holiday. Hang it! I’ve laid drain-pipes on a farm – for fun!”

It was past one o’clock when we got out supper. And our appetites lost nothing by the prospect of hardships which we treated rather lightly, since we entirely failed to appreciate their seriousness. Jack’s visions of storming ramparts at the point of the bayonet merely added flavour to his amazing collation of cold beef, ham, brawn, cold fowl, and peaches and cream, with which he insisted on winding-up at nearly two in the morning. He would have shouted with laughter had you told him that in less than three weeks he would be dashing through the enemy’s lines with despatches on a red-hot motor-cycle. And Tommy – poor old Tommy – well, I fancy he would have been just as cheerful,

dear old chap, had he known the fate that was in store. For to him was to fall the lot which, of all others, everyone – rich and poor alike – understands. There is no need for me to repeat the story. Even in the rush of a war which has already brought forward some thousands of heroes, the reader will remember the glorious exploit of Corporal Thomas Evans, in which he won the D.C.M., and also, unfortunately, gave his life for his country. It is sufficient to say that three men in particular will ever cherish his memory as that of a loyal friend, a cheery comrade, a clean, honest, straightforward Englishman through and through.

As for Dennis and myself – but I am coming to that.

Having finished our early morning supper, we turned in for a few hours' sleep, Jack and Tommy in one boat, Dennis and I in the other. But before we did so we stood up, as well as we could under our canvas roof, and drank "The King"; and I fancy that in the mind of each of us there was more than one other name silently coupled with that toast. Then, for the first time in my memory of our intimacy together, we solemnly shook hands before turning in. But, try as I would, I couldn't sleep. For a long time I lay there, in the beautiful silence of the night, my thoughts far away, sleep farther away still. Presently I grovelled for my tobacco-pouch.

"Restless, Ron?" Dennis asked, himself evidently quite wide awake.

"Can't sleep at all," I answered. "But don't let me disturb you."

"You're not disturbing me, old man. I can't sleep either. Let's light the lamp and smoke."

Accordingly we fished out our pipes and relighted the acetylene lamp, which hung from the middle hoop. Jack turned over in his sleep.

"Put out the light, old fellow. Not a cab'net meeting, y'know," he murmured drowsily. And by way of compromise I pulled the primitive draught curtain between the two boats, and as I sat up to do so I noticed with a start that Dennis wore a worried look I had never seen before. I lay back, got my pipe going, and waited for him to speak.

"I wonder," he said presently, through the clouds of smoke that hung imprisoned beneath our shallow roof – "I wonder if there would have been any war if the Germans smoked Jamavana?"

"What's worrying you, Den?" I asked, ignoring his question.

"Worrying me? Why, nothing. I've got nothing to worry about. What about you, though? I don't want to butt in on your private affairs, but you've a lot more to be worried about than I have."

"I? Oh, nonsense, Dennis," I protested.

"None of that with me, Ron. You know what I mean. There's no point in either of us concealing things. This war is going to make a big difference to you and Myra McLeod. Now, tell me all about it. What do you mean to do, and everything?"

"There isn't much to tell you. You know all about it. We're not engaged. Old General McLeod objects to our engagement on account of my position. Of course, he's quite right. He's very nice about it, and he's always kindness itself to me. You know, of course, that he and my father were brother officers? Myra and I have been chums since she was four. We love each other, and she would be content to wait, but, in the meantime – well, you know my position. I can only describe it in the well-worn phrases, 'briefless barrister' and 'impecunious junior.' There's a great deal of truth in the weak old joke, Dennis, about the many that are called and the few that are briefed. Of course the General is right. He says that I ought to leave Myra absolutely alone, and neither write to her nor see her, and give her a chance to meet someone else, and all that – someone who could keep her among her own set. But I tried that once for three months; I didn't answer her letters, or write to her, and I worried myself to death very nearly about it. But at the end of the three months she came up to town to see what it was all about. Gad, how glad I was to see her!"

"I bet you were," said Dennis, sympathetically. "But what d'you mean by telling me you'd got nothing to worry about? Now that you're just getting things going nicely, and look like doing really well, along comes this wretched war, and you join the army, and such practice as you have goes to the devil. It's rotten luck, Ronnie, rotten luck."

“It is a bit,” I admitted with a sigh. My little bit of hard-earned success had meant a lot to me.

“Still,” said Dennis, “you’ve got a thundering lot to be thankful for too. To begin with, she’ll wait for you, and then, if necessary, marry on twopence-halfpenny a year, and make you comfortable on it too. As far as her father is concerned, she’s very devoted to him, and would never do anything to annoy him if she could possibly help it, as I easily spotted the night we dined with them at the Carlton. But she’s made up her mind to be Mrs. Ronald Ewart sooner or later; that I *will* swear!”

“I’m very glad to hear you say so,” I answered, “but the thing that worries me, of course, is the question as to whether I have any right to let this go on. If war is declared – ”

“Which it will be,” said Dennis.

“Well, then, my practice goes to the devil, as you say. How long after the war is it going to be before I could marry one of Myra’s maids, let alone Myra? And, supposing, of course, that I use the return half of my ticket, so to speak, and come back safe and sound, my own prospects will be infinitely worse than they were before the war. The law, after all, is a luxury, and no one will have a great deal of money for luxuries by the time we have finished with it and wiped Germany off the map. Besides, if there’s no money about, there’s nothing to go to law over. So there you are, or, rather, there I am.”

“What do you intend to do, then?” my friend asked.

“I shall go up to Scotland to-morrow night – well, of course, it’s to-night, I should say – and see her – and – and – ”

“Yes – well, and – ”

“Oh, and tell her that it must be all – all over. I shall say that the war will make all the difference, that I must join the army, and that she must consider herself free to marry someone else, and that, as in any case I might never come back, I think it’s the best thing for us both that she should consider herself free, and – er – and – and consider herself free,” I ended weakly.

“Just like that?” asked Dennis, with a twinkle in his eye.

“I shall try and put it fairly formally to her,” I said, “because, of course, I must appear to be sincere about it. I must try and think out some way of making her imagine I want it broken off for reasons of my own.”

Dennis laughed softly.

“You delicious, egotistical idiot,” he said. “You don’t really imagine that you could persuade anyone you met for the first time even that you’re not in love. By all means do what you think is right, Ron. I wouldn’t dissuade you for the world. Tell her that she is free. Tell her why you are setting her free, and I’ll be willing to wager my little all that you two ridiculous young people will find yourselves tied tighter together than ever. By all means do your best to be a good little boy, Ronald, and do what you conceive to be your duty.”

“You needn’t pull my leg about it,” I said, though somewhat half-heartedly.

“I’m not pulling your leg, as you put it,” Dennis answered, in a more serious tone. “If ever I saw honesty and truth and love and loyalty looking out of a girl’s eyes, that girl is Myra McLeod.”

“Thank you for that, Den,” I answered simply. There was little sentiment between us. Thank heaven, there was something more.

“And so you see, you lucky dog, you’ll go out to the front, and come back loaded with honours and blushes, and marry the girl of your dreams, and live happy ever after.” And Dennis sighed.

“Why the sigh?” I asked. “Oh, come now,” I added, suddenly remembering. “Fair exchange, you know. You haven’t told me what was worrying you.”

“My dear old fellow, don’t be ridiculous, there’s nothing worrying me.”

I pressed him to no purpose. He refused to admit that he had a care in the world, and so we fell to talking of matters connected with the routine of army life, how long we should be before we got to the front, the sport we four should have in our rest time behind the trenches, our determination to stick together at all costs, etc. Suddenly Dennis sat bolt upright.

“Gad!” he cried savagely, “if you beggars weren’t going, I could stick it. But you three leaving me behind, it’s – ”

“Leaving you behind?” I echoed in astonishment. “But why, old man? Aren’t you coming too?”

“I hope so,” said Dennis bitterly; “I hope so with all my heart, and I shall have a jolly good shot at it. But I know what it will be, worse luck.”

“But why, Dennis?” I asked again. “I don’t understand.”

“Of course you don’t,” he replied, “but you’ve got your own troubles, and there’s no point in worrying about me, in any case.”

I begged him to tell me; I pleaded our old friendship, and the fact that I had taken him into my confidence in the various vicissitudes of my own love affair. It struck me at the time that it was I who should have been indebted to him for his patient sympathy and help; and here he was, poor old fellow, with a real, live trouble of his own, refusing to bother me with it.

“So you’ve just got to own up, old man,” I finished.

“Oh, it’s really nothing,” said Dennis miserably. “I’m a crock, that’s all. A useless hulk of unnecessary lumber.”

“How, my dear chap?” I asked incredulously. Here was Dennis Burnham, who had put up a record for the mile in our school days, and lifted the public school’s middle-weight pot, a champion swimmer, a massive young man of six-foot-two in his socks, calling himself a crock.

“You remember that summer we did the cruise from Southampton to Stranraer?”

“Heavens! yes,” I exclaimed, “and we capsized the cutter in the Solway, and you were laid up in a farmhouse at Whithorn with rheumatic fever. Am I ever likely to forget it?”

“I’m not, anyway,” said Dennis, ruefully. “That rheumatic fever left me with a weak heart. I strained it rowing up at Oxford, you remember, and that fever business put the last touches on it for all practical purposes.”

“Are you sure, old man?” I asked. It seemed impossible that a great big chap like Dennis, the picture of health, should have anything seriously wrong with him.

“I’m dead sure, Ron; I wish I weren’t. Not that it matters much, of course; but just now, when one has a chance to do something decent for one’s Motherland and justify one’s existence, it hits a bit hard.”

“Is it serious?” I asked – “really serious?”

“Sufficient to bar me from joining you chaps, though I’ll see if I can sneak past the doctor. You remember about three weeks ago we were to have played a foursome out at Hendon, and I didn’t turn up? I said afterwards that I had been called out of town, and had quite forgotten to wire.”

“Which was extremely unlike you,” I interposed; “but go on.”

“Well, as a matter of fact, I was on my way. I was a bit late, and when I got outside Golders Green Tube Station I ran for a ’bus. The rest of the day I spent in the Cottage Hospital. No, I didn’t faint. The valve struck, and I simply lay on the pavement a crumpled mass of semi-conscious humanity till they carted me off on the ambulance. It’s the fourth time it’s happened.”

“Of course you had good advice?” I asked anxiously.

“Heavens! yes,” he exclaimed; “any amount of the best. And they all say the same thing – rest, be careful, no sudden excitement, no strain, and I may live for ever – a creaking door.”

“My dear old Den,” I said, for I was deeply touched. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Plenty of worries of your own, old man,” he answered, more cheerfully; “and, besides, it would have spoiled everything. You fellows would have been nursing me behind my back, to use an Irishism, and trying to prevent my noticing it. You know as well as I do that if you had known I should have been a skeleton at the feast.”

“You must promise me two things,” I said presently. “One is that you won’t try to join the army; there is sure to be a rush of recruits in the next few days, and the doctors will be flurried, and may

skip through their work roughshod. The other is that you will take care of yourself, run no risks, and do nothing rash while we are away.”

The first he refused. He said he must do what he could to get through, if only to satisfy his conscience; but he made me the second promise, and solemnly gave me his word that he would do nothing that would put him in any danger. Then at last, at his suggestion, we turned in; he insisted that I had an all-night journey in front of me. And so eventually I fell asleep, saddened by the knowledge of my friend’s trouble, but somewhat relieved that I had extracted from him a promise to take care of himself.

Little did I dream that he would break his promise to save one who was dearer to me than life itself, or that I should owe all my present and future happiness to poor old Dennis’s inability to join the army. Truly, as events were to prove, “he did his bit.”

CHAPTER II. THE MAN GOING NORTH

We “made” Richmond about half-past eleven, and completed the necessary arrangements for the housing of the boats and the disposal of our superfluous fodder, as Jack called it, for by this time we had all made up our minds that the war was inevitable.

The bustle of mobilisation had already taken possession of the streets, and as we stepped out of Charing Cross Station we stumbled into a crowd of English Bluejackets and Tommies and French reservists in Villiers Street. We parted for the afternoon, each to attend to his private affairs, and arranged to meet again at the Grand Hotel Grill Room for an early dinner, as I had to catch the 7.55 from King’s Cross.

I dashed out to Hampstead to my flat, and packed the necessary wearing apparel, taking care to include my fly-book and my favourite split-cane trout rod in my kit. I should only be in Scotland for a couple of days, but I knew that I should be fishing with Myra at least one of them, and no borrowed rod is a patch on one’s own tried favourite. I snatched an half-hour or so to write to the few relatives I have and tell them that I was joining the army after a hurried visit to Scotland to say good-bye to Myra. And then I got my kit to Dennis’s rooms in Panton Street, Haymarket, just in time to have a chat with him before we joined the others at the Grand Hotel. I found him hopefully getting things ready for a long absence, sorting out unanswered letters, putting away papers, etc. On the table was an open copy of a stores catalogue. He had been trying to find suitable presents for his two small step-sisters. Dennis invariably thought of himself last of all, and then usually at someone else’s request.

“Well, old man,” I asked, “how do you feel about it now?”

“Rotten, Ronnie,” he replied, with a rueful smile. “I’ve been on the ’phone to my silly doctor chap, and he shouted with laughter at me. Still, I shall have a jolly good shot at it as soon as the thing is definite.”

“I only pray to heaven,” I said seriously, “that no slipshod fool of a doctor lets you through.”

“They won’t let me in, old chap; no such luck. It’s a ghastly outlook. What on earth am I to do with myself while the war lasts?”

“My dear chap,” I exclaimed, “it won’t be as bad as all that. There will be thousands of men who won’t go to the war. I shan’t be surprised if you see very little difference about town even when the war’s in full swing. You can’t go, although you want to, and it’s jolly bad luck, old man. Don’t think I don’t understand, but, believe me, you won’t be the only man left in London by a million or two.”

“I know,” he said penitently, “I’m grouching and worrying you. Sorry! But I can see you setting out for the Temple in the morning and leaving your house on fire. It wouldn’t make it easier simply because you knew you weren’t able to do anything to put out the fire. In fact, it would make it a jolly lot worse. Still, we’ll cut that and change the subject. When you get back from Invermalluch give me a look up. I expect I shall be here. And, of course, give my kindest regards to Miss McLeod – oh, and the General,” he added, as an afterthought.

“I will, indeed,” I promised readily, “and I’ll wire you the train I’m coming back by. I should like you to meet it, and we can spend the few remaining days I have together. If you don’t get past the doctor I should like you to keep your eye on one or two things for me while I’m away.”

“Of course, anything you like. The more the merrier,” he answered readily; and the poor fellow brightened visibly at the thought of being able to do something for a pal.

We taxied round the corner with my kit, and joined the others at the grill room. They were both in the highest of spirits, Jack, of course, in particular. He had been told that his intimate knowledge of motors and motor-cycles would be of great advantage to him, and he had been advised on all hands to join as a despatch-rider. In imagination he already saw himself up to the most weird pranks

on his machine, many of which, much to the gratification of his friends, and just as much to his own astonishment, were proved later to have a solid foundation in fact. Over dinner we discussed the question of applying for commissions.

“Oh, dash it, no,” said Jack; “I’m going to Berlin on the old snorter.”

“Commissions are off – quite out of the question,” Tommy agreed with emphasis. “To begin with, it means waiting, which is absurd; and in the second place I object to any attempt to travel first-class. It’s silly and snobbish, to put the kindest construction on it. If I’ve got to join this excursion I’m willing to go where they like to put me, and if necessary I’ll hang on behind.”

I record this remark because it was the last that I ever heard poor Tommy Evans make in this connection; and I think the reader will agree it was just what one would have expected of him.

We said good-bye after dinner. They all wanted to come to the station to see me off, but I was anxious to be alone with Dennis.

The others in any case had plenty to do, and I could scarcely let them sacrifice their “last few hours of liberty” to come and see me off. I rather expected that the excitement of the war would have prevented a lot of people travelling, but the reverse was the case. There seemed to be more people than ever on the platform, and I could not get a corner seat even in the Fort William coach. I bundled my things into a carriage and took up as much room as I could, and then Dennis and I strolled about the platform until the train was due to start.

“Strange mixtures of humanity you see on a railway platform,” Dennis remarked presently.

“Very,” I agreed. “I daresay there are some very curious professions represented here.”

“This chap, for instance,” said Dennis, indicating a youth in a tweed jacket and flannel trousers. “He might be anything from an M.P.’s private secretary to an artist’s model, for all we know. I should say he’s a journalist; he knows his way through a crowd as only journalists do.”

“A typical Yorkshire cattle-dealer in his Sunday best,” I suggested, as we passed another passenger. And so we went the length of the platform making rough guesses as to the professions of my fellow travellers. Suddenly I noticed a tall man, wearing a tweed cap and a long covert-coat, his hands in his pockets, a stumpy cigar stuck in the corner of his mouth. His hair was gray, and his face bore signs of a tough struggle in early youth. His complexion was of that curious gray-yellow one sees frequently in America and occasionally in Denmark – something quite distinct from the bronze-gray of many colonials. I nudged Dennis.

“What did you make of that?” I asked him after we had passed.

“I should be much more interested to know what ‘that’ made of us,” he replied.

“Nothing, I should think,” I answered carelessly. “Why, the man’s eyes were nearly closed, he was half asleep. I bet he hasn’t taken the slightest notice of anyone for the past ten minutes. You could commit a murder under his nose and he wouldn’t see it.”

“I think not,” said Dennis quietly. “I fancy that if you took out a cigarette-case as you passed him he would be able to tell you afterwards how many cigarettes you had left in the case, what brand they were, and what the monogram on the front was. If you’ve any murders to commit, Ronnie, I should be careful to see that our American friend is some thousands of miles away.”

“Good heavens, you old sleuth!” I exclaimed in astonishment. “I never saw a more innocent-looking man in my life.”

“I hate innocent people,” said Dennis emphatically; “they are usually dangerous, and seldom half as innocent as they look.”

“But what makes you think this man is only pretending to look like a dreaming, unobservant idiot, and why do you call him American so definitely?”

“He may or may not be American; but we have to give him a name for purposes of classification,” Dennis explained. “In any case his overcoat was made in the States; the cut of the lapels is quite unmistakable. I knew an American who tried everywhere to get a coat cut like that over here, and failed. As to his being observant, you seem to have overlooked one important fact. There

the man stands, apparently half asleep. Occasionally he displays a certain amount of life – tucks his papers more tightly under his arms, and so on. Now, the man who has been dreaming on a station platform and is obviously going by the train would wake up to look at the clock, or glance round to see how many are travelling, and generally take an interest in the bustle of the station. But this man doesn't. Why? Because he only wakes up when his interest wanders, and that is only when he has seen all he wants to see for the moment. When we pass him the second time he will probably appear to be more awake, unless there is someone else passing him in the other direction, simply because he has seen us and sized us up and dismissed us as of no interest; or, more likely, stowed us away in his capacious memory, and, having no further use for us, he forgets to appear disinterested."

"Good Lord, Dennis!" I exclaimed, "I'd no idea you ever noticed things so keenly. What do you think he is – a detective?"

"Either that or a criminal. They are the same type of mind. One is positive and the other negative, that's all. We'll turn back and test him as we pass him. Talk golf, or fishing, or something."

So we commenced a half-hearted conversation on trout flies, and as we approached "the American" I was explaining the deadly nature of the Red Palmer after a spate and the advisability of including Greenwell's Glory on the same cast. Unfortunately, as we passed our man there were three other people coming towards us, and he was gazing over the top of the carriage with the same dreaming look that had, according to Dennis, deceived me before. But we were hardly abreast of him when his stick shot up in front of us. His arm never moved at all; it was done with a quick jerk of the wrist.

"You've dropped a paper, sir," he said to Dennis, to my utter astonishment, for I had seen no paper dropped. Dennis turned quickly, and picked up a letter which was lying on the platform behind him.

"I'm very much obliged, sir; thank you," said Dennis, as he put the letter in his pocket.

"I never saw you drop that," I exclaimed when we were safely out of earshot. "Did you?"

"There you are," my friend cried triumphantly. "You were walking beside me and you didn't spot it, and he was some distance away and he did; and you say he was half asleep."

"I say, Den," I exclaimed, laughing, "d'you think it's going to be safe to travel on this train? I wonder where he's going?"

Then we dismissed the man from our minds. The train was going in six minutes, and I joined the crowd round the rug and pillow barrow, and prepared to make myself comfortable. Leaving everything to the last minute, as most travellers do, we had a hurried stirrup-cup in view of the fact that I was about to "gang awa'," and as the train glided out of the station Dennis turned to wire for my breakfast-basket at Crianlarich. The one thing that it is important to do when travelling on the West Highland Railway I had forgotten! We had not passed Potter's Bar before I decided that it would be impossible to sleep, so I ferreted out the attendant and bribed him to put me into a first-class carriage. Better still, he showed me into a sleeper. I was dog-tired, and in ten minutes fell fast asleep. I awoke for a moment or two as the train snorted into a station and drew up. I dozed again for some time, and then the door of my sleeper opened and who should look in but "the American."

"Say, I beg your pardon," he exclaimed apologetically. "My mistake."

"Not at all," I replied. "Where are we now?" For the train was still standing.

"Edinburgh," he answered. "Just leaving. Sorry to disturb you."

I again assured him that there was no harm done, and he turned and left me, the tassels of his Jaeger dressing-gown trailing after him. Then I fell asleep again, and woke up as we left Whistlefield. I had finished my wretched ablutions – for an early morning wash on a train is always a wretched business – as we reached Crianlarich. I was not long in claiming my breakfast; and when the passengers in the refreshment-room had finished their coffee – which seems to be the time when the train is due to leave, and not *vice-versâ*, as might be expected – the guard was standing on the

platform, flag in hand, on the point of blowing his whistle. Suddenly the head of the American shot out of the window of his carriage – no other expression describes it.

“Say, conductor,” he exclaimed angrily, “where’s my breakfast?”

Surely Dennis had been right about the nationality.

“What name might it be, sir?” asked the guard.

“Hilderman – J. G. Hilderman. Ordered by telegraph.”

“I’ll see, sir,” said the guard, dashing into the refreshment-room. It did not seem to matter when the train started; but, after a further heated argument, in which the official refused to wait while a couple of eggs were being fried, Mr. Hilderman was supplied with a pot of coffee, some cold ham, and dried toast, and we recommenced our belated journey. I reached Fort William and changed on to the Mallaig train, as did Mr. Hilderman, on whom, after the breakfast episode, I had begun to look with an affectionate and admiring regard. The man who can keep a train waiting in Great Britain while the guard gets him his breakfast must be very human after all. Most of the way on the beautiful journey through Lochaber I leaned with my head out of the window, drinking in the gorgeous air and admiring the luxurious scenery of the mountain side. But, in view of the hilly nature of the track and the quality of the coal employed, it is always a dangerous adventure on the West Highland Railway, and presently I found myself with a big cinder in my eye. I was trying to remove the cause of my discomfort, and at the same time swearing softly, I am afraid, when Hilderman came up.

“I guess I’m just the man you’re looking for,” he said. “Show me.”

In less time than it takes to tell the offending cinder was removed, and I was amazed at the delicacy and certainty of his touch. I thanked him profusely, and indeed I was really grateful to him. Naturally enough, we fell into conversation – the easy, broad conversation of two men who have never seen each other before and expect never to see each other again, but are quite willing to be friends in the meantime.

“Terrible news, this,” he said presently, pulling a copy of the *Glasgow Herald* from his pocket. “I suppose you got it at Fort William?”

“No,” I said. “I didn’t leave the train. I wasn’t thinking of newspapers. What is it?”

“A state of war exists between Great Britain and Germany as from twelve o’clock last night.”

“Ah!” said I. “It has come, then.” And I was surprised that I had forgotten all about the war, which was actually the cause of my presence there. I noticed with some curiosity that Hilderman looked out of the window with a strangely tense air, his lips firmly pressed together, his eyes wide open and staring. He was certainly awake now. But in a moment he turned to me with a charming smile.

“You know, I’m an American,” he said. “But this hits me – hits me hard. There’s a calm and peaceful, friendly hospitality about this island of yours that I like – like a lot. My own country reminds me too much of my own struggles for existence. For nearly forty years I fought for breath in America, and, but that I like now and again to run over and have a look round, you can keep the place as far as I’m concerned. I’ve been about here now for a good many years – not just this part, for this is nearly new to me, but about the country – and I feel that this is my quarrel, and I should like to have a hand in it.”

“Perhaps America may join in yet,” I suggested.

“Not she,” he cried, with a laugh. “America! Not on your life. Why, she’s afraid of civil war. She don’t know which of her own citizens are her friends and which ain’t. She’s tied hand and foot. She can’t even turn round long enough to whip Mexico. Don’t you ever expect America to join in anything except family prayer, my boy. That’s safe. You know where you are, and it don’t matter if you don’t agree about the wording of a psalm. If an American was told off to shoot a German, he’d ten to one turn round and say: ‘Here, hold on a minute; that’s my uncle!’”

“You think all the Germans in the States prefer their fatherland to their adopted country, or are they most of them spies?”

“Spies?” said Hilderman, “I don’t believe in spies. It stands to reason there can’t be much spying done in any country. Over here, for instance, for every German policeman in this country – for that’s all a spy can be – there are about a thousand British policemen. What chance has the spy? You don’t seriously believe in them, do you?” he added, smiling, as he offered me a Corona cigar.

“I don’t know,” I said doubtfully. I didn’t want to argue with my good Samaritan. “There is no doubt a certain amount of spying done; but, of course, our policemen are hardly trained to cope with it. I daresay the whole business is very greatly exaggerated.”

“You bet it is, my boy,” he replied emphatically. “Going far?” he asked, suddenly changing the subject.

“North of Loch Hourn,” I answered.

“Oh!” said Hilderman, with renewed interest. “Glenelg?”

“I take the boat to Glenelg and then drive back,” I explained. I was in a mood to tell him just where I was going, and why, and all about myself; but I recollected, with an effort, that I was talking to a total stranger.

“Drive back?” he repeated after me, with a sudden return to his dreamy manner. Then, just as suddenly, he woke up again. “Where are we now?” he asked.

“Passing over Morar bridge,” I explained.

“Dear me – yes, of course!” he exclaimed, with a glance out of the window. “Well, I must pack up my wraps. Good-bye, Mr. Ewart; I’m so glad to have met you. Your country’s at war, and you look to me a very likely young man to do your best. Well, good-bye and good luck. I only wish I could join you.”

“I wish you could,” I replied heartily. “I shall certainly do my best. And many thanks for your kind assistance.”

And so we parted, and returned to our respective compartments to put our things together; for our journey – the rail part of it, at any rate – was nearly over. And it was not until long afterwards that I realised that he had called me by my name, and I had never told him what it was.

CHAPTER III. MAINLY ABOUT MYRA

The train slowed down into Mallaig station. I thrilled with anticipation, for now I had only the journey on the boat, and Myra would be waiting for me at Glenelg. The train had hardly stopped when I seized my bag and jumped out on to the platform. The next instant I was nearly knocked back into the carriage again. A magnificent Great Dane had jumped at me with a deep bark of flattering welcome, and planted his paws on my shoulders.

“Sholto, my dear old man!” I cried in excitement, dropping my bag and looking round expectantly. It was Myra’s dog, and there, sure enough, was a beautiful vision of brown eyes and brown-gold hair, in a heather-coloured Burberry costume, running down the platform to meet me.

“Well – darling?” I said, as I met her half-way.

“Well?” she whispered, as she took my hand, and I looked into the depths of those wonderful eyes. Truly I was a lucky dog. The world was a most excellent place, full of delightful people; and even if I were an impecunious young barrister I was richer than Cræsus in the possession of those beautiful brown eyes, which looked on all the world with the gentle affection of a tender and indulgent sister, but which looked on me with – Oh! hang it all! – a fellow can’t write about these sort of things when they affect him personally. Besides, they belong to me – thank God!

“I got your telegram, dear,” said Myra, as we strolled out of the station behind the porter who had appropriated my bag. Sholto brought up the rear. He had too great an opinion of his own position to be jealous of me – or at any rate he was too dignified to show it – and he had always admitted me into the inner circle of his friendship in a manner that was very charming, if not a little condescending.

“Did you, darling?” I said, in reply to Myra’s remark.

“Yes; it was delivered first thing this morning, and father was very pleased about it.”

“Really!” I exclaimed. “I *am* glad. I was afraid he might be rather annoyed.”

“I was a little bit surprised myself,” she confessed, “though I’m sure I don’t know why I should be. Dad’s a perfect dear – he always was and he always will be. But he has been very determined about our engagement. When I told him you’d wired you were coming he was tremendously pleased. He kept on saying, ‘I’m glad; that’s good news, little woman, very good news. ‘Pon my soul I’m doocid glad!’ He said you were a splendid fellow – I can’t think what made him imagine that – but he said it several times, so I suppose he had some reason for it. I was frightfully pleased. I like you to be a splendid fellow, Ron!”

I was very glad to hear that the old General was really pleased to hear of my visit. I had intended to stay at the Glenelg Hotel, as I could hardly invite myself to Invermalluch Lodge, even though I had known the old man all my life. Accordingly I took it as a definite sign that his opposition was wearing down when Myra told me I was expected at the house.

“And he said,” she continued, “that he never heard such ridiculous nonsense as your saying you were coming to the hotel, and that if you preferred a common inn to the house that had been good enough for him and his fathers before him, you could stop away altogether. So there!”

“Good – that’s great!” I said enthusiastically. “But did you come over by the boat from Glenelg, or what?”

“No, dear; I came in the motor-boat, so we don’t need to hang about the pier here. We can either go straight home or wait a bit, whichever you like. I wanted to meet you, and I thought you’d rather come back with me in the motor-boat than jolt about in the stuffy old *Sheila*.”

“Rather, dear; I should say I would,” said I – and a lot more besides, which has nothing to do with the story. Suddenly Myra’s motherly instinct awoke.

“Have you had breakfast?” she asked.

“Yes, dear – at Crianlarich. The only decent meal to be got on a railway in this country is a Crianlarich breakfast.”

“Well, in that case you’re ready for lunch. It’s gone twelve. I could do with something myself, incidentally, and I want to talk to you before we start for home. Let’s have lunch here.”

I readily agreed, and after calling Sholto, who was being conducted on a tour of inspection by the parson’s dog, we strolled up the hill to the hotel. As we entered the long dining-room we came upon Hilderman, seated at one of the tables with his back to us.

“Yes,” he was saying to the waiter, “I have been spending the week-end on the Clyde in a yacht. I joined the train at Ardlui this morning, and I can tell you – ”

I didn’t wait to hear any more. Rather by instinct than as a result of any definite train of thought, I led Myra quickly behind a Japanese screen to a small table by a side window. After all, it was no business of mine if Hilderman wished to say he had joined the train at Ardlui. He probably had his own reasons. Possibly Dennis was right, and the man was a detective. But I had seen him at King’s Cross and again at Edinburgh before we reached Ardlui, so I thought it might embarrass him if I walked in on the top of his assertion that he had just come from the Clyde. However, Myra was with me, which was much more important, and I dismissed Hilderman and his little fib from my mind.

“Ronnie,” said Myra, in the middle of lunch, “you haven’t said anything about the war.”

“No, dear,” I answered clumsily. “It – ” It was an astonishingly difficult thing to say when it came to saying it.

“And yet that was what you came to see me about?”

“Yes, darling. You see, I – ”

“I know, dear. You’ve come to tell me that you’re going to enlist. I’m glad, Ronnie, very glad – and very, very proud.”

Myra turned away and looked out of the window.

“I hate people who talk a lot about their duty,” I said; “but it obviously is my duty, and I know that’s what you would want me to do.”

“Of course, dear, I wouldn’t have you do anything else.” And she turned and smiled at me, though there were tears in her dear eyes. “And I shall try to be brave, very brave, Ronnie. I’m getting a big girl now,” she added pluckily, attempting a little laugh. And though, of course, we afterwards discussed the regiment I was to join, and how the uniform would suit me, and how you kept your buttons clean, and a thousand other things, that was the last that was said about it from that point of view. There are some people who never need to say certain things – or at any rate there are some things that never need be said between certain people.

After lunch we strolled round the “fish-table,” a sort of subsidiary pier on which the fish are auctioned, and listened to the excited conversations of the fish-curiers, gutters, and fishermen. It was a veritable babel – the mournful intonation of the East Coast, the broad guttural of the Broomielaw, mingled with the shrill Gaelic scream of the Highlands, and the occasional twang of the cockney tourist. Having retrieved Sholto, who was inspecting some fish which had been laid out to dry in the middle of the village street, and packed him safely in the bows, we set out to sea, Myra at the engine, while I took the tiller. As we glided out of the harbour I turned round, impelled by some unknown instinct. The parson’s dog was standing at the head of the main pier, seeing us safely off the premises, and beside him was the tall figure of my friend J. G. Hilderman. As I looked up at him I wondered if he recognised me; but it was evident he did, for he raised his cap and waved to me. I returned the compliment as well as I could, for just then Myra turned and implored me not to run into the lighthouse.

“Someone you know?” she asked, as I righted our course.

“Only a chap I met on the train,” I explained.

“It looks like the tenant of Glasnabinnie, but I couldn’t be certain. I’ve never met him, and I’ve only seen him once.”

“Glasnabinnie!” I exclaimed, with a new interest. “Really! Why, that’s quite close to you, surely?”

“Just the other side of the loch, directly opposite us. A good swimmer could swim across, but a motor would take days to go round. So we’re really a long way off, and unless he turns up at some local function we’re not likely to meet him. He’s said to be an American millionaire; but then every American in these parts is supposed to have at least one million of money.”

“Do you know anything about him – what he does, or did?” I asked.

“Absolutely nothing,” she replied, “except, of course, the silly rumours that one always hears about strangers. He took Glasnabinnie in May – in fact, the last week of April, I believe. That rather surprised us, because it was very early for summer visitors. But he showed his good sense in doing so, as the country was looking gorgeous – Sgriol, na Ciche, and the Cuchulins under snow. I’ve heard (Angus McGeochan, one of our crofters, told me) he was an inventor, and had made a few odd millions out of a machine for sticking labels on canned meat. That and the fact that he is a very keen amateur photographer is the complete history of Mr. Hilderman so far as I know it. Anyway, he has a gorgeous view, hasn’t he? It’s nearly as good as ours.”

“He has indeed,” I agreed readily. “But I don’t think Hilderman can be very wealthy; no fishing goes with Glasnabinnie, there’s no yacht anchorage, and there’s no road to motor on. How does he get about?”

“He’s got a beautiful Wolseley launch,” said Myra jealously, “a perfect beauty. He calls her the *Baltimore II*. She was lying alongside the *Hermione* at Mallaig when we left. Oh! look up the loch, Ron! Isn’t it a wonderful view?”

And so the magnificent purple-gray summit of Sgor na Ciche, at the head of Loch Nevis, claimed our attention – (that and other matters of a personal nature) – and J. G. Hilderman went completely from our minds. Myra was a real Highlander of the West. She lived for its mountains and lochs, its rivers and burns, its magnificent coast and its fascinating animal life. She knew every little creek and inlet, every rock and shallow, every reef and current from Fort William to the Gair Loch. I have even heard it said that when she was twelve she could draw an accurate outline of Benbecula and North Uist, a feat that would be a great deal beyond the vast majority of grown-ups living on those islands themselves. As we turned to cross the head of Loch Hourn, Myra pointed out Glasnabinnie, nestling like a lump of grey lichen at the foot of the Croulin Burn. Anchored off the point was a small steam yacht, either a converted drifter or built on drifter lines.

“Our friend has visitors,” said Myra, “and he’s not there to receive them. How very rude! That yacht is often there. She only makes about eight knots as a rule, although she gives you the impression she could do more. You see, she’s been built for strength and comfort more than for looks. She calls at Glasnabinnie in the afternoons sometimes, and is there after dark, and sails off before six.” (Myra was always out of doors before six in the morning, whatever the weather.) “From which I gather,” she continued, “that the owner lives some distance away and sleeps on board. She can’t be continuously cruising, or she would make a longer stay sometimes.”

“You seem to know the ways of yacht-owners, dear,” I said. “Hullo! what is that hut on the cliff above the falls? That’s new, surely.”

“Oh! that beastly thing,” said Myra in disgust. “That’s his, too. A smoking-room and study, I believe. He had it built there because he has an uninterrupted view that sweeps the sea.”

“Why ‘beastly thing’?” I asked. “It’s too far away to worry you, though it isn’t exactly pretty, and I know you hate to see anything in the shape of a new building going up.”

“Oh! it annoys me,” she answered airily, “and somehow it gets on daddy’s nerves. You see, it has a funny sort of window which goes all round the top of the hut. This is evidently divided into several small windows, because they swing about in the wind, and when the sun shines on them they catch the eye even at our distance. And, as I say, they get on daddy’s nerves, which have not been too good the last week or two.”

“Never mind,” I consoled her; “he’ll be all right when his friends come up for the Twelfth. I think the doctors are wrong to say that he should never have a lot of people hanging round him, because there can surely be no harm in letting him see a few friends. I certainly think he’s right to make an exception for the grouse.”

“Grouse!” sniffed Myra. “They come for the Twelfth because they like to be seen travelling north on the eleventh! And I have to entertain them. And some of the ones who come for the first time tell me they suppose I know all the pretty walks round about! And in any case,” she finished, in high indignation, “can you imagine *me* entertaining anybody?”

“Yes, my dear, I can,” I replied; and the “argument” kept us busy till we reached Invermalluch. The old General came down to the landing-stage to meet us, and was much more honestly pleased to see me than I had ever known him before.

“Ah! Ronald, my boy!” he exclaimed heartily. “Pon my soul, I’m glad to see you. It’s true, I suppose? You’ve heard the news?”

The question amused me, because it was so typical of the old fellow. Here had I come from London, where the Cabinet was sitting night and day, to a spot miles from the railway terminus, to be asked if I had heard the news!

“You mean the war, of course?” I replied.

“Yes; it’s come, my boy, at last. Come to find me on the shelf! Ah, well! It had to come sooner or later, and now we’re not ready. Ah, well, we must all do what we can. Begad, I’m glad to see you, my boy, thundering glad. It’s a bit lonely here sometimes for the little woman, you know; but she never complains.” (In point of fact, she even contrived to laugh, and take her father’s arm affectionately in her’s.) “And besides, there are many things I want to have a talk with you about, Ronald – many things. By the way, had lunch?”

“We lunched at Mallaig, thank you, sir,” I explained.

“Well, well, Myra will see you get all you want – won’t you, girlie?” he said.

“I say, Ronnie,” Myra asked, as we reached the house, “are you very tired after your journey, or shall we have a cup of tea and then take our rods for an hour or so?”

I stoutly declared I was not the least tired – as who could have been in the circumstances? – and I should enjoy an hour’s fishing with Myra immensely. So I ran upstairs and had a bath, and changed, and came down to find the General waiting for me. Myra had disappeared into the kitchen regions to give first-aid to a bare-legged crofter laddie who had cut his foot on a broken bottle.

“Well, my boy,” said the old man, “you’ve come to tell us something. What is it?”

“Oh!” I replied, as lightly as I could, “it is simply that we are in for a row with Germany, and I’ve got a part in the play, so to speak. I’m enlisting.”

“Good boy,” he chuckled, “good boy! Applying for a commission, I suppose – man of your class and education, and all that – eh?”

“Oh, heavens, no!” I laughed. “I shall just walk on with the crowd, to continue the simile.”

“Glad to hear it, my boy – I am, indeed. ’Pon my soul, you’re a good lad, you know – quite a good lad. Your father would have been proud of you. He was a splendid fellow – a thundering splendid fellow. We always used to say, ‘You can always trust Ewart to do the straight, clean thing; he’s a gentleman.’ I hope your comrades will say the same of you, my boy.”

“By the way, sir,” I added, “I also intended to tell you that in the circumstances I – I – Well, I mean to say that I shan’t – shan’t expect Myra to consider herself under – under any obligations to me.”

However difficult it was for me to say it, I had been quite certain that the old General would think it was the right thing to say, and would be genuinely grateful to me for saying it off my own bat without any prompting from him. So I was quite unprepared for the outburst that followed.

“You silly young fellow!” he cried. “Pon my soul, you are a silly young chap, you know. D’you mean to tell me you came here intending to tell my little girl to forget all about you just when you are

going off to fight for your country, and may never come back? You mean to run away and leave her alone with an old crock of a father? You know, Ewart, you – you make me angry at times.”

“I’m very sorry, sir,” I apologised, though I had no recollection of having made him angry before.

“Oh! I know,” he said, in a calmer tone. “Felt it was your duty, and all that – eh? I know. But, you see, it’s not your duty at all. No. Now, there are one or two things I want to tell you that you don’t know, and I’ll tell you one of ’em now and the rest later. The first thing – in absolute confidence, of course – is that – ”

But at this point Myra walked in, and the General broke off into an incoherent mutter. He was a poor diplomatist.

“Ah! secrets? Naughty!” she exclaimed laughingly. “Are you ready, Ronnie?”

“He’s quite ready, my dear,” said the old man graciously. “I’ve said all I want to say to him for the time being. Run along with girlie, Ewart. You don’t want to mess about with an old crock.”

“Daddy,” said Myra reproachfully, “you’re not to call yourself names.”

“All right, then; I won’t,” he laughed. “You young people will excuse me, I’m sure. I should like to join you; but I have a lot of letters to write, and I daresay you’d rather be by yourselves. Eh? – you young dog!”

It was a polite fiction between father and daughter that when the old fellow felt too unwell to join her or his guests he “had a lot of letters to write.” And occasionally, when he was in the mood to overtax his strength, she would never refer to it directly, but often she would remark, “You know you’ll miss the post, daddy.” And they both understood. So we set out by ourselves, and I naturally preferred to be alone with Myra, much as I liked her father. We went out on to the verandah, and while I unpacked my kit Myra rewound her line, which had been drying on the pegs overnight.

“Are you content with small mercies, Ron?” she asked, “or do you agree that it is better to try for a salmon than catch a trout?”

“It certainly isn’t better to-day, anyway,” I answered. “I want to be near you, darling. I don’t want the distance of the pools between us. We might walk up to the Dead Man’s Pool, and then fish up stream; and later fish the loch from the boat. That would bring us back in nice time for dinner.”

“Oh! splendid!” she cried; and we fished out our fly-books. Her’s was a big book of tattered pig-skin, which reclined at the bottom of the capacious “poacher’s pocket” in her jacket. The fly-book was an old favourite – she wouldn’t have parted with it for worlds. Having followed her advice, and changed the Orange I had tied for the “bob” to a Peacock Zulu, which I borrowed from her, we set out.

“Just above the Dead Man’s Pool you get a beautiful view of Hilderman’s hideous hut,” Myra declared as we walked along. I may explain here that “Dead Man’s Pool” is an English translation of the Gaelic name, which I dare not inflict on the reader.

“See?” she cried, as we climbed the rock looking down on the gorgeous salmon pool, with its cool, inviting depths and its subtle promise of sport. “Oh! Ronnie, isn’t it wonderful?” she cried. “Almost every day of my life I have admired this view, and I love it more and more every time I see it. I sometimes think I’d rather give up my life than the simple power to gaze at the mountains and the sea.”

“Why, look!” I exclaimed. “Is that the window you meant?”

“Yes,” Myra replied, with an air of annoyance, “that’s it. You can see that light when the sun shines on it, which is nearly all day, and it keeps on reminding us that we have a neighbour, although the loch is between us. Besides, for some extraordinary reason it gets on father’s nerves. Poor old daddy!”

It may seem strange to the reader that anyone should take notice of the sun’s reflection on a window two and a quarter miles away; but it must be remembered that all her life Myra had been accustomed to the undisputed possession of an unbroken view.

“Anyhow,” she added, as she turned away, “we came here to fish. One of us must cross the stream here and fish that side. We can’t cross higher up, there’s too much water, and there’s no point in getting wet. I’ll go, and you fish this side; and when we reach the loch we’ll get into the boat. See, Sholto’s across already.”

And she tripped lightly from boulder to boulder across the top of the fall which steams into the Dead Man’s Pool, while I stood and admired her agile sureness of foot as one admires the graceful movements of a beautiful young roe. Sholto was pawing about in a tiny backwater, and trying to swallow the bubbles he made, until he saw his beloved mistress was intent on the serious business of fishing, and then he climbed lazily to the top of a rock, where he could keep a watchful eye on her, and sprawled himself out in the sun. I have fished better water than the Malluch river, certainly, and killed bigger fish in other lochs than the beautiful mountain tarn above Invermalluch Lodge; but I have never had a more enjoyable day’s sport than the least satisfying of my many days there.

There was a delightful informality about the sport at the Lodge. One fished in all weathers because one wanted to fish, and varied one’s methods and destination according to the day. There was no sign of that hideous custom of doing the thing “properly” that the members of a stockbroker’s house-party seem to enjoy – no drawing lots for reaches or pools overnight, no roping-in a gillie to add to the chance of sending a basket “south.” When there was a superfluity of fish the crofters and tenants were supplied first, and then anything that was left over was sent to friends in London and elsewhere. At the end of the day’s sport we went home happy and pleased with ourselves, not in the least depressed if we had drawn a blank, to jolly and delightful meals, without any formality at all. And if we were wet, there was a great drying-room off the kitchen premises where our clothes were dried by a housemaid who really understood the business. As for our tackle, we dried our own lines and pegged them under the verandah, and rewound them again in the morning, made up our own casts, and generally did everything for ourselves without a retinue of attendants. And thereby we enjoyed ourselves hugely.

Angus and Sandy, the two handy-men of the place, would carry the lunch-basket or pull the boats on the loch or stand by with the gaff or net – and what experts they are! – but the rest we did for ourselves. By the time I had got a pipe on and wetted my line, Myra was some fifty yards or so up stream making for a spot where she suspected something. She has the unerring instinct of the inveterate poacher! I cast idly once or twice, content to revel in the delight of holding a rod in my hand once more, intoxicated with the air and the scenery and the sunshine (What a good thing the fish in the west “like it bright!”), and after a few minutes a sudden jerk on my line brought me back to earth. I missed him, but he thrilled me to the serious business of the thing, and I fished on, intent on every cast.

I suppose I must have fished for about twenty minutes, but of that I have never been able to say definitely. It may possibly have been more. I only know that as I was picking my way over some boulders to enable me to cast more accurately for a big one I had risen, I heard Myra give a sharp, short cry. I turned anxiously and called to her.

I could not distinguish her at first among the great gray rocks in the river. Surely she could not have fallen in. Even had she done so, I hardly think she would have called out. She was extraordinarily sure on her feet, and, in any case, she was an expert swimmer. What could it be? Immediately following her cry came Sholto’s deep bay, and then I saw her. She was standing on a tall, white, lozenge-shaped rock, that looked almost as if it had been carefully shaped in concrete. She was kneeling, and her arm was across her face. With a cry I dashed into the river, and floundered across, sometimes almost up to my neck, and ran stumbling to her in a blind agony of fear. Even as I ran her rod was carried past me, and disappeared over the fall below.

“Myra, my darling,” I cried as I reached her, and took her in my arms, “what is it, dearest? For God’s sake tell me – what is it?”

“Oh, Ronnie, dear,” she said, “I don’t know, darling. I don’t understand.” Her voice broke as she lifted her beautiful face to me. I looked into those wonderful eyes, and they gazed back at me with a dull, meaningless stare. She stretched out her arm to grasp my hand, and her own hand clutched aimlessly on my collar.

In a flash I realised the hideous truth.

Myra was blind!

CHAPTER IV. THE BLACK BLOW

“Oh, Ronnie, darling,” Myra asked, in a pitiful voice that went to my heart. “What can it mean? I – I – I can’t see – anything at all.”

“It’s the sun, darling; it will be all right in a minute or two. There, lie in my arms, dear, and close your poor eyes. It will be all right soon, dearest.”

I tried to comfort her, to assure her that it was just the glare on the water, that she would be able to see again in a moment, but I felt the pitiful inadequacy of my empty words, and it seemed that the light had gone out of my life. I pray that I may never again witness such a harrowing sight as that of Myra, leaning her beautiful head on my shoulder, suddenly stricken blind, doing her best to pacify her dog, who was heart-broken in the instinctive knowledge of a new, swift grief which he could not understand.

I must ask the reader to spare me from describing in detail the terrible agony of the next few days, when the hideous tragedy of Myra’s blindness overcame us all in its naked freshness. I cannot bring myself to speak of it even yet. I would at any time give my life to save Myra’s sight, her most priceless possession. I make this as a simple statement of fact, and in no spirit of romantic arrogance, and I think I would rather die than live again the gnawing agony of those days.

I took Myra in my arms, and carried her back to the house. Poor child; she realised almost immediately that I was as dumbfounded as she was herself at the terrible blow which had befallen her, and that I had no faith in my empty assurances that it would soon be all right again, and she would be able to see as well as ever in an hour or two, at most. So she at once began to comfort me! I marvelled at her bravery, but she made me more miserable than ever. I felt that she might have a sort of premonition that she would never see again. As we crossed the stream above the fall I saw again the reflected light from Hilderman’s window, and a pang shot through me as I remembered her words on that very spot – that she would rather die than be unable to see her beloved mountains.

I clutched her in my arms, and held her closer to me in dumb despair.

“Am I very heavy, Ron, dear?” she asked presently. “If you give me your hand, dear, I could walk. I think I could even manage without it; but, of course, I should prefer to have your hand at any time.” She gave a natural little laugh, which almost deceived me, and again I marvelled at her pluck. I had known Myra since she was four, and I might have expected that she would meet her tragic misfortune with a smile.

“You’re as light as a feather, dearest,” I protested, “and, as far as that goes, I’d rather carry you at any time.”

“I’m glad you were here when it happened, dear,” she whispered.

“Tell me, darling, how did it happen?” I asked. “I mean, what did it seem like? Did things gradually grow duller and duller, or what?”

“No,” she answered; “that was the extraordinary part of it. Quite suddenly I saw everything green for a second, and then everything went out in a green flash. It was a wonderful, liquid green, like the sea over a sand-bank. It was just a long flash, very quick and sharp, and then I found I could see nothing at all. Everything is black now, the black of an intense green. I thought I’d been struck by lightning. Wasn’t it silly of me?”

“My poor, brave little woman,” I murmured. “Tell me, where were you then?”

“Just where you found me, on the Chemist’s Rock. I call it the Chemist’s Rock because it’s shaped like a cough-lozenge. I was casting from there; it makes a beautiful fishing-table. I looked up, and then – well, then it happened.”

“We’re just coming to the house,” said Myra suddenly. “We’re just going to turn on to the stable-path.”

“Darling!” I cried, nearly dropping her in my excitement; “you can see already?”

“Oh, Ronnie, I’m so sorry,” she said penitently. “I only knew by the smell of the peat stacks.” I could not restrain a groan of disappointment, and Myra stroked my face, and murmured again, “I’m sorry, dearest.”

“Will you please put me down now?” she asked. “If daddy saw you carrying me to the house he’d have a fit, and the servants would go into hysterics.” So I put her tenderly on her feet, and she took my arm, and we walked slowly to the house. She could see nothing, not even in the hazy confusion of the nearly blind; yet she walked to the house with as firm a step and as natural an air as if she had nothing whatever the matter with her.

“You had better leave dad to me, Ron,” she suggested. “We understand each other, and I can explain to him. You would find it difficult, and it would be painful for you both. Just tell him that I’m not feeling very well, and he’ll come straight to me. Don’t tell him I want to see him. Give me your arm to my den, dear.”

I led her to her “den,” a little room opening on to the verandah. There was a writing-table in the window covered with correspondence in neat little piles, for Myra was on all the charity committees in the county, and the rest of the room was given up to a profusion of fishing tackle, shooting gear, and books. Sholto followed us, every now and then rubbing his great head against her skirt. I left her there, and turned into the hall, where I met the General. He had heard us return.

“You’re back early, my boy,” he remarked.

“Yes,” I said, taking out my cigarette-case to give myself an air of assurance which was utterly unknown to me. “Myra is not feeling very well. She’s resting for a bit.”

“Not well?” he exclaimed, in surprise. “Very unusual, very unusual indeed.” And he turned straight into Myra’s room without waiting for an answer to his quiet tap on the door. With a heavy heart I went upstairs to the old schoolroom, now given over to Mary McNiven, Myra’s old nurse.

“Master Ronald! I *am* glad,” she cried, when I accepted her invitation to “come in.” Mary had boxed my ears many times in my boyhood, and the fact that we were old friends made it difficult for me to tell her my terrible news. I broke it as gently as I could, and warned her not to alarm the servants, and very soon she wiped away her tears and went downstairs to see what she could do. I went out into the fresh air for a moment to pull myself together, marvelling at the unreasoning cruelty of fate. I turned into the hall, and met the General coming out of Myra’s room. He was talking to Mary and one of the housemaids.

“These things often occur,” he was explaining in a very matter-of-fact voice. “They are unusual, though not unheard-of, and very distressing at the time. But I am confident that Miss Myra will be quite herself again in a day or two. Meanwhile, she had better go to bed and rest, and take care of herself while Angus fetches Doctor Whitehouse. No doubt he will give her some lotion to wash her eyes with, and it will be only a day or two before we see Miss Myra about again as usual. You must see that she has no light near her, and that she rests her eyes in every possible way. There is nothing whatever for you girls to get anxious or frightened about. I have seen this sort of thing before, though usually in the East.”

The old man dismissed the maids, and went into the drawing-room, while I spent a few moments with Myra. I was delighted to see the General taking it so well, as I had even been afraid of his total collapse, so I took what comfort I could from his ready assurance that he was quite accustomed to that sort of thing. But when, some twenty minutes later, I went to look for him in the drawing-room, and found him prostrate on the sofa, his head buried in his arms, I realised whence Myra had derived her pluck. He looked up as he heard the door open, and tears were streaming down his rugged old face.

“Never mind me, Ronald,” he said brokenly. “Never mind me. I shall be all right in a minute. I – I didn’t expect this, but I shall be all right in a minute.” I closed the door softly and left him alone.

I found Angus had harnessed the pony, and was just about to start for Glenelg to fetch Doctor Whitehouse. So I told him to tell the General that I should be better able to explain to the doctor what had happened, and, glad of the diversion, I drove in for him myself. But when he arrived he made a long and searching examination, patted Myra's head, and told her the nerve had been strained by the glare on the water, and rest was all that was needed; and, as soon as he got outside her door, he sighed and shook his head. In the library he made no bones about it, and her father and I were both grateful to him.

"It's not a bit of use my saying I know when I don't," the doctor declared emphatically. "I'm puzzled – indeed, I'm absolutely beaten. This is a thing I've not only never come across before, but I've never even read about it. This green flash, the suddenness of it, the absence of pain – she says she feels perfectly well. She could see wonderfully well up to the second it happened; no warning headaches, and nothing whatever to account for it. I have known a sudden shock to the system produce instantaneous blindness, such as a man in a very heated state diving into ice-cold water. But in this case there is nothing to go by. I can only do her harm by pretending to know what I don't know, and you know as much as I do. She must see a specialist, and the sooner the better. I would recommend Sir Gaire Olvery; that would mean taking her up to London. Mr. Herbert Garnesk is the second greatest oculist in the country; but undoubtedly Sir Gaire is first. Meanwhile I will give her a little nerve tonic; it will do her no harm, and will give her reason to think that we know how to treat her, so that it may do her good. She must wear the shade I brought her, and take care her eyes are never exposed to the light."

"The fact that you yourself can make nothing of it is for us or against us?" asked the General, in an anxious voice.

He was looking haggard and tired out.

"In what way?" queried the doctor.

"I mean that if she had – er – totally lost her – the use of her eyes – for all time, could you be certain of that or not? Or can you give us any reason to hope that the very fact of your not understanding the nature of the case points to her getting over it?"

"Ah," said the doctor, "I'm not going to be so unfair to you as to say that. I will say emphatically that she has not absolutely hopelessly lost her sight. The nerves are not dead. This green veil may be lifted, possibly, as suddenly as it fell; but I am talking to men, and I want you to understand that I can give no idea as to when that may be. I pray that it may be soon – very soon."

"I'm glad you're so straightforward about it, Whitehouse," said the old man, as he sank into a chair. "I don't need to be buoyed up by any false hopes. You can understand that it is a very terrible blow to Mr. Ewart and myself."

"I can indeed," said the doctor solemnly. "I brought her into the world, you know. It is a tragic shock to me. I'll get back now, if you'll excuse me. I have a very serious case in the village, but I'll be over first thing in the morning, and I'll bring you a small bottle of something with me. You'll need it with this anxiety."

"Nonsense, Whitehouse," declared the General stoutly. "I'm perfectly all right. There's nothing at all the matter with me. I don't need any of your begad slush."

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