E. Nesbit

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A YOUNG man on his way to South Africa—(do not be alarmed, this tale has nothing to do with the Boer War), and not knowing whether he will have the luck to come home or only to become, after a very little time, one of those names in parallel columns on the tablet in the church at home. In such a young man, family feeling runs high—the call of the blood is listened to with an attentive courtesy which it does not at all other times command. And relations in quite remote spots will on occasions like this receive farewell visits from young men of such families as *are* families—not in the county, but in the patriarchal sense.

Therefore Edmund Templar went down into Hampshire to see his aunt and uncle. Edmund Templar, corporal in the C.I.V.—I implore you to check your uneasy surmises. I give you my word of honour that there are no veldts or kopjes or Boers in my pages. Not an ox shall be outspanned, not a mealie baked. Have courage, and read on. There is no fighting in the story, and it all happened in England. Most of it is very romantic, and some of it is rather horrible. If Edmund Templar, who is, I scorn to deny it, my hero, goes to South Africa, he goes alone. We will not, I pledge you my honour, go with him.

At present, however, he is not going to South Africa, but to Reka Dom, which lies on the border of the New Forest. Here, again, I beg to reassure you. There is nothing about Russia in this story. Not a bomb, not a knout, not so much as

a political tract. No samovar broods hissing o’er my pages, no secret societies whisper and explode. You are safe from vodka, from sledges, wolves, and princesses who are spies. The house was called Reka Dom just because the aunt in her young days had read Mrs. Ewing, and because the house had grounds which, at some length, ran down to the river that sprawls among kingcups in the Ringwood water meadows, and runs under the bridge of many arches in that pleasant town.

Mr. Templar wished, quite nicely and affectionately, to see his relations once again before he left England. Also, he wished, with all his heart and soul, to see once more the New Forest, so he detrained—a military expression which I regret and will not repeat—at Lyndhurst, and walked through the greenness to his uncle’s house.

You know what the New Forest is like? When you see it for the first time it teaches you the meaning of words you had never understood before. You then for the first time know what glades mean, for example, and vistas, and mist and bracken; and “monarch of the grove,” a phrase you always laughed at and still dislike, does yet begin to have a sort of meaning.

It was not for the first time that Edmund saw the forest, so he threw himself into its green embrace as a lover, home-coming, throws himself into his mistress’s dear arms that have been waiting for him long.

“At last!” the forest seemed to say, proffering its green embrace.

Edmund thought of South Africa, and filled his lungs with the soft, sweet air of home; and presently he threw himself

down to rest, and sniffed deep with great contentment. There is no scent like the scent of bruised bracken. He lay looking through the straight bracken stems that are themselves a forest. And to him came soft lights, little forest noises—the hum of a wild bee, the scutter of a squirrel, and the stealthy glide of something long and swift under dead leaves that hardly rustled to its passing.

All these sounds caressed his ear. Then among them came a sound that was not a caress, but a challenge—the strangest sound: through the bracken forest, music, single notes, an air, familiar, yet unrecognised. Thus and not otherwise might Pan have piped to nymphs, among other woods, in other days than these. Templar pleased himself for a while with the fancy of Pan haunting these woods through the long ages, revealing himself only to worshippers rare and approved. Then he got up lazily and went towards the music—to see who the deuce was playing the Casse-Noisette waltz in the heart of the New Forest.

He could move, when he chose, as quietly as an Indian; and he chose now, so that he got nearer and nearer to the music without breaking it by any heard movement, and presently saw before him the gold of an open glade in sunlight, and knew that the musician was here. He let himself slowly down and lay under a bush; then, very slowly he reached his head forward till between the hornbeam leaves he could fully see the glade.

A fallen sapling lay across the lower end of the glade, and on it, self-comprised orchestra of a sylvan theatre, sat a boy, barefooted, bare-chested, blowing at the gleaming

silver pipe with at least all a Pan’s energy, and—Templar owned it—a faint touch of the very magic of Pan.

He piped, and he did not pipe to solitude, nor only to his unseen listener. He piped to a nymph and she danced. Between smooth, short turf and arched oak-branches she danced, and the dance was the dance of the wild wood nymph, and the music was the music of the Valse des Fleurs. And the flute of Pan was a penny whistle.

Of course you guessed, as soon as I mentioned nymphs, that Mr. Templar would come upon a girl dancing in the forest. But that was just because the story is called Salome—and, of course you knew it would be about a dancer. But Mr. Templar did not know at this time that *his* story would be called Salome—and he was very much surprised, lying there under his bush. It is very seldom, except in novels, that people think that they “must be dreaming,” but Mr. Templar really for one moment thought it—or something like it, and, of course, he had no idea that he would ever be in a novel. “Am I really awake?” he quite thought of asking himself. Perhaps the recumbent position under the bush helped the thought.

The dancer’s straight, limp black hair hung in hanks on each side of a narrow, brown face that broadened suddenly at the brow where large dark eyes were. She had a wreath of the delicate white-flowered weed, called Our Lady’s bedstraw—a twisted rope of it, thick as your two wrists. Her lips were long and pale, her cheeks smooth and brown. Brown were her arms, that waved and wove the air about her into arcs and circles ... and curves that are not in the book; her ankles brown, too, and the bare feet that touched

the mossy turf in such swift, soft caress. She wore a scarlet skirt, and a white chemise that fell away from the small, square shoulder and looped low, like a holy-water stoup, in front of the young breast, flat as a boy's. As the hidden spectator gazed she cast away the wreath, threw back her hair, lank like seaweed, and shook shivering fingers imperatively to the flute player on the fallen tree. The music quickened, the brown feet moved faster and faster—the muscles of arms and legs stiffened squarely. The eyes that had flashed to the first quickening of the music grew dull as the heavy lids drooped over them. The mouth stretched to a pale red line, the white teeth catching the lower lip.

"Beautiful," said Mr. Templar, under his bush, "beautiful—beautiful!"

Without taking his eyes from the linked rhythm of her dance, Mr. Templar was aware that shoes and stockings and a straw hat lay among mossed oak roots, that a blue gown hung from the branch of a chestnut tree.

The dancer suddenly seemed to tire of her lonely dance. She approached the blue dress, bowed to it, smiled to it, menaced it, scorned it, relented to it, sidled up to it with shy allurements, retreated from it with bold defiances, reached up her arms to it, danced away from it with gestures of desperate farewell; and at last from the far end of the glade, with one fleet, dazzling rush, reached the hanging thing; stood an instant with arms outspread and face raised in worship, and, as the music approached a pause, sank on her knees before it, burying her face in its folds.

The music ceased.

“I wish you wouldn’t do that,” said Pan, wiping his whistle on his coat sleeve, “it’s outlandish, that is. I don’t like it.”

“Why?” she said, from among the blue folds.

“You know why. It’s like as if you was dancing to a dead man—one that’s hanged by the neck till he’s dead, like it says in the papers.”

“Perhaps I am,” she said; “perhaps it really *is* a dead man, Denny. Perhaps I’ve just done some magic to make you think it’s only my old blue linen. You know I’m a witch, don’t you, Den?”

“Ah,” said Pan gloomily. “I know that well enough. But I won’t ’ave you talk about it—see? If you do I shan’t whistle for you no more—I ain’t goin’ to whistle for a witch, not even if it’s you, Miss Sandy.”

Mr. Templar was now fully awake to his own indiscretion. Yet he could not move, without deepening that indiscretion to the blackness of the chimney-back. To watch is one thing; to listen is another. A really high-souled young man would have said “Ahem,” and made his presence known, so as to be quite sure of not being an eavesdropper. But Edmund was not sufficiently high-souled to intrude the knowledge of his presence on a girl in her petticoat and shift, even though that girl were only a slip of a thing who could not, by any chance, be a day older than her first teen. So he lay still, and knew that still he must lie till the scene was over, and the actors gone, and the woodland drop-scene fallen once more on their sylvan stage.

“Ah,” said the girl, swaying the blue folds to and fro, her face still hidden in them, “you didn’t believe in witches when you came from London—did you?”

“No.”

“But I’ve made you believe in them, haven’t I?”

“Yes.”

“And in all the good things, too. God and His angels and the blessed saints?”

“Yes.”

“And you’re a good Christian?”

“Yes.”

“And you’re very frightened of me?”

“Yes.”

“And you love me very much?”

“Yes.”

“And you’ll always do what I tell you?”

“Yes.”

“Then wait till I get my frock on, and then you shall say your creed and I’ll give you the sixpence and you can go.”

She picked up the dress and turned towards the thicket furthest away from Templar.

“Where you going?”

“To put on my dress. I don’t mind dressing with you here—you’re just the same as my faithful dog—aren’t you, Denny? But I’m not going to dress with strange men about and there’s a man under the bushes looking at us.”

“Where? I don’t see him!”

“Stay still. *I* don’t see him. But I know he’s here. And I forbid you to look for him. Perhaps he’s invisible to you; anyway, I won’t have you look for him. I shall tie my sash round your eyes.”

“No,” said Pan, jerking his head back as she came towards him with the long blue linen streamer. “Honour

bright!”

And he shut his eyes.

She parted the green screen and disappeared behind it.

“You, man,” came the voice from behind moving green leaves, “don’t you dare to stir till I say you may.”

There was a pause. Pan kept his eyes tightly shut. Templar, under his bush, changed to an easier attitude.

When in blue linen, with bound hair, she came back into the filtered sunlight, he saw that she had at least two years more than he had assigned to her. Her face now was grave, her eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

“Now!” she said, “Denny, you are to keep your eyes shut. Perhaps there isn’t any man here at all. Perhaps I’m only trying your obedience. But if you look I’ll never let you come here and play for me anymore.”

“I won’t look,” said Pan, and covered his face with his hands.

“Now, you man,” she said, “come out. But you’re not to speak. If you speak I shall know exactly what to think of you, and I shall tell my grandfather that you are a poacher.”

Nothing, Templar felt, would induce him to enter that grassy arena on his stomach. He drew back through the bushes, resumed the upright and stepped out. When he was quite out he bowed very formally. But her bow was yet more formal.

“I don’t wish you to speak,” she said, “but I wish you to know that you ought to be torn by dogs like Actæon.” Denny growled. “Be quiet, Den. You man, that isn’t *common* dancing.”

Templar shook his head earnestly and she frowned.

“It all means things. It’s the only way I have of saying what I mean. If you go and tell, it’ll be stopped.”

He shook his head to express trustworthiness.

“Of course,” she went on thoughtfully, “I could bewitch you.”

He did not nod there, though he wanted to.

“I could make your cows go dry, and your pigs have swine-fever, and your horses go lame and your chickens have the pip.”

He spread deprecating hands.

“But I won’t. And you won’t tell. You couldn’t—you’re a gentleman. No gentleman would be a sneak. And if you did, there’s Denny. The only thing he cares for is his whistle and. . . and me.—Isn’t it, Denny?”

“You knows it is, all right,” said Denny, muffled.

“You won't tell, will you?” the girl insisted.

Templar shook his head again. He wished the child would have let him speak. He could have been so adequate, light yet deferent, condescending a little to her youth—respectful to her genius. As it was, he shook his head, then nodded. It was the best he could do.

“Thank you. That’s decent of you. And I don’t like being indebted to people. I must do something for you. Shall I tell your fortune? I always carry the cards. A gipsy taught me—one of the Lees,” she added proudly, and her dark eyes met his with limpid assurance.

He was glad of anything that delayed the moment of parting from her. She motioned him to sit down on the turf.

“Now, shuffle, and cut into three heaps. You must wish all the time you have the cards in your hands. Wish for

something you really want—not just that it may be fine to-morrow, or that you may be asked to a dance or something."

He shuffled the cards slowly, with his eyes on the lanky figure almost prim in its neat blue. And through the disguise of the schoolgirl he saw the nymph, and he wished, and his wish was like this: "I wish that I may meet you when you're a woman, and that I may kiss you then." (I wish I could say that he wished that she might love and marry him, but he did not. He wished just what I have told you.) And with that he cut the cards and laid them in three heaps on the moss between the tree roots.

She picked them up, held them in her hands, frowning a little.

"Oh, well," she said, "I'll lay them out for you." And she did, in four rows of eight, and two alone below. Out of doors in the sunshine cards are very red and white and black, like old women of the town with last night's rouge on their cheeks and last week's dye in their hair. Templar moved impatiently. The cards were spoiling the scene for him.

The child was sitting sideways, leaning on one hand, her head bent over the cards. After a silent minute she flung her chin up, looked straight skyward and then quickly began to gather up the cards, taking them one by one from rows alternate, and from opposite ends of the rows. Her lips moved but she did not speak. When all the cards were in her hands she looked at him—almost furtively—then suddenly shut the cards together tightly and slipped them into her pocket.

“I won’t tell your fortune,” she said definitely; “it’s all nonsense really. Good-bye.”

He shook his head, and looked imploring.

“Good-bye,” she said again. “Go.”

Slowly he got out card-case and pencil: wrote, and laid the card on her knee, for her hand would not come out to meet it.

“If you do not tell my fortune,” he said, “I shall speak.”

“Coward,” she said, and stopped short on the word, reaching her hand for the pencil.

“It is because of Denny: it’s all nonsense, but it would frighten him,” was what Templar read in an angular, fierce, half-formed handwriting.

He thought a moment, then handed her another card from his case, and the pencil.

“Write it,” he said voicelessly with lips elaborately forming the syllables.

She hesitated, shrugged lean shoulders and wrote:

“You will go beyond the seas. There is money for you. And love. But something dreadful will happen to you. Something terrible. And it will be the person you wished about’s fault. I mean through her—”

When he had read it, he wrote: “Do you mean I shall be killed—wounded?” and she wrote under it: “I do not know. You’ll be in danger, frightful danger. But it’s all nonsense, really.”

Templar smiled with his lips, but the smile went no further. In his heart he was uncomfortable. He was, you see, on his way to South Africa, where men were being wounded and killed. Of course it was all nonsense—but it was

uncomfortable nonsense, and it did not rhyme with the hour or the scene.

She took his hand, looked eagerly at the lines and nodded in reluctant confirmation.

“Your hand says the same,” was what the nod and the raised eyebrows conveyed.

“Is he gone—may I open my eyes?” said Denny.

“No—not yet. He is just going. There is no fortune to tell you,” she said. “There are foreign countries and a woman, and something I can’t understand, about a Head. The head of a college, perhaps. It might be a bishop, or a king, or the Pope, or a millionaire. But it’s all nonsense, really. Good-bye. Silence to the death?”

“Silence to the death,” said Templar, voiceless and elaborate of gesture.

“Now go,” said the child. And he went.

“I heard him go. He’s gone now,” said Pan. “I may look now, mayn’t I?”

“Oh, yes—you may look now, Denny. Oh, Denny, dear, I can make you believe anything I like, can’t I? You really thought there was someone here, didn’t you?”

“There *was* someone here,” said the little Pan, “and when you said that about the dogs tearing him I wished as I was your little dog really, like what you says I am sometimes.”

“There was no one here at all,” said the girl deliberately, and laughed in his face: “No one at all—I made it all up. There was no one here. Do you believe me?”

“Yes,” said Pan slowly—“yes, I believe you: but I know better all the same.”

A wing of silence seemed to sweep through the woods.

“I know,” said the girl-child. “But it’s I who make you think you know better, too. Do you understand that, Denny?”

“It’s you that makes me go on being alive at all, I think,” said Pan, “making me think things ain’t much ’longside that.”

“Nonsense!” she said briskly. “Where’s your little friend?”

He reached his hand down behind the tree trunk on which he sat, and pulled up the “little friend” that had lain there hidden.

It was a crutch.

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Mr. Templar was the soul of honour. He never told anyone about the sylvan scene and Pan, or the child-nymph who danced and told fortunes and was altogether so wonderful and impossible. But he did say, after dinner, for which he had only the barest time to dress:

“I say, Auntie, who’s the little girl in blue, with hair like a black horse-tail, that walks about the forest?”

And the Aunt replied:

“Oh, that’s poor little Alexandra Mundy. Runs quite wild. It’s a dreadful pity.”

“She looked quiet enough,” said Templar, deliberately, thinking of her in the blue frock, of her demureness, and not in the red and white of her dance.

“Oh, well,” said his Aunt, “one hears very odd things.”

“Such as—”

“Oh, well—she’s always about with a crippled boy, one of those ‘Happy Holiday Fund’ children—came down for a fortnight and then old Mr. Mundy—her grandfather, you know—sort of pensioned him permanently into the family he

was staying with. And now he's having the boy taught music. The violin, and all sorts of things. And Alexandra spoils him completely."

"But who are they?—I don't remember the name."

"He's very rich—tallow, I think it was. Son married an actress," said the Uncle. "Nobody knows them, you know."

"I expect if all were known, that's why poor Alexandra's so peculiar," said the Aunt—"the actress mother, I mean. We mustn't disregard heredity nowadays, you know, Edmund." She spoke with the respectful solemnity due from those who name the names of the new gods.

"But doesn't the old gentleman look after her?"

"Oh, he's always away—in Athens or Venice or somewhere, collecting rubbish. She has governesses, of course, but she sets them at defiance. You mark my words, that old tallow man will live to regret it."

"Is she so *very* naughty?" Edmund asked lazily.

"She's outrée, my dear," said his Aunt firmly, "outrée. She's eccentric—flighty, and I'm very much afraid that when she grows up she may even be not respectable."

"Do you think she's pretty?" Edmund asked warily; and the white and red and brown of her dancing shape danced again before the eyes of his memory.

"Pretty? my dear boy, thank goodness she's not *that*. I really am grateful for her plainness. It may be her salvation. Providence moves in a mysterious way, you know. I suppose you only saw her a long way off?"

"Now *I* should have said," the Uncle put in, "that the girl had the makings of a fine woman."

“Ah, yes,” said the wife with affectionate scorn, “but then you’d say anything if it was about a girl—wouldn’t you Henry?”

•••••

It was the very next day that Edmund Templar joined his regiment and went out to South Africa. I should like to tell you how he distinguished himself there, but a promise is a promise. I keep mine. You trust me. And hand in hand, in an atmosphere of mutual confidence, we proceed to the story of Salome and the Head.

Limelight

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“And what,” asked Mr. Edmund Templar on his return from Africa, “has become of that girl—what was her name?—Alexandra Something or other.”

It was not the first thing he said, of course; there were enquiries about the health and happiness of relations—and answers to their enquiries. He told them many things about South Africa and the war, and what he had been doing all those eight years. He was an engineer, by the way, and he had been making railways in desert places. He had had all sorts of adventures, which the Aunt and Uncle found quite enthralling, so that it was not till quite the end of the first evening that he was able to say the first thing, of all the things he said, in which we have any interest or concern.

“Oh!” said the Aunt, stretching her fat, kid-slippered feet to the fire, for these May evenings were still chilly; “you mean that dreadful Mundy girl! Of course I’m sorry for her and all that, but really!”

“Why—what’s become of her?”

“Ah!” said the Aunt impressively, “that’s just it. What has become of her? That’s what everybody’s been asking—And nobody knows. *He* lost all his money, you know—or nearly all—and when he was dead—it was most painful. He took an overdose of chloral, and of course if you’re charitable you can say it was an accident. But you have a right to your own opinion.”

“Nonsense, my dear,” said the Uncle: “accident, not a doubt of it. Hard-headed man of business.”

“That’s just why,” said the Aunt—“Do throw your cigar end into the fire, Henry, if you’ve quite done smoking it. You know how it makes the curtains smell in the morning if you leave them in the ash-trays.”

“All right, my dear, all right,” said the Uncle testily. “I don’t know what you think, Edmund, but I think I shall turn in.”

Edmund put it that the return of a really respectable prodigal should be celebrated with yet another cigar, and sitting up a little longer, and the fire so jolly, too—applewood, wasn’t it?

“Yes—I never let them waste the orchard thinnings. There’s no wood like it.—Thanks—no, I never use a match.” When the cigar had been lighted from a glowing flake of red-hot wood, Edmund tried again.

“What makes you think that Mundy man did it on purpose?”

“Well, you see the money was all gone. It went in some bank or other.”

“Unified Westrallan,” said the Uncle.

“And the girl?”

“How you do go on about the girl! Well, that was what I was telling you when your Uncle interrupted. After the death—whether it was suicide or not—I have my own opinion about that—and anyone can think anything else——”

“After the death,” Templar permitted himself to interrupt, with patient impatience. The years that rob us of so much

are in some things generous, and the old gain in words where they lose in ideas. Templar saw this—and said:

“After the death?”

“Well, as I was telling you—after the death it was most painful. She never waited even for the funeral, or to see her guardian, a very worthy man—our own family solicitor as it happened. She never waited to see what was left out of the wreck, or from the sale, or anything. Just took all her clothes as well as other things, and *went*.”

“Where to?”

The Aunt’s shoulders shrugged nearly to her ears in the expression of her complete dissociation from such “goings on.”

“Ah!—where, indeed? She and her old nurse—and that lame fiddling youth who was not quite right—they all went, like the folded Arabs in the hymn: only, of course, they went by train. Two fly-loads of boxes and things, besides a cart, and no one at the station had the sense to stop them.”

“No one had any *right* to stop them,” said the Uncle, “except Wigram and Bucks, and they weren’t there.”

“Well, anyhow they went. But that’s not the worst. That heartless girl sent all the servants away, and of course everyone thought she wanted to be alone with her sorrow. But not she. My dear, that abandoned girl just wanted to be alone, to *take things*. She stole everything valuable she could lay her hands on—books, silver, linen, curios—all the jewellery. . .”

“Well, come,” said the Uncle, “that was her mother’s, anyway.”

“Well,” said the Aunt, not influenced, “whether or no, she took it, and she and the housekeeper packed it all up, in dozens of boxes and packages—regular bales some of them were, the stationmaster told your Uncle. Deliberate robbery of the creditors, as Mr. Wigram most properly put it.”

“But there was enough to satisfy the creditors, and a little bit over, you must remember that, Louise.”

“Ah! but she didn’t know that. It’s the principle I think of. Well, of course Mr. Wigram set detectives onto her track, and they found her. She set him at defiance, said the things were hers, and she was of age and wouldn’t have a guardian. And he said he was trustee for the little that was left. And she told him to keep it, and have a beano with it. He looked as if he needed one, she said. But the odd thing was that she got round him somehow in the end—made him promise not to tell where she’d gone, or what she was doing, and to let her keep her stolen goods.”

“Louise!”

“Well, the principle’s the thing, Henry. And some very nice people have taken the Mount—retired Indian people; she goes in for archery, and he’s a great gardener—most desirable neighbours. . . .”

When the Aunt had talked herself into sleepiness and retirement, the Uncle said:

“That girl, you know, I’m sorry for her myself. She never had a chance. The old boy left her to herself till she got into mischief, as she was bound to do—bound to do; it’s only human nature, and after that he never let her alone for a minute. Strict school—like a convent—bars to the windows and no holidays—‘Difficult or backward girls,’ you know. I’m

not sure they didn’t flog the girls. Anyhow everyone thought he’d broken her spirit. She came home about three months before the end. They say he never spoke to her, though he was living at home then.”

Templar saw the free grace of the dancing girl in the forest glade, and he saw the school for difficult and backward girls, with the bars, and the rest of it. He felt a pang of the soul so keen as to be also a pang of the body—the kind of fine thrill of physical sympathy that pierces you when you see a child cut its hand or squeeze its finger in a door.

“I don’t wonder she bolted,” he said. “What was it she’d done?—The mischief she got into, I mean?”

“Well, no one knew exactly. Your Aunt has her own opinion. I expect she thought it was too shocking to talk to you about. . . . Contaminate the young, what? The man was her music-master—a black, curly, oily, fat-nosed little beast, like a half-bred wet retriever. Deuced clever at his beastly music. No other good points. He lodged at the baker’s. Old Mundy came back just in time, or just too late. Some people think one and some the other. Anyhow there was a blazing row. He’d only himself to thank for it all. Unforgiving old ass!”

“It’s jolly hard lines on the girl,” said Edmund, and experienced a sense of guilt. Quite unreasonably, for how could he have helped? He had never even spoken to her. He might have spoken something—might have written something. “You have made a friend today.”—“If ever you are in trouble count on me!” No! One does not do such things except in books.

“And no one knows where she’s gone?” he asked.

“To the demnition bow-wows, your Aunt thinks—but I don’t know. If she went she went with her eyes open. The girl was no fool. And I thought her not bad-looking. In fact, there was a sort of a something. And she had a way with her—I’m not sure that she isn’t the sort of girl a man loses his head over—perfectly straight, what? It seems a waste of good material. If she’d had a decent home!”

“If you and Auntie had adopted her,” said Edmund, and wondered.

“As a matter of fact,” said the Uncle, looking disparagingly at his cigar, “I did suggest something of the kind when she was quite small. She was an engaging little thing. Old Mundy cut me for two years after that.

Templar’s heart warmed to his Uncle.

“And Auntie?” he asked.

“Oh, she’d have liked it. You know we only had one child, little Louie that died. Your Aunt wanted it more than I did—I think perhaps that’s the reason why she’s so bitter about the girl—feels what one could have made of her, and all that. Let’s toddle now, shall we?”

Next noon Templar made a little pilgrimage to that glade in the forest that had seen the child dancing. At least he set out on that pilgrimage. But he could not find the shrine. Eight years loosen the outline of undergrowths, as well as the tongues of aunts. There are many glades which might have been the glade, but none that indubitably was it. He went down towards Ringwood with mixed emotions such as—he was hungry; it was nearly luncheon time; eight years

was a good long while; and “what a damn shame. Poor, pretty, brave little thing!”

He thought of her again in the train later in the day, looking out through vistas of forest. It was annoying to remember a person after nearly forgetting her for eight years—or seven, was it?—and then to find that there would be nothing more to remember than there was seven years ago—or eight. And he was sorry for the girl.

The discerning reader will not waste any pity on him. The discerning reader knows perfectly that I am only dwelling on his slight disappointment in order to emphasise the slight pleasure he will feel when he does meet her. Of course he will have to meet her. It is not likely that anyone, outside of a lunatic asylum, would take the trouble to describe the first meeting between a man and a girl unless there were to be a second meeting. And quite soon, too. You can tell that by the masterly way in which I have dealt with all that happened to the two of them during that eight years. I might have made chapters and chapters out of that, and it wouldn’t have been exactly padding either. It would have been quite legitimate. But this story is not a problem novel, nor a study in realism. It is just the story of the way things happened—the most curious and unlikely things, some of them.

He would have liked to see her again then and there—but things like that don’t happen. Of course there had been girls—but the thin bare-armed nymph of the forest hadn’t been girls, nor come at all into that province of a young man’s fancy over which “girls” reign. She had been a child, a witch, a wonder.

“Well, it’s a pity,” said Mr. Templar, and leaned back in his corner.

Perhaps I have been too reticent; perhaps you would have liked to know more about what happened in those eight years and I, who thought to spare you, have really only irritated your curiosity. In case this should be so, I will tell you more than Mr. Templar’s Aunt knew—much more. Indeed, if she could have lived to read these pages she would not have felt that she had lived in vain.

Well then—it really was true about the music-master who was like a wet retriever. There had certainly been a something. The retriever had taught the lame youth music, and then Alexandra had wanted to learn. And the retriever, nosing about in the forest had sniffed out the sylvan theatre, and seen the dance. Quite a number of people in the neighbourhood knew that little Miss Mundy went for a walk on Sunday with the music-master. And one of these people wrote an anonymous letter to the grandfather which brought him back from his vague Venetian haunts—just in time—or just too late. Anyhow, the retriever was kicked, and retired growling. But the village post-mistress could have told you that Mr. Mundy, to the time of his death, every Christmas—a feast which he always celebrated at home—did send a letter addressed to the retriever at his kennel, which was somewhere in Highbury New Park. It was, by the way, at the railway station that Mr. Mundy had come face to face with the retriever—and there is no doubt that Sandra was with him. Quite half-a-dozen people knew that. Some people said they had first-class tickets to London, but this

could not have been because the retriever always travelled third-class instead of in the dog-box where he belonged.

"It *is* a pity," Mr. Templar, in his railway carriage corner, told himself. But the pity of it did not distress him acutely. After all, as the late Robert Louis Stevenson so aptly puts it, "the world is so full of a number of things"—and it is not empty of them just because you saw someone once when she was a child, and feel that you are not likely to see her again now that she is a woman. But Mr. Templar had a life of leisure before him—his godfather had just left him a very handsome competence, so that he need not go on making railways in desert places unless he wanted to—and he could quite well afford to spend one or two of his leisure hours in thinking about the child who had danced in the wood.

So, in due time, he reached London. And he found London vibrant with the resonant insistent echo of his thought.

You know how oddly these things happen. A fresh idea strikes you—or a Latin tag is happily quoted—and from that moment every book you take up, every newspaper you throw down will present your idea—misquote and misapply your tag. It was thus with Templar.

In the train, he thought of dancing, and when he got to London he found London talking of nothing else. He dined with the Browns—and the talk was of Miss Matilda Solitaire and dancing. He lunched with the Joneses—and dancing and Miss Peggy Pirouette were served with all the courses. He had tea with the Robinsons—and their talk was of dancing and Dorothea Duncan. Whatever the talk began with it drifted to the dance—and whoever was talked of as a

dancer, the tribute to that dancer’s gifts and graces always ended in one way:

“But you should see Sylvia—that’s all!”

His friends did not take him to see Sylvia because tickets had to be booked far ahead. But they took him to see the other ladies, and he found their dancing quite charming, but—well—quite charming; that was all. He felt a secret pleasure in remaining calm amid the transports of his friends. London was quite mad about these dancers, bare behind their veils, or with no veils at all, who strove to reproduce the spirit of the old classic dances. London was quite mad. He, proudly, was sane. For he had seen a dancer to whom these others were as wooden puppets jerked by strings almost visible. He knew, better than anyone in the world, what dancing should be. He alone, in all London, knew it. For he alone had seen a little brown dancer in a forest glade. So he remained critical and aloof, wondering at the enthusiasm of the town and not sharing it.

He was quite prepared to find Sylvia just like the others, only more so—and his friends in vain assured him that she was quite different. She was—and when at last he was dragged to see her, the difference struck him in the face like a blow. For when the curtain went up, the scene was a forest glade, painted with all the tender brilliant genius of Mascarille, the prince of scene-painters, delicately tinted, lighted faultlessly. The leaves moved as in a gentle breeze—moved and rustled. A bird twittered, trilled, uttered one long sweet note, to be answered by a pipe, clear and piercing, sweet in the first note of Mendelssohn’s “Spring Song.”