

## The Woodcutter and the Lady

(By Robert Deas)

"Oh, by the way, Hil, forgot to tell you, I found out yesterday afternoon, where that woodcutter lives, blessed nuisance he hasn't a telephone. Walked about two miles from the end of the car line, no sidewalk, no road, just a trail through the woods, inches deep in wet soggy leaves, fog coming up in patches, but a grand sunset, just like the one we saw in the—yes, thanks, I'll have another cup—Well his shack is in a lovely situation, open glade in the woods with a view of the sea and the mountains over on Vancouver Island. He came along as I got there, a giant of a man with great shoulders and huge feet, and a beard like a door mat. He carries a smell around with him about a foot thick: stale tobacco smoke and old, old clothes. He and his old mother live up there on the hillside in a dirty old two-room shack—they both look as if they never took their clothes off, just like that old gardener Robinson, that came to your father's place in Epsom once a week. They speak the same quaint dialect as he did too. How on earth they got out here I can't imagine. There must have been a sudden eruption of restlessness in some hidden valley of old England, which heaved them out and dropped them down here. It hasn't changed them a bit."

"Well everything inside seemed brown, even the smell, and she was cooking onions for his supper. I was nearly suffocated. He is going to bring us some bark and wood which is the main thing, so that's that—. No, thanks, I must run for the ferry, didn't know it was so late. I missed the clearing house yesterday and the manager said if I did it again we'd have to live on the south side of the inlet."

"Oh, Bertie, you must take one peep at the new rug in the drawing room, it's just the finishing touch. There! isn't that a lovely room. That sunset you saw yesterday came in here through the curtains and overlaid everything with a rosy light—just heavenly. Oh! bother the old Bank—all right, I'll come to the gate with you."

Hilarie St. Clair stood at the gate for a long minute, watching the rise and fall of her husband's boot soles and his braced elbows, as he ran down the hill to the short cut through the park. A quick half turn as he paused at the corner, a hasty flourish of his hat and he had gone for another day.

Late in the afternoon, when the mellowing sun filtered through the curtains and enveloped the elegant tapestries of Hilarie's drawing room with an added richness of colour, Emma, the youthful half breed from the Indian Reservation, who came to help by the day, closed the windows against the damp of nightfall.

Happy with the new clothes that are the fortune of the not long wedded, Hilarie concluded a prolonged session before her mirror, but lingered to rejoice in the daintiness of the delicate fabric of an evening gown which her husband had not yet seen—a present from her mother in England, given with the injunction not to let herself get slack, even if she found the country rough and uncouth.

Looking from her window over the golden sunlit sea, the mist laden flats along the shore, the blue smoke rising like that of Abel's offering, in the breathless air, from many a household altar, the distant islands of the Gulf of Georgia and the nearer headland of Stanley Park, she felt that here was happiness, peace, security and with her whole being given up to dreams she drifted down stairs.

Dreaming still, she entered the drawing room in whose artistic beauty she had tried to express her love of home.

With sudden movement and sound of scrambling feet a huge dark shape heaved itself upward from her frail Chipendale settee, blotting out the sunlight, like the hand of war

on a peaceful countryside, scattering her dreams like splintered glass. The heavy odour of autumn forests, the reek of stale tobacco smoke and the staler reek of toil worn clothes swirled around her and battled with the light perfume of her exquisite person.

The chill of terror stilled the beating of her heart; she hardly breathed. Instinct called for more light and frantically she pressed the electric switch.

With a gasp of relief she recognized at once the towering bearded bulk of "Jarge" the woodcutter, as described by her husband. The great gnarled hands fumbled nervously with the rim of a battered hat, pieces of bark dripped from the wrinkled homespun as he swayed uncertainly, the restless hob-nailed boots scraped and tapped distressingly on the new carpet.

A deep rumbling voice with slow and halting speech unfolded the purpose of this untimely visit.

"I come about them loads o' bark, mum. The gentleman 'e said I c'd bring five cards, but bein' as it were a-gettin' laate o' the season like, I thowt mebbe ye'd like s'more an' I got twenty—yes now, I do think I c'd maake it twenty for t' same price by the card, mūm."

Hilarie was too busy with conflicting emotions to derive more than a very sketchy idea of the proposal embodied in this speech, quite a long one for "Jarge."

The mud and leaves on the carpet and a stain of charcoal on the silk tapestry of the settee were signs that pointed towards a vigorous scolding of Emma for letting such a man into the house.

The echo of old England in the quaint accent and the man's obvious embarrassment however awakened her natural kindness and sympathy. Again she heard her mother's voice warning her of the roughness of the country and its ways.

"Wont you sit down?"

"Thankee kindly, mum."

And again she became anxiously aware of the silk tapestry.

"Now, what was it you wanted, Mr. Beden, oh, yes, some bark, twenty cords did you say? Mercy on us, that seems a lot. How big is a cord anyway? Oh, well send it along, yes, yes, that will be all right."

"Thankee kindly, mum."

The big restless hands pulled at the rim of the battered hat. He did not know how to go and she wondered why he stayed.

"It be gran' weather, fur the time o' year, mum."

"Yes, lovely weather."

And she wondered if he expected afternoon tea. He dropped the hat and as he scrambled after it, his pipe fell out of his pocket and scattered fine ashes over the carpet, foreboding more sackcloth and ashes for Emma.

"Would you like to take some flowers home to your wife? Come out into the garden."

"I ain't married, mum."

Another awkward pause in this animated conversation.

"Me an' mother, mum, we lives together."

"Oh, yes, I remember, well, come on out, come along. We will cut some chrysanthemums for her."

"Thankee kindly, mum."

The great coarse red hands crushed a generous bunch of big yellow "mums" and the cavernous voice rumbled once more.

"Thankee kindly, mum, an' good night."

And for a long minute Hilaire stood at the gate watching the slow lift and swing of heavy feet, and wondering greatly.