

The Little Grey Lady

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"It was my good fortune," he answered gravely. "Nothing more."

She gathered up the reins and smiled down at him. The men whom Esther Stanmore smiled upon seldom forgot it.

"I shall have to confine my afternoon walks to the homewoods," she remarked. "They are just as pretty, really. Good afternoon, Mr. Paul-ton. We are such close neighbours that we are certain to come across one another again soon, I hope."

But Paulton, though he bowed, did not echo her wish.

And yet in less than three weeks they had reached the end, the last barrier through which one looks into Paradise. They were seated on the trunk of a fallen tree, the sunshine distorted into queer, zigzag stripes and gleams playing away from their feet into the heart of the silent wood. A squirrel had just scampered across the path. From the hidden places beyond, a pigeon was calling softly to his mate, a woodpecker was busy amongst the branches of a beech-tree, and all the while the west wind sang in the rustling canopy above their heads. They alone of all the living things were silent.

"I think," he said, at last, "that up to now I have dreamed, not lived. The commencement of life is here."

She looked at him a little wonderingly.

"You are losing your sense of proportion," she remarked, smiling. "It is here, if you will, that one may dream of life and be happy. Yet it can be nothing save an interlude. Life is not in these woods—no, not the commencement or the end of life. It is the Paradise of dumb beasts, this. We, alas! have to seek for our Paradise in different places."

"A month ago," he said slowly, keeping his eye fixed upon the ground, "I should have needed no one to have told me where Paradise lay. If I were the Ronald Stourton of a month ago, I should not hesitate for a single second to grasp it—now."

"Ronald Stourton!" she repeated softly. "So you are Ronald Stourton?"

"Yes," he answered. "I have heard you speak of my people."

"I thought you were in Paris."

"I was. I came to England on an important mission from the chief to the Prime Minister a month ago. I bungled it hopelessly. I was taken in by a trick which should not have deceived a child. There isn't any particular secret about it now. I brought across a draft of the proposed understanding between France and England as to their neutrality in the Russo-Japanese war. The draft was stolen from me by an agent of the Russian Government or by someone who means to dispose of it to the Russian Government. I am suspended for the present. Immediately the draft is transferred to the Russian Ambassador, and the thing comes out, I shall be dismissed from the service."

She looked at him—as a woman knows how to look at such times. Her hand rested lightly upon his shoulder.

"Oh, I am so sorry," she said softly. "I felt all the time that you were in trouble. But can nothing be done? Can't the person be found who stole the paper?"

"The cleverest detective in England has the matter in hand," he answered, "and it was at his particular request that I disappeared. The person whom he strongly suspects is being watched day and night, and it is supposed that he has not yet had an

opportunity of disposing of the papers. That is why I am still merely on leave. It is a sickening story, but I am glad that you know the truth. You will understand now why I must go away."

"I understand nothing of the sort," she answered decisively. "Of course, it is shocking bad luck; but even if you have to give up your profession, there is plenty of other work in the world for a man, isn't there? How old are you?"

He smiled. He thought her manner charming, but it was certainly original.

"I am thirty-four next birthday. Too old, you see, for any of the services. I might go abroad, of course; but it is a far cry from diplomacy to ranching."

She looked at him thoughtfully.

"You are well off, aren't you?" she remarked. "Most of your family are."

"Yes," he answered drily, "I am well off. I am spared the luxury of having to work for a living, at any rate. But I am a sorry idler."

"Quite right!" she assented. "I detest men who do nothing. It always ends in their dabbling in things which they don't understand at all."

He groaned.

"Don't!" he begged, digging his stick savagely into the ground. "I can see myself—a J.P., perhaps a county councillor, a director of city companies—Heaven knows what!"

"Aren't you a little premature?" she said, smiling. "You are not sure yet that you have finished with diplomacy."

"I am perfectly certain that diplomacy has finished with me," he answered ruefully. "Pardon me!"

He picked up the letter which had slipped from her waistband and handed it to her. His eyes by chance fell upon the address, and he started.

"Miss de Poulgasky!" he repeated.

"Forgive me, but I could not help seeing. It seems strange to see that name here."

She nodded sympathetically.

"It is her father, of course, to whom those papers will be sent," she remarked. "I was at school with Corona, and we write to one another now and then. My uncle, who came down last night, seems very friendly with them. This letter is really from him. And that reminds me. I am no longer without a chaperon. I want you to come and dine with us to-night."

He shook his head.

"Don't ask me! I am not in a fit humour to meet people."

"There is only my uncle, and I think that perhaps he may amuse you. He is such a thorough cosmopolitan. I believe that he is equally at home in every capital of Europe, and he has the most marvellous collection of anecdotes. Come and dine, and afterwards I will show you my rose-garden."

"If you will—" Their heads came very close together. He seemed to have a good deal to say, and she was very well content to listen. In the end he forgot for a brief space of time all his troubles. And she forgot to post her letter.

He was watching the sunset from the terrace. Behind him was the empty drawing-room. He had arrived, after all, a little early; eight o'clock was only just striking by the stable clock. She could scarcely be down yet. He had left her barely an hour ago, and he was in no humour for a *tete-a-tete* with this wonderful uncle. So he leaned over the worn, grey balustrade and wondered which way the rose-garden might lie. Were other men so much the sport of Fate as this, he asked himself bitterly, that the greatest joy of life should shine down upon him whose feet were fast set in the quag-

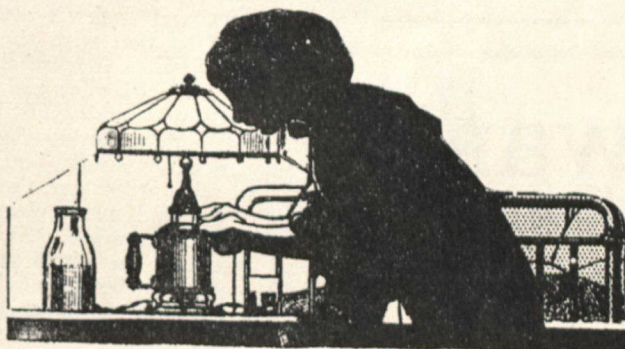
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