

THE TIME SPIRIT

A Romantic Tale

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THE TIME SPIRIT



Three pairs of eyes met in challenge

CHAPTER I

THE ARRIVAL

I

THE fog of November in its descent upon Laxton, one of London's busiest suburbs, had effaced the whole of Beaconsfield Villas, including the Number Five on the fanlight over the door of the last house but two in the row. To a tall girl in black on her way from the station this was a serious matter. She was familiar with the lie of the land in the light of day and in darkness less than Cimmerian, but this evening she had to ask a policeman, a grocer's boy, and a person of no defined status, before a kid-gloved hand met the knocker of her destination.

It was the year 1890. Those days are very distant now. Victoria the Good was on the throne of Britain. W.G. went in first for Gloucestershire; Lohmann and Lockwood bowled for Surrey. The hansom was still the gondola of London. The Tube was not, and eke the motor-bus. The *Daily Mail* had not yet invented Lord Northcliffe. Orville Wright had not made good. William Hohenzollern used to come over to see his grandmother.

Indeed, on this almost incredibly distant evening in the world's history, his grandmother in three colors and a widow's cap, with a blue ribbon across her bosom, surmounted the sitting-room chimney-piece of Number Five, Beaconsfield Villas. And at the other end of the room, over the dresser, was an old gentleman with a beard, by common consent the wisest man in the realm, who

talked about “splendid isolation,” and gave Heligoland to deep, strong, patient Germany in exchange for a tiny strip of Africa.

Yes, there were giants in those days. And no doubt there are giants in these. But it is not until little Miss Clio trips in with her scroll that we shall know for certain, shall we?

At the first crisp tap the door of Number Five was flung open.

“Harriet, so here you are!”

There was welcome in the eyes as well as in the voice of the eager, personable creature who greeted the visitor. There was welcome also in the gush of mingled gas and firelight from a cosy within.

“How are you, Eliza?”

The tall girl asked the question, shut the door, and kissed her sister, all in one breath, so that only a minute quantity of a London “partickler” was able to follow her into the room.

The hostess pressed Harriet into a chair, as near the bright fire as she could be persuaded to sit.

“What a night! I was half afraid you wouldn’t face it.”

“I always try to keep a promise.” The quiet, firm voice had a gravity and a depth which made it sound years older than that of the elder sister.

“I know you do—and that’s a lot to say of anyone. How’s your health, my dear? It’s very good to see you after all these months.”

Chattering all the time with the artlessness of a nature wholly different from that of her visitor, Eliza Kelly took the kettle from the hob and made the tea.

Beyond a superficial general likeness there was nothing to suggest the near relationship of these two. The air and manner which invested the well-made coat and skirt, the lady-like muff and stole, with a dignity rather austere, were not to be found in the unpretentious front parlor opening on to the street, or in its brisk, voluble, easy-going mistress.

“Harriet, you are really all right again?” Eliza impulsively poured out the tea before it had time to brew, thereby putting herself to the trouble of returning it to the pot.

“Oh, yes.” Harriet removed her gloves elegantly. She was quite a striking-looking creature of nine-and-twenty. In spite of a recent illness, she had an air of strength and virility. The face and brow had been cast in a mold of serious beauty, the eyes, a clear deep gray, were strongholds of good sense. Even without the aid of a considered, rather formidable manner, this young woman would have exacted respect anywhere.

“Take a muffin while it’s warm.”

Harriet did so.

“I had no idea your illness was going to be so bad.”

The younger woman would not own that her illness had been anything of the kind; she was even inclined to make light of it.

“Why, you’ve been away weeks and weeks. And Aunt Annie says you’ve had to have an operation.”

“Only a slight one.” The tone was casual. “Nothing to speak of.”

“Nothing to speak of! Aunt Annie says you have been at Brighton I don’t know how long.”

“Well, you know,” said Harriet in a discreet, rather charming voice, “they thought I was run down and that I ought to have a good rest. You see, the long illness of her Grace was very trying for those who had to look after her.”

“I suppose so. Although her Grace has been dead nearly two years. Anyhow, I hope the Family paid your expenses.” The elder sister and prudent housewife looked at Harriet keenly.

“Everything, even my railway fare.” A fine note came into the voice of Harriet Sanderson.

“Lucky you to be in such service,” said Eliza in a tone of envy.

Slowly the color deepened in Harriet’s cheek.

“By the way, what are you doing at Buntisford? Does it mean you’ve left Bridport House for good?”

“It does, I suppose.”

“But I thought Buntisford had been closed for years?”

“His Grace had it opened again, so that he can go down there when he wants to be quiet. He was always fond of it. There’s a bit of rough shooting and a river, and it’s within thirty miles of London; he finds it very convenient. Of course, it’s quite small and easy to manage.”

“What is your position there?”

“I’m housekeeper,” said Harriet. “That is to say, I manage everything.”

The elder sister looked at her with incredulity, in which a little awe was mingled. “Housekeeper—to the Duke of Bridport—and you not yet thirty, Hattie. Gracious, goodness, what next!”

The visitor smiled at this simplicity. “It’s hardly so grand as it sounds. The house doesn’t need much in the way of servants; the Family never go there. His Grace comes down now and again for a week-end when he wants to be alone. Just himself—there’s never anyone else.”

“But housekeeper!” Eliza was still incredulous. “At twenty-nine! I call it wonderful.”

“Is it so remarkable?” Harriet’s calmness seemed a little uncanny.

“The dad would have thought so, had he lived to see it. He always thought the world of the Family.”

The younger sister smiled at this artlessness.

“Every reason to do so, no doubt,” she said with a brightening eye and a rush of warmth to her voice. “I am sure there couldn’t be better people in this world than the Dinnefords.”

“That was the father’s opinion, anyway. He always said they knew how to treat those who served them.”

“Not a doubt of that,” said Harriet. “They have been more than good to me.” The color flowed over her face. “And his Grace often speaks of the father. He says he was his right hand at Ardnaleuchan, and that he saved him many a pound in a twelvemonth.”

“I expect he did,” said Eliza, her own eyes kindling. “He simply worshiped the Family. Mother used to declare that he would have sold his soul for the Dinnefords.”

“He was a very good man,” said Harriet simply.

“It would have been a proud day for him, Hattie, had he lived to see you where you are now. And not yet thirty—with all your life before you.”

But the words of the elder sister brought a look of constraint to the face of Harriet. Mistaking the cause, Eliza was puzzled. “And it won’t be my opinion only,” she said. “Aunt Annie I’m sure will think as I do. She’ll say you’ve had a wonderful piece of luck.”

“But the position *does* mean great responsibility”—there was a sudden change in Harriet’s tone.

Eliza kept her eyes on the face of the younger woman, that fine Scots face, so full of resolution and character. “Whatever it may be, Hattie, I’m thinking you’ll just about be able to manage it.”

“I mean to try.” Harriet spoke very slowly and softly. “I mean to show myself worthy of his Grace’s confidence.”

The elder sister smiled an involuntary admiration; there was such a calm force about the girl. “And, of course, it means that you are made for life.”

But in the eyes of Harriet was a fleck of anxiety. “Ah! you don’t know. It’s a big position—an awfully big position.”

Eliza agreed.

“There are times when it almost frightens me.” Harriet spoke half to herself.

“Everything has to run like clockwork, of course,” said the sympathetic Eliza. “And it’s bound to make the upper servants at Bridport House very jealous.”

“It may.” The deep tone had almost an edge of disdain. “Anyhow it doesn’t matter. I don’t go to Bridport House now.”

“But you can’t tell me, my dear, that they like to hear of her Grace’s second maid holding the keys in the housekeeper’s room.”

The calm Harriet smiled. “But it’s only Buntisford, after all. You speak as if it was Bridport House or Ardnaleuchan.”

Eliza shook a knowledgeable head. “They won’t like it all the same, Hattie. The dad wouldn’t have, for one. He was all his life on the estate, but he was turned fifty before he rose to be factor at Ardnaleuchan.”

“Well, Eliza”—there was a force, a decision in the words which made an end of criticism—“it’s just a matter for the Duke. The place is not of my seeking. I was asked to take it—what else could I do?”

“Don’t think I blame you. If it’s the wish of his Grace there is no more to be said. Still, there’s no denying you’ve a big responsibility.”

At these words a shadow came into the resolute eyes.

Said the elder sister reassuringly, “You’ll be equal to the position, never fear. That head of yours is a good one, Hattie. Even Aunt Annie admits that. By the way, have you seen her lately?”

“Seen—Aunt Annie?” said Harriet defensively. The sudden mention of that name produced an immediate change of tone in her distinguished niece.

“She’s been asking about you. She wants very much to see you.”

The shadow deepened in Harriet’s eyes. But an instant later she had skillfully covered an air of growing constraint by a conventional question.

“How’s Joe, Eliza?”

“Pretty much as usual. He’ll be off duty soon.”

Joe Kelly was Eliza’s husband, and a member of the Metropolitan police force. In the eyes of her family, Eliza Sanderson had married beneath her. But Joe, if a rough diamond, was a good fellow, and Eliza could afford not to be over-sensitive on the score of public opinion. Joe had no superficial graces, it was as much as he could do to write a line in his notebook, high rank in his calling was not prophesied by his best friends, but his wife knew she was well off. They had been married eight years, and if only Providence had blessed a harmonious union in a becoming manner, Eliza Kelly would not have found it in her heart to envy the greatest lady in the land. But Providence had not done so, the more was the pity.

“By the way,”—Eliza suddenly broke a silence—“there’s a piece of news for you, Hattie. A friend is coming to see you at five.”

“A friend—to see me!”

“To see you, my dear. In fact, I might say an admirer. Can’t you guess who?”

“I certainly can’t.”

“Then I think you ought.” Mischief had yielded to laughter of a rather quizzical kind.

“I didn’t know that I had any admirers—in Laxton.”

The touch of manner delicately suggested ducal circles.

“You can have a husband for the asking, our Harriet.” The eternal feminine was now in command of the situation.

Harriet frowned.

“I can’t think who it can be.”

“No?” laughed the tormentress. “You are not going to tell me you have forgotten the young man you met the last time you were here?”

It seemed that the distinguished visitor had.

“I do call that hard lines,” mocked Eliza. “You have really forgotten him?”

“I really have!”

“He has talked of you ever since. When was Miss Sanderson coming again? Could he be invited to meet her? He wanted to see her about something verra impoortant.”

A light dawned upon Harriet’s perplexity.

“Surely you don’t mean—you don’t mean that red-headed young policeman——?”

“Dugald Maclean. Of course, I do. He has invited himself to meet you at five o’clock.” Eliza sat back in her chair and laughed at the face of Harriet, but the face of Harriet showed it was hardly a laughing matter.

“Well!” she cried. Her eyes were smiling, yet they could not veil their look of deep annoyance.

“Now, Hattie,” admonished the voice of maternal wisdom, “there’s no need to take offense. Don’t forget you are twenty-nine, Dugald Maclean is a smart young man, and Joe says he’ll make his way in the world. Of course, you hold a very high position now, but if you don’t want to find yourself on the shelf it’s time you began to think very seriously about a husband.”

“We will change the subject, if you don’t mind.” The tone revealed a wide gulf between the outlook of Eliza Kelly and that of a confidential retainer in the household of the Duke of Bridport.

“Very well, my dear. But don’t bite. Have the last piece of muffin. And then I’ll toast another for Constable Maclean.”

II

The clock on the chimney-piece struck five. Before its last echo had died there came a loud knock on the front door.

Constable Maclean was a ruddy young Scotsman. He was tall, lean, large-boned, with prominent teeth and ears. Although freckled like a turkey’s egg, he was not a bad-looking fellow. His boots, however, took up a lot of space in a small room, and the manner of his entrance suggested that the difficult operation known as “falling over oneself” was in the act of consummation. But there

was an intense earnestness in his manner, and a personal force in his look, which gave a redeeming grace of character to a shy awkwardness, verging on the grotesque.

“Good afternune,” said Constable Maclean, removing his helmet with a polite grimace.

One of the ladies shook hands, the other welcomed the young man with a cordial good-evening and bade him sit down. Constable Maclean, encumbered with a regulation overcoat, sat down rather like a performing bear.

At first conversation languished. Yet no welcome could have been more cordial than Eliza’s. She felt like a mother to this young man. It was her nature to feel like a mother to every young man. Moreover, Dugald Maclean, as he sat perspiring with nervousness on the edge of a chair much too small for him, seemed to need some large-hearted woman to feel like a mother towards him.

Miss Harriet Sanderson was to blame, no doubt, for the young policeman’s aphasia. Her coolness and ease, with a half quizzical, half ironical look surmounting it, seemed to increase the bashfulness of Dugald Maclean whenever he ventured to look at her out of the tail of his eye.

It was clear that the young man was suffering acutely. Nature had intended him to be expansive—not in the Sassenach sense perhaps,—but given the time and the place and a right conjunction of the planets, Dugald Maclean had social gifts, at least they were so assessed at Carrickmachree in his native Caledonia. Moreover, he was rather proud of them. He was an ambitious and gifted young police officer. For many moons he had been looking forward to this romantic hour. Since a first chance meeting with

the semi-divine Miss Sanderson he had been living in the hope of a second, yet now by the courtesy of Providence it was granted to him he might never have seen a woman before.

The lips of Constable Maclean were dry, his tongue clove to the roof of an amazingly capacious mouth. As for Miss Sanderson, mere silence began to achieve wonders in the way of gentle, smiling irony. But the hostess was more humane. For one thing she was married, and although Fate had been cruel, she had a sacred instinct which made her regard every young man as a boy of her own.

Every moment the situation became more delicate, but Eliza's handling of it was superb. She brewed a fresh cup of tea for Constable Maclean, and then plied the toasting-fork to such purpose that the young man became so busy devouring muffins that for a time he forgot his shame. Eliza could toast and butter a muffin with anyone, Constable Maclean could eat a muffin with anyone—thus things began to go better. And when, without turning a hair, the young man entered upon his third muffin, Miss Sanderson dramatically unbent.

“Allow me to give you another cup of tea.” The voice was melody.

A succession of guttural noises, which might be interpreted as “Thank ye kindly, miss,” having come apparently from the boots of Constable Maclean, Miss Harriet Sanderson handed him a second cup of tea.

Still, the conversation did not prosper. But the perfect hostess, kneeling before the fire in order to toast muffin the fifth, had still her best card to play. It was the ace of trumps, in fact, and when

she rose to spread butter over a sizzling, delicious, corrugated surface, she decided that the time had come to make use of it.

Perhaps the factor in the situation which moved her to this step was that only one muffin now remained for her husband when he came off duty half-an-hour hence, and that his young colleague of the X Division seemed ready to go on devouring them until the crack of doom.

“That reminds me,” Eliza suddenly remarked as she cut the fifth muffin in half, “I promised Mrs. Norris I would go across after tea to have a look at her latest.”

“You are not going out, Eliza, such a night as this?” said Harriet in a voice of consternation.

“A promise is a promise, my dear, you know that. Mrs. Norris has just had her sixth—the sweetest little boy. Some people have all the luck.”

“But the fog—you can’t see a yard in front of you!”

“It’s only just across the street, my dear.”

III

As soon as Eliza, hatted and cloaked, had gone to see Mrs. Norris’s latest, a change came over Constable Maclean. He was a young man of big ideas. But all that they had done for him so far was to turn life into a tragedy. By nature fiercely sensitive, the shyness which made his life a burden had a trick of crystallizing at the most inconvenient moments into a kind of dumb madness. A crisis of this kind was upon him now. Yet he had a will of iron. And in order to keep faith with the highest law of his being that will was

always forcing him to do things, and say things, which people who did not happen to be Dugald Maclean could only regard as perfectly amazing.

His acquaintance with Miss Sanderson was very slight. They came from neighboring villages in their native Scotland; many times he had gazed from afar on his beautiful compatriot, but only once before could he really be said to have met her. That was months ago, in that very room, when he had been but a few days in London. Since then a very ambitious young man had thought about her a great deal. The force and charm of her personality had cast a spell upon him; this was a demonic woman if ever there was one; he had hardly guessed that such creatures existed. It would be wrong to say that he was in love with her; his passion was centered upon ideas and not upon people; yet Harriet Sanderson was already marked in the catalogue as the property of Dugald Maclean.

“Do you like *vairse*?” inquired the young man, with an abruptness which startled her.

The unexpected question was far from the present plane of her thoughts, but it was answered to the best of her ability.

“Yes, I like it very much,” she said, tactfully.

“I’m gled.” Constable Maclean unbuttoned his great coat.

Somewhere in the mind of Harriet lurked the romantic hope that this remarkable young man was about to produce a hare or a rabbit after the manner of a wonder-worker at the Egyptian Hall. But in this she was disappointed. He simply took forth from an inner pocket of his tunic several sheets of neatly-folded white foolscap, and handed them to Miss Sanderson without a word. He then

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