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VERA

BY THE AUTHOR OF "ELIZABETH AND HER GERMAN GARDEN"

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I

When the doctor had gone, and the two women from the village he had been waiting for were upstairs shut in with her dead father, Lucy went out into the garden and stood leaning on the gate staring at the sea.

Her father had died at nine o'clock that morning, and it was now twelve. The sun beat on her bare head; and the burnt-up grass along the top of the diff, and the dusty road that passed the gate, and the

glittering sea, and the few white clouds hanging in the sky, all blazed and glared in an extremity of silent, motionless heat and light.

Into this emptiness Lucy stared, motionless herself, as if she had been carved in stone. There was not a sail on the sea, nor a line of distant smoke from any steamer, neither was there once the flash of a bird's wing brushing across the sky. Movement seemed smitten rigid. Sound seemed to have gone to sleep.

Lucy stood staring at the sea, her face as empty of expression as the bright blank world before her. Her father had been dead three hours, and she felt nothing.

It was just a week since they had arrived in Cornwall, she and he, full of hope, full of pleasure in the pretty little furnished house they had taken for August and September, full of confidence in the good the pure air was going to do him. But there had always been confidence; there had never been a moment during the long years of his fragility when confidence had even been questioned. He was delicate, and she had taken care of him. She had taken care of him and he had been delicate ever since she could remember. And ever since she could remember he had been everything in life to her. She had had no thought since she grew up for anybody but her father. There was no room for any other thought, so completely did he fill her heart. They had done everything together, shared everything together, dodged the winters together, settled in charming places, seen the same beautiful things, read the same books, talked, laughed, had friends,--heaps of friends; wherever they were her father seemed at once to have friends, adding them to the mass he had already. She had not been away from him a day for years; she had had no wish to go away. Where and with whom could she be so happy as with him? All the years were years of sunshine. There had been no winters; nothing but summer, summer, and sweet scents and soft skies, and patient understanding with her slowness--for he had the nimblest mind--and love. He was the most amusing companion to her, the most generous friend, the most illuminating guide, the most adoring father; and now he was dead, and she felt nothing.

Her father. Dead. For ever.

She said the words over to herself. They meant nothing.

She was going to be alone. Without him. Always.

She said the words over to herself. They meant nothing.

Up in that room with its windows wide open, shut away from her with the two village women, he was lying dead. He had smiled at her for the last time, said all he was ever going to say to her, called her the last of the sweet, half-teasing names he loved to invent for her. Why, only a few hours ago they were having breakfast together and planning what they would do that day. Why, only yesterday they drove together after tea towards the sunset, and he had seen, with his quick eyes that saw everything, some unusual grasses by the road-side, and had stopped and gathered them, excited to find such rare ones, and had taken them back with him to study, and had explained them to her and made her see profoundly interesting, important things in them, in these grasses which, till he touched them, had seemed just grasses. That is what he did with everything,--touched it into life and delight. The grasses lay in the dining-room now, waiting for him to work on them, spread out where he had put them on some blotting-paper in the window. She had seen them as she came through on her way to the garden; and she had seen, too, that the breakfast was still there, the breakfast they had had together, still as they had left it, forgotten by the servants in the surprise of death. He had fallen down as he got up from it. Dead. In an instant. No time for anything, for a cry, for a look. Gone. Finished.

Wiped out.

What a beautiful day it was; and so hot. He loved heat. They were lucky in the weather....

Yes, there were sounds after all,--she suddenly noticed them; sounds from the room upstairs, a busy moving about of discreet footsteps, the splash of water, crockery being carefully set down. Presently the women would come and tell her everything was ready, and she could go back to him again. The women had tried to comfort her when they arrived; and so had the servants, and so had the doctor. Comfort her! And she felt nothing.

Lucy stared at the sea, thinking these things, examining the situation as a curious one but unconnected with herself, looking at it with a kind of cold comprehension. Her mind was quite clear. Every detail of what had happened was sharply before her. She knew everything, and she felt nothing,--like God, she said to herself; yes, exactly like God.

Footsteps came along the road, which was hidden by the garden's fringe of trees and bushes for fifty yards on either side of the gate, and presently a man passed between her eyes and the sea. She did not

notice him, for she was noticing nothing but her thoughts, and he passed in front of her quite close, and was gone.

But he had seen her, and had stared hard at her for the brief instant it took to pass the gate. Her face and its expression had surprised him. He was not a very observant man, and at that moment was even less so than usual, for he was particularly and deeply absorbed in his own affairs; yet when he came suddenly on the motionless figure at the gate, with its wide-open eyes that simply looked through him as he went by, unconscious, obviously, that any one was going by, his attention was surprised away from himself and almost he had stopped to examine the strange creature more closely. His code, however, prevented that, and he continued along the further fifty yards of bushes and trees that hid the other half of the garden from the road, but more slowly, slower and slower, till at the end of the garden where the road left it behind and went on very solitarily over the bare grass on the top of the cliffs, winding in and out with the ins and outs of the coast for as far as one could see, he hesitated, looked back, went on a yard or two, hesitated again, stopped and took off his hot hat and wiped his forehead, looked at the bare country and the long twisting glare of the road ahead, and then very slowly turned and went past the belt of bushes towards the

gate again.

He said to himself as he went: 'My God, I'm so lonely. I can't stand it. I must speak to some one. I shall go off my head----'

For what had happened to this man--his name was Wemyss--was that public opinion was forcing him into retirement and inactivity at the very time when he most needed company and distraction. He had to go away by himself, he had to withdraw for at the very least a week from his ordinary life, from his house on the river where he had just begun his summer holiday, from his house in London where at least there were his clubs, because of this determination on the part of public opinion that he should for a space be alone with his sorrow. Alone with sorrow,--of all ghastly things for a man to be alone with! It was an outrage, he felt, to condemn a man to that; it was the cruellest form of solitary confinement. He had come to Cornwall because it took a long time to get to, a whole day in the train there and a whole day in the train back, dipping the week, the minimum of time public opinion insisted on for respecting his bereavement, at both ends; but still that left five days of awful loneliness, of wandering about the cliffs by himself trying not to think, without a soul to speak to, without a thing to do. He couldn't play bridge because of public opinion. Everybody knew what had happened to him. It had been in all the papers. The moment he said his name they would know. It was so recent. Only last week....

No, he couldn't bear this, he must speak to some one. That girl,--with those strange eyes she wasn't just ordinary. She wouldn't mind letting him talk to her for a little, perhaps sit in the garden with her a little. She would understand.

Wemyss was like a child in his misery. He very nearly cried outright when he got to the gate and took off his hat, and the girl looked at him blankly just as if she still didn't see him and hadn't heard him when he said, 'Could you let me have a glass of water? I--it's so hot----'

He began to stammer because of her eyes. 'I--I'm horribly thirsty--the heat----'

He pulled out his handkerchief and mopped his forehead. He certainly looked very hot. His face was red and distressed, and his forehead dripped. He was all puckered, like an unhappy baby. And the girl looked so cool, so bloodlessly cool. Her hands, folded on the top bar of the gate, looked more than cool, they looked cold; like hands in winter, shrunk and small with cold. She had bobbed hair, he noticed, so that it was impossible to tell how old she was, brown hair from which the sun was beating out bright lights; and her small face had no colour except those wide eyes fixed on his and the colour of her rather big mouth; but even her mouth seemed frozen.

'Would it be much bother----' began Wemyss again; and then his situation overwhelmed him.

'You would be doing a greater kindness than you know,' he said, his voice trembling with unhappiness, 'if you would let me come into the garden a minute and rest.'

At the sound of the genuine wretchedness in his voice Lucy's blank eyes became a little human. It got through to her consciousness that this distressed warm stranger was appealing to her for something.

'Are you so hot?' she asked, really seeing him for the first time.

'Yes, I'm hot,' said Wemyss. 'But it isn't that. I've had a misfortune--a terrible misfortune----'

He paused, overcome by the remembrance of it, by the unfairness of so much horror having overtaken him.

'Oh, I'm sorry,' said Lucy vaguely, still miles away from him, deep in indifference. 'Have you lost anything?'

'Good God, not that sort of misfortune!' cried Wemyss. 'Let me come in a minute--into the garden a minute--just to sit a minute with a human being. You would be doing a great kindness. Because you're a stranger I can talk to you about it if you'll let me. Just because we're strangers I could talk. I haven't spoken to a soul but servants and official people since--since it happened. For two days I haven't spoken at all to a living soul--I shall go mad----'

His voice shook again with his unhappiness, with his astonishment at his unhappiness.

Lucy didn't think two days very long not to speak to anybody in, but there was something overwhelming about the strange man's evident affliction that roused her out of her apathy; not much,--she was still profoundly detached, observing from another world, as it were, this extreme heat and agitation, but at least she saw him now, she did with a faint curiosity consider him. He was like some elemental force in his directness. He had the quality of an irresistible natural phenomenon. But she did not move from her position at the gate, and her eyes continued, with the unwaveringness he thought so odd, to stare into his.

'I would gladly have let you come in,' she said, 'if you had come yesterday, but to-day my father died.'

Wemyss looked at her in astonishment. She had said it in as level and ordinary a voice as if she had been remarking, rather indifferently, on the weather.

Then he had a moment of insight. His own calamity had illuminated him. He who had never known pain, who had never let himself be worried, who had never let himself be approached in his life by a doubt, had for the last week lived in an atmosphere of worry and pain, and of what, if he allowed himself to think, to become morbid, might well grow into a most unfair, tormenting doubt. He understood, as he would not have understood a week ago, what her whole attitude, her rigidity meant. He stared at her a moment while she stared straight back at him, and then his big warm hands dropped on to the cold

ones folded on the top bar of the gate, and he said, holding them firmly though they made no attempt to move, 'So that's it. So that's why. Now I know.'

And then he added, with the simplicity his own situation was putting into everything he did, 'That settles it. We two stricken ones must talk together.'

And still covering her hands with one of his, with the other he unlatched the gate and walked in.

II

There was a seat under a mulberry tree on the little lawn, with its back to the house and the gaping windows, and Wemyss, spying it out, led Lucy to it as if she were a child, holding her by the hand.

She went with him indifferently. What did it matter whether she sat under the mulberry tree or stood at the gate? This convulsed stranger--was he real? Was anything real? Let him tell her whatever it was he wanted to tell her, and she would listen, and get him his glass of water, and then he would go his way and by that time the women would have finished upstairs and she could be with her father again.

'I'll fetch the water,' she said when they got to the seat.

'No. Sit down,' said Wemyss.

She sat down. So did he, letting her hand go. It dropped on the seat, palm upwards, between them.

'It's strange our coming across each other like this,' he said, looking at her while she looked indifferently straight in front of her at the sun on the grass beyond the shade of the mulberry tree, at a mass of huge fuchsia bushes a little way off. 'I've been going through hell--and so must you have been. Good God, what hell! Do you mind if I tell you? You'll understand because of your own----'

Lucy didn't mind. She didn't mind anything. She merely vaguely wondered that he should think she had been going through hell. Hell and her darling father; how quaint it sounded. She began to suspect that she was asleep. All this wasn't really happening. Her father wasn't dead. Presently the housemaid would come in with the hot water and wake her to the usual cheerful day. The man sitting beside her,--he seemed rather vivid for a dream, it was true; so detailed, with his flushed face and the perspiration on his forehead, besides the feel of his big warm hand a moment ago and the small puffs of heat that came from his clothes when he moved. But it was so unlikely ... everything that had happened since breakfast was so unlikely. This man, too, would resolve himself soon into just something she had had for dinner last night, and she would tell her father about her dream at breakfast, and they would laugh.

She stirred uneasily. It wasn't a dream. It was real.

'The story is unbelievably horrible,' Wemyss was saying in a high aggrievement, looking at her little head with the straight cut hair, and her grave profile. How old was she? Eighteen? Twenty-eight? Impossible to tell exactly with hair cut like that, but young anyhow compared to him; very young perhaps compared to him who was well over forty, and so much scarred, so deeply scarred, by this terrible thing that had happened to him.

'It's so horrible that I wouldn't talk about it if you were going to mind,' he went on, 'but you can't mind because you're a stranger, and it may help you with your own trouble, because whatever you may suffer I'm suffering much worse, so then you'll see yours isn't so bad. And besides I must talk to some one I should go mad----'

This was certainly a dream, thought Lucy. Things didn't happen like this when one was awake,--grotesque things.

She turned her head and looked at him. No, it wasn't a dream. No dream could be so solid as the man beside her. What was he saying?

He was saying in a tormented voice that he was Wemyss.

'You are Wemyss,' she repeated gravely.

It made no impression on her. She didn't mind his being Wemyss.

'I'm the Wemyss the newspapers were full of last week,' he said, seeing that the name left her unmoved. 'My God,' he went on, again wiping his forehead, but as fast as he wiped it more beads burst out, 'those posters to see one's own name staring at one everywhere on posters!'

'Why was your name on posters?' said Lucy.

She didn't want to know; she asked mechanically, her ear attentive only to the sounds from the open windows of the room upstairs.

'Don't you read newspapers here?' was his answer.

'I don't think we do,' she said, listening. 'We've been settling in. I don't think we've remembered to order any newspapers yet.'

A look of some, at any rate, relief from the pressure he was evidently struggling under came into Wemyss's face. 'Then I can tell you the real version,' he said, 'without you're being already filled up with the monstrous suggestions that were made at the inquest. As though I hadn't suffered enough as it was! As though it hadn't been terrible enough already---'

'The inquest?' repeated Lucy.

Again she turned her head and looked at him. 'Has your trouble anything to do with death?'

'Why, you don't suppose anything else would reduce me to the state I'm in?'

'Oh, I'm sorry,' she said; and into her eyes and into her voice came a different expression, something living, something gentle. 'I hope it wasn't anybody you--loved?'

'It was my wife,' said Wemyss.

He got up quickly, so near was he to crying at the thought of it, at the thought of all he had endured, and turned his back on her and began stripping the leaves off the branches above his head.

Lucy watched him, leaning forward a little on both hands. 'Tell me about it,' she said presently, very gently.

He came back and dropped down heavily beside her again, and with many interjections of astonishment that such a ghastly calamity could have happened to him, to him who till now had never---

'Yes,' said Lucy, comprehendingly and gravely, 'yes--I know----'

--had never had anything to do with--well, with calamities, he told her the story.

They had gone down, he and his wife, as they did every 25th of July, for the summer to their house on the river, and he had been looking forward to a glorious time of peaceful doing nothing after months of London, just lying about in a punt and reading and smoking and resting--London was an awful place for tiring one out--and they hadn't been there twenty-four hours before his wife--before his wife---

The remembrance of it was too grievous to him. He couldn't go on.

'Was she--very ill?' asked Lucy gently, to give him time to recover. 'I think that would almost be better. One would be a little at least one would be a little prepared---'

'She wasn't ill at all,' cried Wemyss. 'She just--died.'

'Oh like father!' exclaimed Lucy, roused now altogether. It was she now who laid her hand on his.

Wemyss seized it between both his, and went on quickly.

He was writing letters, he said, in the library at his table in the window where he could see the terrace and the garden and the river; they had had tea together only an hour before; there was a flagged terrace along that side of the house, the side the library was on and all the principal rooms; and all of a sudden there was a great flash of shadow between him and the light; come and gone instantaneously; and instantaneously then there was a thud; he would never forget it, that thud; and there outside his window on the flags---

'Oh don't--oh don't----' gasped Lucy.

'It was my wife,' Wemyss hurried on, not able now to stop, looking at Lucy while he talked with eyes of amazed horror. 'Fallen out of the top room of the house her sitting-room because of the view--it was in a straight line with the library window--she dropped past my window like a stone--she was smashed--smashed----'

'Oh, don't--oh----'

'Now can you wonder at the state I'm in?' he cried. 'Can you wonder if I'm nearly off my head? And forced to be by myself--forced into retirement for what the world considers a proper period of mourning, with nothing to think of but that ghastly inquest.'

He hurt her hand, he gripped it so hard.

'If you hadn't let me come and talk to you,' he said, 'I believe I'd have pitched myself over the cliff there this afternoon and made an end of it.'

'But how--but why--how could she fall?' whispered Lucy, to whom poor Wemyss's misfortune seemed more frightful than anything she had ever heard of.

She hung on his words, her eyes on his face, her lips parted, her whole body an agony of sympathy. Life--how terrible it was, and how unsuspected. One went on and on, never dreaming of the sudden dreadful day when the coverings were going to be dropped and one would see it was death after all, that it had been death all the time, death pretending, death waiting. Her father, so full of love and interests and plans,--gone, finished, brushed away as if he no more mattered than some insect one unseeingly treads on as one walks; and this man's wife, dead in an instant, dead so far more cruelly, so horribly....

'I had often told her to be careful of that window,' Wemyss answered in a voice that almost sounded like anger; but all the time his tone had been one of high anger at the wanton, outrageous cruelty of fate. 'It was a very low one, and the floor was slippery. Oak. Every floor in my house is polished oak. I had them put in myself. She must have been leaning out and her feet slipped away behind her. That would make her fall head foremost----'

'Oh--oh----' said Lucy, shrinking. What could she do, what could she say to help him, to soften at least these dreadful memories?

'And then,' Wemyss went on after a moment, as unaware as Lucy was that she was tremblingly stroking his hand, 'at the inquest, as though it hadn't all been awful enough for me already, the jury must actually get wrangling about the cause of death.'

'The cause of death?' echoed Lucy. 'But--she fell.'

'Whether it were an accident or done on purpose.'

'Done on----?'

'Suicide.'

'Oh----'

She drew in her breath quickly.

'But--it wasn't?'

'How could it be? She was my wife, without a care in the world, everything done for her, no troubles, nothing on her mind, nothing wrong with her health. We had been married fifteen years, and I was devoted to her--devoted to her.'

He banged his knee with his free hand. His voice was full of indignant tears.

'Then why did the jury----'

'My wife had a fool of a maid--I never could stand that woman--and it was something she said at the inquest, some invention or other about what my wife had said to her. You know what servants are. It upset some of the jury. You know juries are made up of anybody and everybody--butcher, baker, and candle-stick-maker--quite uneducated most of them, quite at the mercy of any suggestion. And so instead of a verdict of death by misadventure, which would have been the right one, it was an open verdict.'

'Oh, how terrible--how terrible for you,' breathed Lucy, her eyes on his, her mouth twitching with sympathy.

'You'd have seen all about it if you had read the papers last week,' said Wemyss, more quietly. It had done him good to get it out and talked over.

He looked down at her upturned face with its horror-stricken eyes and twitching mouth. 'Now tell me about yourself,' he said, touched with compunction; nothing that had happened to her could be so horrible as what had happened to him, still she too was newly smitten, they had met on a common ground of disaster, Death himself had been their introducer.

'Is life all--only death?' she breathed, her horror-stricken eyes on his.

Before he could answer--and what was there to answer to such a question except that of course it wasn't, and he and she were just victims of a monstrous special unfairness,--he certainly was; her father had probably died as fathers did, in the usual way in his bed--before he could answer, the two women came out of the house, and with small discreet steps proceeded down the path to the gate. The sun flooded their spare figures and their decent black clothes, clothes kept for these occasions as a mark of respectful sympathy.

One of them saw Lucy under the mulberry tree and hesitated, and then came across the grass to her with the mincing steps of tact.

'Here's somebody coming to speak to you,' said Wemyss, for Lucy was sitting with her back to the path.

She started and looked round.

The woman approached hesitatingly, her head on one side, her hands folded, her face pulled into a little smile intended to convey encouragement and pity.

'The gentleman's quite ready, miss,' she said softly.

All that day and all the next day Wemyss was Lucy's tower of strength and rock of refuge. He did everything that had to be done of the business part of death--that extra wantonness of misery thrown in so grimly to finish off the crushing of a mourner who is alone. It is true the doctor was kind and ready to help, but he was a complete stranger; she had never seen him till he was fetched that dreadful morning; and he had other things to see to besides her affairs,--his own patients, scattered widely over a lonely countryside. Wemyss had nothing to see to. He could concentrate entirely on Lucy. And he was her friend, linked to her so strangely and so strongly by death. She felt she had known him for ever. She felt that since the beginning of time she and he had been advancing hand in hand towards just this place, towards just this house and garden, towards just this year, this August, this moment of existence.

Wemyss dropped quite naturally into the place a near male relative would have been in if there had been a near male relative within reach; and his relief at having something to do, something practical and immediate, was so immense that never were funeral arrangements made with greater zeal and energy,--really one might almost say with greater gusto. Fresh from the horrors of those other funeral arrangements, clouded as they had been by the silences of friends and the averted looks of neighbours--all owing to the idiotic jurors and their hesitations, and the vindictiveness of that woman because, he concluded, he had refused to raise her wages the previous month--what he was arranging now was so simple and straightforward that it positively was a pleasure. There were no anxieties, there were no worries, and there was a grateful little girl. After each fruitful visit to the undertaker, and he paid several in his zeal, he came back to Lucy and she was grateful; and she was not only grateful, but very obviously glad to get him back.

He saw she didn't like it when he went away, off along the top of the diff on his various business visits, purpose in each step, a different being from the indignantly miserable person who had dragged about that very cliff killing time such a little while before; he could see she didn't like it. She knew he had to go, she was grateful and immensely expressive of her gratitude--Wemyss thought he had never met any one so expressively grateful--that he should so diligently go, but she didn't like it. He saw she didn't like it; he saw that she clung to him; and it pleased him.

'Don't be long,' she murmured each time, looking at him with eyes of entreaty; and when he got back, and stood before her again mopping his forehead, having triumphantly advanced the funeral arrangements another stage, a faint colour came into her face and she had the relieved eyes of a child who has been left alone in the dark and sees its mother coming in with a candle. Vera usedn't to look like that. Vera had accepted everything he did for her as a matter of course.

Naturally he wasn't going to let the poor little girl sleep alone in

that house with a dead body, and the strange servants who had been hired together with the house and knew nothing either about her or her father probably getting restive as night drew on, and as likely as not bolting to the village; so he fetched his things from the primitive hotel down in the cove about seven o'clock and announced his intention of sleeping on the drawing-room sofa. He had lunched with her, and had had tea with her, and now was going to dine with her. What she would have done without him Wemyss couldn't think.

He felt he was being delicate and tactful in this about the drawing-room sofa. He might fairly have claimed the spare-room bed; but he wasn't going to take any advantage, not the smallest, of the poor little girl's situation. The servants, who supposed him to be a relation and had supposed him to be that from the first moment they saw him, big and middle-aged, holding the young lady's hand under the mulberry tree, were surprised at having to make up a bed in the drawing-room when there were two spare-rooms with beds already in them upstairs, but did so obediently, vaguely imagining it had something to do with watchfulness and French windows; and Lucy, when he told her he was going to stay the night, was so grateful, so really thankful, that her eyes, red from the waves of grief that had engulfed her at intervals during the afternoon--ever since, that is, the sight of her dead father lying so remote from her, so wrapped, it seemed, in a deep, absorbed attentiveness, had unfrozen her and swept her away into a sea of passionate weeping--filled again with tears.

'Oh,' she murmured, 'how good you are---'

It was Wemyss who had done all the thinking for her, and in the spare

moments between his visits to the undertaker about the arrangements, and to the doctor about the certificate, and to the vicar about the burial, had telegraphed to her only existing relative, an aunt, had sent the obituary notice to The Times, and had even reminded her that she had on a blue frock and

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