

The Garden of Survival

by

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Chapter 1

IT will surprise and at the same time possibly amuse you to know that I had the instinct to tell what follows to a Priest, and might have done so had not the Man of the World in me whispered that from professional Believers I should get little sympathy, and probably less credence still. For to have my experience disbelieved, or attributed to hallucination, would be intolerable to me. Psychical investigators, I am told, prefer a Medium who takes no cash recompense for his performance, a Healer who gives of his strange powers without reward. There are, however, natural-born priests who yet wear no uniform other than upon their face and heart, but since I know of none I fall back upon yourself, my other half, for in writing this adventure to you I almost feel that I am writing it to myself.

The desire for confession is upon me: this thing must out. It is a story, though an unfinished one. I mention this at once lest, frightened by the thickness of the many pages, you lay them aside against another time, and so perhaps neglect them altogether. A story, however, will invite your interest, and when I add that it is true, I feel that you will bring sympathy to that interest: these together, I hope, may win your attention, and hold it, until you shall have read the final word.

That I should use this form in telling it will offend your literary taste--you who have made your name both as critic and creative writer--for you said once, I remember, that to tell a story in epistolary form is a subterfuge, an attempt to evade the difficult matters of construction and delineation of character. My story, however, is so slight, so subtle, so delicately intimate too, that a letter to some one in closest sympathy with myself seems the only form that offers.

It is, as I said, a confession, but a very dear confession: I burn to tell it honestly, yet know not how. To withhold it from you would be to admit a secretiveness that our relationship has never known--out it must, and to you. I may, perhaps, borrow--who can limit the sharing powers of twin brothers like ourselves?--some of the skill your own work spills so prodigally, crumbs from your writing-table, so to speak; and you will forgive the robbery, if successful, as you will accept lie love behind the confession as your due.

Now, listen, please! For this is the point: that, although my wife is dead these dozen years and more--I have found reunion and I love. Explanation of this must follow as best it may. So, please mark tie point which for the sake of emphasis I venture to repeat: that I know reunion and I love.

With the jealous prerogative of the twin, you objected to that marriage, though I knew that it deprived you of no jot of my affection, owing to the fact that it was prompted by pity only, leaving the soul in me wholly disengaged. Marion, by her steady refusal to accept my honest friendship, by her persistent admiration of me, as also by her

loveliness, her youth, her singing, persuaded me somehow finally that I needed her. The cry of the flesh, which her beauty stimulated and her singing increased most strangely, seemed raised into a burning desire that I mistook at the moment for the true desire of the soul. Yet, actually, the soul in me remained aloof, a spectator, and one, moreover, of a distinctly lukewarm kind. It was very curious. On looking back, I can hardly understand it even now; there seemed some special power, some special undiscovered tie between us that led me on and yet deceived me. It was especially evident in her singing, this deep power. She sang, you remember, to her own accompaniment on the harp, and her method, though so simple it seemed almost childish, was at the same time charged with a great melancholy that always moved me most profoundly. The sound of her small, plaintive voice, the sight of her slender fingers that plucked the strings in some delicate fashion native to herself, the tiny foot that pressed the pedal--all these, with her dark searching eyes fixed penetratingly upon my own while she sang of love and love's endearments, combined in a single stroke of very puissant and seductive kind. Passions in me awoke, so deep, so ardent, so imperious, that I conceived them as born of the need of one soul for another. I attributed their power to genuine love. The following reactions, when my soul held up a finger and bade me listen to her still, small warnings, grew less positive and of ever less duration. The frontier between physical and spiritual passion is perilously narrow, perhaps. My judgment, at any rate, became insecure, then floundered hopelessly. The sound of the harp-strings and of Marion's voice could overwhelm its balance instantly.

Mistaking, perhaps, my lukewarm-ness for restraint, she led me at last to the altar you described as one of sacrifice. And your instinct, more piercing than my own, proved only too correct: that which I held for love declared itself as pity only, the soft, affectionate pity of a weakish man in whom the flesh cried loudly, the pity of a man who would be untrue to himself rather than pain so sweet a girl by rejecting the one great offering life placed within her gift. She persuaded me so cunningly that I persuaded myself, yet was not aware I did so until afterwards. I married her because in some manner I felt, but never could explain, that she had need of me.

And, at the wedding, I remember two things vividly: the expression of wondering resignation on your face, and upon hers--chiefly in the eyes and in the odd lines about the mouth--the air of subtle triumph that she wore: that she had captured me for her very own at last, and yet--for there was this singular hint in her attitude and behaviour--that she had taken me, because she had this curious deep need of me.

This sharply moving touch was graven into me, increasing the tenderness of my pity, subsequently, a thousandfold. The necessity lay in her very soul. She gave to me all she had to give, and in so doing she tried to satisfy some hunger of her being that lay beyond my comprehension or interpretation. For, note this--she gave herself into my keeping, I remember, with a sigh.

It seems as of yesterday the actual moment when, urged by my vehement desires, I made her consent to be my wife; I remember, too, the doubt, the shame, the hesitation that made themselves felt in me before the climax when her beauty overpowered me,

sweeping reflection utterly away. I can hear to-day the sigh, half of satisfaction, yet half, it seemed, of pain, with which she sank into my arms at last, as though her victory brought intense relief, yet was not wholly gamed in the way that she had wanted. Her physical beauty, perhaps, was the last weapon she had wished to use for my enslavement; she knew quite surely that the appeal to what was highest in me had not succeeded. . .

The party in our mother's house that week in July included yourself; there is no need for me to remind you of its various members, nor of the strong attraction Marion, then a girl of twenty-five, exercised upon the men belonging to it. Nor have you forgotten, I feel sure, the adroit way in which she contrived so often to find herself alone with me, both in the house and out of it, even to the point of sometimes placing me in a quasi-false position. That she tempted me is, perhaps, an overstatement, though that she availed herself of every legitimate use of feminine magic to entrap me is certainly the truth. Opportunities of marriage, it was notorious, had been frequently given to her, and she had as frequently declined them; she was older than her years; to inexperience she certainly had no claim: and from the very first it was clear to me--if conceited, I cannot pretend that I was also blind--that flirtation was not her object and that marriage was. Yet it was marriage with a purpose that she desired, and that purpose had to do, I felt, with sacrifice. She burned to give her very best, her all, and for my highest welfare. It was in this sense, I got the impression strangely, that she had need of me.

The battle seemed, at first, uneven, since, as a woman, she did not positively attract me. I was first amused at her endeavours and her skill; but respect for her as a redoubtable antagonist soon followed. This respect, doubtless, was the first blood she drew from me, since it gained my attention and fixed my mind upon her presence. From that moment she entered my consciousness as a woman; when she was near me I became more and more aware of her, and the room, the picnic, the game of tennis that included her were entirely different from such occasions when she was absent, I became self-conscious. It was impossible to ignore her as formerly had been my happy case.

It was then I first knew how beautiful she was, and that her beauty made a certain difference to my mood. The next step may seem a big one, but, I believe, is very natural: her physical beauty gave me definite pleasure. And the instant this change occurred she was aware of it. The curious fact, however, is that, although aware of this gain of power, she made no direct use of it at first. She did not draw this potent weapon for my undoing; it was ever with her, but was ever sheathed. Did she discern my weakness, perhaps, and know that the subtle power would work upon me most effectively if left to itself? Did she, rich in experience, deem that its too direct use might waken a reaction in my better self? I cannot say, I do not know. . . . Every feminine art was at her disposal, as every use of magic pertaining to young and comely womanhood was easily within her reach. As you and I might express it bluntly, she knew men thoroughly, she knew every trick; she drew me on, then left me abruptly in the wrong, puzzled, foolish, angry, only to forgive me later with the most enchanting smile or word imaginable. But never once did she deliberately make use of the merciless weapon of

her physical beauty although--perhaps because--she knew that it was the most powerful in all her armoury.

For listen to this: when at last I took her in my arms with passion that would not be denied, she actually resented it. She even sought to repel me from her touch that had undone me. I repeat what I said before: She did not wish to win me in that way. The sigh of happiness she drew in that moment--I can swear to it--included somewhere, too, the pain of bitter disappointment.

The weapon, however, that she did use without hesitation was her singing. There was nothing special either in its quality or skill; it was a voice untrained, I believe, and certainly without ambition; her repertoire was limited; she sang folk-songs mostly, the simple love-songs of primitive people, of peasants and the like, yet sang them with such truth and charm, with such power and conviction, somehow, that I knew enchantment as I listened. This, too, she instantly divined, and that behind my compliments lay hid a weakness of deep origin she could play upon to her sure advantage. She did so without mercy, until gradually I passed beneath her sway.

I will not now relate in detail the steps of my descent, or if you like it better, of my capture. This is a summary merely. So let me say in brief that her singing to the harp combined with the revelation of her physical beauty to lead me swiftly to the point where I ardently desired her, and that in this turmoil of desire I sought eagerly to find real love. There were times when I deceived myself most admirably; there were times when I plainly saw the truth. During the former I believed that my happiness lay in marrying her, but in the latter I recognised that a girl who meant nothing to my better self had grown of a sudden painfully yet exquisitely desirable. But even during the ascendancy of the latter physical mood, she had only to seat herself beside the harp and sing, for the former state to usurp its place, I watched, I listened, and I yielded. Her voice, aided by the soft plucking of the strings, completed my defeat. Now, strangest of all, I must add one other thing, and I will add it without comment. For though sure of its truth, I would not dwell upon it. And it is this: that in her singing, as also in her playing, in the "colour" of her voice as also in the very attitude and gestures of her figure as she sat beside the instrument, there lay, though marvellously hidden, something gross. It woke a response of something in myself, hitherto unrecognized, that was similarly gross. . . .

It was in the empty billiard-room when the climax came, a calm evening of late July, the dusk upon the lawn, and most of the house-party already gone upstairs to dress for dinner. I had been standing beside the open window for some considerable time, motionless, and listening idly to the singing of a thrush or blackbird in the shrubberies--when I heard the faint twanging of the harp-strings in the room behind me, and turning, saw that Marion had entered and was there beside the instrument. At the same moment she saw me, rose from the harp and came forward. During the day she had kept me at a distance. I was hungry for her voice and touch; her presence excited me--and yet I was half afraid.

"What! Already dressed!" I exclaimed, anxious to avoid a talk a deux. "I must hurry then, or I shall be later than usual."

I crossed the room towards the door, when she stopped me with her eyes.

"Do you really mean to say you don't know the difference between an evening frock and--and this," she answered lightly, holding out the skirt in her fingers for me to touch. And in the voice was that hint of a sensual caress that, I admit, bewildered both my will and judgment. She was very close and her fragrance came on me with her breath, like the perfume of the summer garden. I touched the material carelessly; it was of softest smooth white serge. It seemed I touched herself that lay beneath it. And at that touch some fire of lightning ran through every vein.

"How stupid of me," I said quickly, making to go past her, "but it's white, you see, and in this dim light I----"

"A man's idea of an evening frock is always white, I suppose, or black." She laughed a little. "I'm not coming to dinner to-night," she added, sitting down to the harp. "I've got a headache and thought I might soothe it with a little music. I didn't know any one was here. I thought I was alone."

Thus, deftly, having touched a chord of pity in me, she began to play; her voice followed; dinner and dressing, the house-party and my mother's guests, were all forgotten. I remember that you looked in, your eyes touched with a suggestive and melancholy smile, and as quickly closed the door again. But even that little warning failed to help me. I sat down on the sofa facing her, the world forgotten. And, as I listened to her singing and to the sweet music of the harp, the spell, it seemed, of some ancient beauty stole upon my spirit. The sound of her soft voice reduced my resistance to utter impotence. An aggressive passion took its place. The desire for contact, physical contact, became a vehement aching that I scarcely could restrain, and my arms were hungry for her. Shame and repugnance touched me faintly for a moment, but at once died away again. I listened and I watched. The sensuous beauty of her figure and her movements, swathed in that soft and clinging serge, troubled my judgment; it seemed, as I saw her little foot upon the pedal, that I felt with joy its pressure on my heart and life. Something gross and abandoned stirred in me; I welcomed her easy power and delighted in it. I feasted my eyes and ears, the blood rose feverishly to my head. She did not look at me, yet knew that I looked at her, and how. No longer ashamed, but with a fiery pleasure in my heart, I spoke at last. Her song had ended. She softly brushed the strings, her eyes turned downwards.

"Marion," I said, agitation making my voice sound unfamiliar, "Marion, dear, I am enthralled; your voice, your beauty----"

I found no other words; my voice stopped dead; I stood up, trembling in every limb. I saw her in that instant as a maid of olden time, singing the love-songs of some far-off

day beside her native instrument, and of a voluptuous beauty there was no withstanding. The half-light of the dusk set her in a frame of terrible enchantment.

And as I spoke her name and rose, she also spoke my own, my Christian name, and rose as well. I saw her move towards me. Upon her face, in her eyes and on her lips, was a smile of joy I had never seen before, though a smile of conquest, and of something more besides that I must call truly by its rightful name, a smile of lust. God! those movements beneath the clinging dress that fell in lines of beauty to her feet! Those little feet that stepped upon my heart, upon my very soul. . . . For a moment I loathed myself. The next, as she touched me and my arms took her with rough strength against my breast, my repugnance vanished, and I was utterly undone. I believed I loved. That which was gross in me, leaping like fire to claim her glorious beauty, met and merged with that similar, devouring flame in her; but in the merging seemed cunningly transformed into the call of soul to soul: I forgot the pity. . . . I kissed her, holding her to me so fiercely that she scarcely moved. I said a thousand things. I know not what I said. I loved.

Then, suddenly, she seemed to free herself; she drew away; she looked at me, standing a moment just beyond my reach, a strange smile on her lips and in her darkened eyes a nameless expression that held both joy and pain. For one second I felt that she repelled me, that she resented my action and my words. Yes, for one brief second she stood there, like an angel set in judgment over me, and the next we had come together again, softly, gently, happily; I heard that strange, deep sigh, already mentioned, half of satisfaction, half, it seemed, of pain, as she sank down into my arms and found relief in quiet sobbing on my breast.

And pity then returned. I felt unsure of myself again. This was the love of the body only; my soul was silent. Yet--somehow, in some strange hidden way, lay this ambushed meaning--that she had need of me, and that she offered her devotion and herself in sacrifice.

Chapter 2

THE brief marriage ran its course, depleting rather than enriching me, and I know you realized before the hurried, dreadful end that my tie with yourself was strengthened rather than endangered, and that I took from you nothing that I might give it to her. That death should intervene so swiftly, leaving her but an interval of a month between the altar and the grave, you could foreknow as little as I or she; yet in that brief space of time you learned that I had robbed you of nothing that was your precious due, while she as surely realized that the amazing love she poured so lavishly upon me woke no response--beyond a deep and tender pity, strangely deep and singularly tender I admit, but assuredly very different from love.

Now this, I think, you already know and in some measure understand; but what you cannot know--since it is a portion of her secret, of that ambushed meaning, as I termed it, given to me when she lay dying--is the pathetic truth that her discovery wrought no touch of disenchantment in her. I think she knew with shame that she had caught me with her lowest weapon, yet still hoped that the highest in her might complete and elevate her victory. She knew, at any rate, neither dismay nor disappointment; of reproach there was no faintest hint. She did not even once speak of it directly, though her fine, passionate face made me aware of the position. Of the usual human reaction, that is, there was no slightest trace; she neither chided nor implored; she did not weep. The exact opposite of what I might have expected took place before my very eyes.

For she turned and faced me, empty as I was. The soul in her, realizing the truth, stood erect to meet the misery of lonely pain that inevitably lay ahead--in some sense as though she welcomed it already; and, strangest of all, she blossomed, physically as well as mentally, into a fuller revelation of gracious loveliness than before, sweeter and more exquisite, indeed, than anything life had yet shown to me. Moreover, having captured me, she changed; the grossness I had discerned, that which had led me to my own undoing, vanished completely as though it were transmuted into desires and emotions of a loftier kind. Some purpose, some intention, a hope immensely resolute shone out of her, and of such spiritual loveliness, it seemed to me, that I watched it in a kind of dumb amazement.

I watched it--unaware at first of my own shame, emptied of any emotion whatsoever, I think, but that of a startled worship before the grandeur of her generosity. It seemed she listened breathlessly for the beating of my heart, and hearing none, resolved that she would pour her own life into it, regardless of pain, of loss, of sacrifice, that she might make it live. She undertook her mission, that is to say, and this mission, in some mysterious way, and according to some code of conduct undivined by me, yet passionately honoured, was to give--regardless of herself or of response. I caught myself sometimes thinking of a child who would instinctively undo some earlier grievous wrong. She loved me marvellously.

I know not how to describe to you the lavish wealth of selfless devotion she bathed me in during the brief torturing and unfulfilled period before the end. It made me aware of new depths and heights in human nature. It taught me a new beauty that even my finest dreams had left

unmentioned. Into the region that great souls inhabit a glimpse was given me. My own dreadful weakness was laid bare. And an eternal hunger woke in me--that I might love.

That hunger remained unsatisfied. I prayed, I yearned, I suffered; I could have decreed myself a deservedly cruel death; it seemed I stretched my little nature to unendurable limits in the fierce hope that the Gift of the Gods might be bestowed upon me, and that her divine emotion might waken a response within my leaden soul. But all in vain. My attitude, in spite of every prayer, of every effort, remained no more than a searching and unavailing pity, but a pity that held no seed of a mere positive emotion, least of all, of love. The heart in me lay unredeemed; it knew ashamed and very tender gratitude; but it did not beat for her. I could not love.

I have told you bluntly, frankly, of my physical feelings towards Marion and her beauty. It is a confession that I give into my own safe keeping. I think, perhaps, that you, though cast in a finer mould, may not despise them utterly, nor too contemptuously misinterpret them. The legend that twins may share a single soul has always seemed to me grotesque and unpoetic nonsense, a cruel and unnecessary notion too: a man is sufficiently imperfect without suffering this further subtraction from his potentialities. And yet it is true, in our own case, that you have exclusive monopoly of the ethereal qualities, while to me are given chiefly the physical attributes of the vigorous and healthy male--the animal: my six feet three, my muscular system, my inartistic and pedestrian temperament. Fairly clean-minded, I hope I may be, but beyond all question I am the male animal incarnate. It was, indeed, the thousand slaveries of the senses, individually so negligible, collectively so overwhelming, that forced me upon my knees before her physical loveliness. I must tell you now that this potent spell, alternating between fiery desire and the sincerest of repugnance, continued to operate. I complete the confession by adding briefly, that after marriage she resented and repelled all my advances. A deep sadness came upon her; she wept; and I desisted. It was my soul that she desired with the fire of her mighty love, and not my body. . . . And again, since it is to myself and to you alone I tell it, I would add this vital fact: it was this "new beauty which my finest dreams have left unmentioned" that made it somehow possible for me to desist, both against my animal will, yet willingly.

I have told you that, when dying, she revealed to me a portion of her "secret." This portion of a sacred confidence lies so safe within my everlasting pity that I may share it with you without the remorse of a betrayal. Full understanding we need never ask; the solution, I am convinced, is scarcely obtainable in this world. The message, however, was incomplete because the breath that framed it into broken words failed suddenly; the heart, so strangely given into my unworthy keeping, stopped beating as you shall hear upon the very edge of full disclosure. The ambushed meaning I have hinted at remained--a hint.

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