

The Story of a Lover

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Table of Contents

Chapter One

Chapter II

Chapter III

Chapter IV

Chapter V

Chapter VI

Chapter VII

Chapter VIII

Chapter IX

Chapter X

Chapter XI

Chapter XII

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Chapter One

was thirty years old when I saw her for the first time. We did not speak, we were not introduced, but I knew that I must meet her; I knew that love which had hitherto been gnawing in my imagination and my senses, had found an object. I fell in love at first sight. She did not see me—and I sometimes think she has never seen me since, although we are married and have lived together for fifteen years.

Life had prepared me to love. I was born sensitive and passionate, and had acquired more emotion than I was endowed with. I had acquired it partly through ill-health and ignorance as a lad, and partly through an intense sex-imagination to which I habitually and gladly yielded. My boyhood was filled with brooding, warm dreams, and partial experiences, always unsatisfied, and leaving a nature more and more stirred, more and more demanding the great adventure.

Then, in youth and early manhood,—as a student, a traveler,—experiences came rich enough in number. The mysterious beauty and terrible attraction that woman has for the adolescent was not even relatively satisfied by my many adventures. Each left me more unsatisfied than before. My hunger for profound relationship grew so strong that all my ideas of beauty, in art, in life and in nature, seemed to be a mere comment, a partial explanation, of that which was a flame in my soul.

This explanation, this comment derived from art, while the ultimate result was greater inflammation, so to speak, yet often temporarily soothed. This was especially true of philosophy and reflective poetry. I had no interest in metaphysics as such, but when, in the university, the magnificent generalizations of philosophy first came to me, I thought for a time that I had found rest.

Dear Wordsworth! How he cooled my fevered senses and soothed my heart and mind; how he pleasingly introduced into every strong sensation an hygienic element of thought which made the whole into warm reflection rather than disturbing impulse! And dear Philosophy! Who, when taught to see things from the viewpoint of eternity, could be intensely unhappy about his own small Self and its imperfections? In Plato, in Spinoza, in Hegel, Fichte, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, I felt the individual temperament struggling to free itself, as I had been struggling to free myself, from too great an interest in Self through the contemplation of what seemed to be the eternal and unvarying truth.

But then, with returning strength, there came metaphysical skepticism. These great structures of philosophy seemed to me to be houses of cards, toys for imaginative children. And at the same time there burst upon me, with renewed intensity, the world of sensuous art, the direct, disturbing force of Nature, the mysterious appeal of Woman. Philosophy had prepared me for a greater absorption in life than would otherwise have been possible. It helped to make me incapable of what men call practical life, and made me attach values only to significant things.

And it lent to my most trivial relations with women the spiritual quality of meaning. Even in the midst of transient sensuality, the eternal flow of Nature, and the inherent significance of all sex life, no matter how impersonal and unindividualized, gave a constant and inevitable spirituality. It was a torturing, promising spirituality. It beckoned to something beyond, dropped strangely disturbing hints of what might be. In the midst of kaleidoscopic women, the Unknown Woman was suggested, foreshadowed. These sensual-poetic experiences were purifiers of the amorous temperament, rendering it at once more passionate, more spiritual and more classic, less mixed with prejudice, with the indecency of ignorance, with unclear as well as unclean theological taboos. I went through every phase of so-called coarse sexual experience, and thereby strengthened and purified my spiritual demand for the Great Adventure. If I had not known women, I should never have known woman; nor could I have loved Her so essentially, so absolutely as I have.

With this past behind me—a past full of the pleasures of thought and sense, of the pain of self-doubt, of strenuous struggle for self-realization, for self-understanding—I met Her. In spite of my thirty years, I was as youthful as a faun endowed with a mind and who had recently partly escaped from a theological conception of life. From the Present of Paganism I looked back to the sensual struggles of escape from the secondary results of a defeated theology.

And she! How different her nature and her past from mine! She had never struggled with herself. She did not need to, for herself did not disturb her. Imperturbable, she struggled only

with her work, with what she was trying to form. She was an artist, and singularly unconscious of herself. Keen to external beauty, she was not interested in the subjective nature of her Soul, or its needs, or how it worked. In fact, her soul seemed to have no needs. I often told her she had no soul, but I was wrong, as we shall see.

Along one of the corridors of the world she passed me for a moment, and I knew that I must love her. She was a thing of beauty! It was not merely her lovely skin and hair: she was one of those rich, dark blondes who seem to have absorbed the light and warmth of the sun and to have given it a definite form which introduced the spiritual quality of the brunette—blond in color, brunette in quality. There was nothing bleached about her, nothing faint, nothing iridescent. Her color and quality were that of saturation. It was as if in her skin and hair warmth and color lay suspended, as it lies suspended in dropping summer rain.

But I know it was not her skin and hair that I loved. What I loved I feel now, though I did not analyze it then, was the integrity of her physical and nervous nature. She was no self-conscious neurasthenic, as I was! She was cool, unconscious, poised—cold, the ignorant would call her. And the Silence which breathed from her when I first saw her has been hers ever since. Never, even in agony, has she been noisy. Her deep quiet comes as a disturbing thing, to most people, and it has been often the cause of quarreling between us—for I, nervous, with a volcanic past, frequently challenged this quiet soul, challenged it morally and socially, succeeded, to my immense

satisfaction, in disturbing it once or twice, but being more often disturbed and irritated myself!

I maneuvered a meeting, and many, many followed, and have been following for fifteen years. Our first few meetings showed me that she had no past! All that she could or can remember is that she had worked—worked calmly and quietly, without excitement. Her life as a child was as calm as that of a plant. I have a whole world of violent emotions remembered, stretching along from my third or fourth year. She has no remembered childhood. She grew too beautifully, too gradually, too quietly, to have occur those cataclysmic things which one remembers. And she still grows!

I suppose what drew us together was Wonder. I marveled at her strange and beautiful integrity, the wholeness and calmness of her being. My vivid nature, my tremulous needs, my spiritual restlessness, interested her. I loved her, and for me she felt a deep amusement. The strangeness I felt in her seemed beautiful; the strangeness she felt in me seemed interesting and amusing. And for years the only word of approval I ever heard from her was the word “amusing.” I can imagine Mona Lisa saying the same word, in exactly the same spirit, meaning intellectually entertaining.

“A thousand years old am I,” she would say. And I seemed so young to her; amusingly young. I suppose all lovers are young, no matter how many years they have. And yet it was I who had definite experience, as the world commonly understands that word. And she had had none. And yet she was old and I was young. She was not naïve, she was not fresh. She was like the Sphinx, wonderful, old, with a beauty that to me at times was

terrible. And I charmed her because I was so pleasingly social, so civilized, and had so many ideas derived from life, ideas which pleased her mind and stirred her sense of poetry and humor. I loved her for the essence of her being, and she liked me warmly for what I was able to say and feel.

Especially for what I was able to say! How she would listen! I know that if what I have said to her could be recorded, it would pass as literature. I am proud only of that one thing: that to her I talked well—really well—for years. I told her all—all of my life, and I think it must have seemed to her like the life of some inhabitant of Mars. Surely, there was in our relationship a deep unfamiliarity—I was strange to her and she was infinitely strange to me. But I loved her strangeness, and my strangeness only interested her. Being profoundly kind, that interest finally awoke emotion in her—but it was not the love of the real and mysterious spiritual form which is at the basis of every human being. She felt aesthetically my qualities. She did not love Me.

It was this which made me bitter, at times, during many years, and even now comes to me like some essential pain. Quite unjustly so—and yet inevitable. When I saw awaken in her, in later years, some such feeling for other men as I had for her, a feeling not based on what they could say or do or even feel, but on what her imagination told her they deeply *were*, an indescribable rage would take possession of my soul.

Perhaps that rage was merely jealousy, that loathsome feeling based on an incredible sense of possession, but I do not believe that. After my genuine social thought began she might have had all manner of relations with other men, without deep disturbance on my part; I might have been unmoved, had she

seen me, once and forever! But as I have said, she felt only my qualities, my gifts of the mind, heart, and spirit. She did not have an immediate, temperamental understanding and love for myself! And to have this feeling for some soul is a need of all deep natures. When I saw this need in her—unsatisfied by me—reaching out to others to whom she had no *coherent* relation—only the mysterious, temperamental, almost metaphysical one that we mean when we say “in love”—it was then that the rage came upon me! Was it jealousy? It was strong and terrible, whatever it was, capable of overpowering all the acquired canons of civilization and making of me an incarnate, miserable, bestial Demand!

I imagine that at least a part of this pain is derived, at any rate in my case, from an egotistic sense of something deeply essential that is lacking in oneself. If this deep woman, who admired and warmly liked me in every nameable way, could not feel the temperamental stir, could not feel me as distinguished from the sum of my qualities, what was the matter with me? What did I deeply lack? I had no crude lack. Physically and mentally I was competent. I could meet her desires in every obvious way. Yes! But the Real Self is not obvious. That, to her, was lacking; that most mysterious, and yet to the eye of the amorous imagination, most real thing of all, which needs no expression to manifest itself, *that* she never saw! Perhaps that is lacking in me! This fear may partly account for the pain I felt. What strenuous soul can endure the thought that perhaps he is lacking in a way so deep that it is unanalyzable?

Sometimes I would think that it was my partly-shattered nervous system. How could this woman's nature, with its sweet integrity, love anything but that which had developed in the most beautiful way? I loved her partly because she had grown without harm. I had not grown without injury; and one perhaps cannot love æsthetically, temperamentally, the injured. My very injuries accounted for my eloquence, my intensity of feeling. This naturally would interest, but how could an æsthetic soul love the shattered cause of even fine things? I have never known a keenly expressive person who was nervously sound; and the nervously unsound are not æsthetically beautiful, however productive they may sometimes be of beautiful things. It shows a fine instinct in a woman to love only what in itself is lovely, without materialistic or sentimental regard for what that thing may do, say, or feel.

Chapter II

ELL, as I have written, I met her in one of the corridors of the world, and I loved her, and I insisted on her knowing me, or trying to know me. She was working, and I was working, and in the evenings we met in the cafés and restaurants and we talked, or rather I talked. I talked about everything—literature, art, sex, wine, people, life,—especially about life! He who does not know very definitely what the indefinite word “life” means has no knowledge of what the essential social relationship between a man and a woman is. A fine woman cares for nothing else. She is not a specialist. And yet most misguided busy men avoid talking life to their sweethearts and wives. They leave the real themes to the unworthy—to rakes, artists, and philosophers, to bohemians and outcasts, or to the very few respectable and at the same time intellectual men who are living on their incomes. And then they are surprised when their wives or sweethearts begin to see with emotions somebody else! Men are for the most part extremely naïve—especially good, sober, industrious, business American men. They are becoming the Predestined ones of the earth, and that is no proof of the infidelity of their wives and mistresses, for they who sow must reap, and Nature will outlive the ethical remnants of an outworn theology. There are one hundred thousand well-to-do wives in the United States to-day who are deeply disturbed by life, and their husbands do not know that anything but nerves is happening to them.

She liked my talk from the start. But to her it was not disturbing—not then—as it would have been to a less composed soul. To her it was merely contributive. It was one more cool channel to knowledge. From the start I tried, tried hard, to disturb her. I felt that if I could disturb her she would love me. In a sense I was more naïve than the business man! I might have known that love for my words would not lead to love of me, that through my talk she might love life more, not me; her love of life, heightened, enhanced through me, might lead her to see others, not necessarily me! I might easily act as an impassioned medium to the Road of Life along which she might find beautiful forms fit for love. I helped her, as a matter of fact, to see men, to feel their quality, just as she helped me to see women. It is true that had I not known women, I would not have known her; but it is also true that knowledge of her gave me a deeper understanding and the possibility of a more intimate approach to other women.

At that early time, however, I did not realize that at all. I did not know that I was working for others as well as for myself. In a deep sense there is a sort of impersonality, a lack of egotism, in passion. It drives us on, even against our personal interests, or what we narrowly regard as our personal interests. A mind and heart in love with life is never merely personal. One of the intensest passions is to give oneself to something which overpowers one's personality.

Working! Yes, that is the word! I worked for her as I never worked for money, for art, for fame, for duty. No one can know how I have worked who does not know how I have loved. Nothing exhausts like emotion; especially the higher forms of

sex-emotion, mixed with temperament and thought and a sense of value as all-embracing as religion. I imagine that the few great artists and doers are they who are capable of this great sex intensity but who through some kind of happy perversion put this intensity into their art or deeds and so strike out great forms. Only in white heat is a great thing created—a human being, or an art form or a sublime social thought, or an act of transcendent meaning for the race. Had I been carried by as inevitable a passion to make an epic in art, or to live an epic in social struggle as I have been to commune with a human temperament, I might well have been looked upon by my fellow men as one of the great ones of the earth. But few of us who have the necessary intensity are willing, even if we are able, to make this sacrifice—for it is a sacrifice. We are impelled irresistibly to exhaust ourselves on the proper object, as is the moth devoted to the devouring flame. To withhold ourselves from the proper object of passion is the perversity of heroic self-denial.

She married me at last without being more than deeply pleased. My warmth and my impassioned ideas became a necessity to her. Life without me would in some measure have lacked richness. It was after a year of strenuous wooing on my part—a struggle which involved all my mental, moral and emotional resources. Before she knew me she needed nothing. I had taught her to need. This she realized when, in a moment of exhausted despair, I left her and tried desperately to live without her. After a time she wrote and I interpreted her letter as a recall. I returned on the wing of desire, and there was a subtle difference in her when we met. She was silent, but her large, mysterious-colored eyes glowed with a half-questioning

promise. She seemed to be wondering whether she was destined, after all, to live with me.

We were never engaged to be married. She never passionately committed herself. We grew into marriage. There came a time when she liked to have me hold her in my arms, to kiss her long hours. It was her education, sentimental, sensuous. It enhanced her nature, and it made her nature demand. But it was tantalizingly impersonal. She liked equally well to sit by the seashore and watch the waves and the line of the sky. I have been driven from her arms, where I felt like a happy stranger, by a sudden anguish which in extreme reaction would carry me to the arms of some less-balanced stranger, whose nervous intensity would reestablish me momentarily into relative feelinglessness.

I remember, on one occasion, when I was in this mood, how I allowed a girl to woo me. She was led to do so by my despair which, keeping me spiritually away from her, provoked her ambition. She passionately desired to overcome what had overcome me. I understood her and was unhappy and brutal enough to allow her to try the impossible. She—the only She—not this poor momentary girl—was never consciously brutal to me, as I was to the other. And yet I constantly reproached her.

I said she had no soul. I said it repeatedly in all manner of ways. I said it when she was warmly hidden in my arms. I said it as we drank wine together across the table of the genial table-d'hôte. I said it between the acts of the theater. I said it in the street-cars and in the open country stretches where we walked. Did she marry me partly because of a kindly desire to prove to me that I was wrong? I did all I could to disturb, to wound, to

arouse, to make her calm soul discontented and unhappy; as well as to interest her vividly and constantly. I think the truth is that she married me because she had to. Like Nature I was always there and would not be denied. Water runs down hill without any great desire to get to the bottom.

These things I said to her, of course, as I said all things to her. She would smile one of those quiet smiles that go all through her being, that are as spiritual as they are physical, that are neither and both. Sometimes in her hinting way, she would quietly suggest that if she should try to express herself to me I would run away. She would amusedly call attention to the vanity and egotism in me that demanded above everything else a sympathetic listener. It is beautifully true that she holds all subjects in solution, that she broods over a theme and does not try violently to assert her personality. With her always is going on a process of incubation. With complete pregnancy of thought-feeling and feeling-thought, she waits, waits, knowing that things grow only in quiet. The gods approve the depth and not the tumult of the soul, wrote Wordsworth, the deeply medicinal poet. It is probable that the finest women are like this. Holding all things together, brooding over life, the tumult of the soul is hateful to their natures,—the tumult which sometimes has even a lovely place in the make-up of a man who must have violent relations with an imperfect world. And I do not think that it is only my vanity and egotism which makes me feel so—my intense and morbid desire for temperamental sympathy. That exists, it is true, but in this brooding nature there is something impersonally beautiful, unexplained by my egotistic needs. The seed as it bursts quietly in spring-warmed earth is beautiful, not because it does not interrupt us in our

feverish futilities, but because in itself it is adequately and richly significant of the whole urge of life.

It is evident that I need to defend myself against her charge, that if she had been expressive, I would have become cold. The philosophy which I have displayed may not be sufficient. What is significant, however, and I think conclusive, is the fact that on the rare occasions when she became expressive to me and to others, I did not tend to withdraw from her; on the contrary, I felt nearer to her, nearer in a new way, nearer through perceiving in her a slight touch of the weakness I knew so well in myself.

Marriage had in me the typical and rightly typical result. It cured me, for the time being, not of love, far from it, but of the diseases of love. For a long time I had neglected the world for her. I could not work, except perfunctorily. My best friends, whom I used to spend long hours with, I found pale and uninteresting. Books were tedious, had nothing to do with the truth of life. Relatives were well-meaning, but boresome. Often I reflected how normal and right the hero of d'Annunzio's "Il Trionfo della Morte" was, when, separated even for a week from his mistress, most poignant boredom would descend like an active pall upon his soul! Formerly I had thought him diseased, neurasthenic. But now he seemed gloriously normal; he had the rightness of the Superman about him. It was only the other day I received a letter from a lover whose sentiment came to me as something deeply familiar. "This experience," he wrote, "has made me even more impatient than ever of stupid, bores and sillies. It has burned the inessential out of me with regard to human commerce."

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