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Содержание

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SUNNY DAYS ON THE THAMES

When city folk, weary of heat and dust, are beginning to think of distant flights – to Switzerland and its eternal snows; to the romantic legendary Rhine; perhaps even farther afield, across the great Atlantic to wondrous Niagara; or farther yet, to that new old world on the shores of the Pacific – I too tire of the closeness and turmoil of the town, and turn my steps towards the pleasant country. I am not going very far, scarcely more than a few miles, but I doubt if any of the travellers on their long journeys will see a lovelier spot.

It is late on an afternoon in early June as I drive along the shady green lanes from the quiet country station, and stop before the gate of a dear old red brick house, which I know and love well. The door stands hospitably open, and in the porch I see kind and friendly faces framed in a wealth of glorious roses and many-tinted creepers, which cling lovingly to the time-stained walls. Good old 'Belle' the black retriever comes to meet me, wagging her tail affectionately; and looking up in my face, seems to ask me what I have done with the curly black puppy I ruthlessly stole from her the last time I was here.

How pleasant the sunny garden looks! How sweet the flowers smell! How delightful does everything appear after the bricks and mortar I have left behind me; and yet here are bricks and mortar too, but ah! not town bricks and town mortar. Time touches the old house with tender hands, and mellows it year by year into richer tints.

A queer old house it is, with odd bits added on to it here and there, in defiance of all the laws of architecture, and startling you with unexpected corners and angles; with quaint tall chimneys springing from the moss-grown roof, out of which the smoke curls lazily in blue-gray clouds, and round which twine the Virginia creeper and purple clematis, trying curiously to peep in at the top of them; with ivy-framed windows flashing in the sun, and overhanging eaves, beneath which the sparrows chirp merrily. The rooms are low, but *so* comfortable; whether great Christmas logs crackle on the hearth, throwing sparkles of light here and there, and leaving the distant corners all dim and shadowy; or whether, as now, the windows stand open to the summer air, and the rooms are invaded by the sweet country scents and the perfume of the mignonette borders outside.

But better than all else of beauty here do I love old Father Thames, and I run rapidly through the house on to the lawn on the other side. There the river wanders at the foot of it, lying across the verdant fields like a silver ribbon on green velvet.

'Let us go to our drawing-room,' says one of the girls who has followed me. 'We shall just have time to do that before dinner.' So we jump into the boat and scull into a neighbouring back-water, where we have christened by the name of 'our drawing-room' a little creek which runs into the bank, and is fringed with pollard willows, making a pleasant shade overhead. We chat cosily there for half an hour, the water licking the sides of the boat with a refreshing sound. A dear little brown water-rat comes and sits near us, and looks curiously at us out of his bright eyes; a kingfisher flashes by us like a sapphire; then the midges come and dance gaily round us, singing a song of which the 'refrain' is ever, 'It will be fine to-morrow!'

To-morrow has come, and the midges have foretold aright! The sun pours a brilliant flood of light into my room, calling me to come to the royal feast he has spread for me (poor weary citizen), of flowers and sweet perfumes and soft balmy breezes. I open the window with welcoming hands as

he streams in, and stand there a moment listening to the birds chanting their joyous matins, to the rooks clamouring cheerfully in the tall elms, and to the busy sparrows who twitter noisily just above my casement. Roses have climbed the wall, and are peeping in at me, some still shyly folding their petals around them in virgin modesty, others already baring their glowing hearts to the kisses of the amorous air. The beds of scarlet geranium make brilliant spots of flame on the diamond-studded grass; and the river is no longer a silver ribbon, for it has caught the sun's reflection, and flows like molten gold between the meadows. It is still early when I betake myself with a book to my favourite seat on the lawn. But I cannot read. The great book of Nature lies open before me, and dwarfs all other literature into insignificance.

After breakfast (even on such a morning as this we must breakfast), as is our wont, we load the boat with books, work, sketching materials, and lastly with ourselves. Two of us take the oars, and to their lazy cadence we glide down the sunlit river in the direction of one of our favourite haunts. The boys, as we still call them, stalwart young Britons though they are, have already disappeared with their fishing-tackle in their canoes; but we shall very likely meet by-and-by, as they know all our pet nooks and corners.

We take our way past the green banks, on which the wild-flowers make delicate jewelled mosaics; by tall beds of graceful wandlike reeds, beneath the shadows made by hanging woods bending to kiss their own reflections in the stream, until we come to a cool and shady retreat, hiding itself away modestly from the sun's bold and ardent eyes. Here we fasten the boat to a willow-stump and prepare to spend our morning happily in this sanctuary of Nature's own making. Some of us begin to sketch a gnarled old tree crowned with a diadem of feathery foliage; others take out their work; and one among us lays hands on a book, as an excuse for silent enjoyment.

Though what silence is there here? The merry insects hum and whirl around us, saying: 'Summer has come, summer has come;' the weary winds, faint with their long winter's strife, sigh softly in the tall tree-tops; a moor-hen calls shrilly from her nest among the rushes; a lark pours from the stainless heavens a rain of melody; and the silence overflows with music. The bright motes dance in the still air, trying to get into our shadowy abode.

Sol is in his kindliest humour to-day; not harsh and fierce, as he will be later in the year, smiting with cruel hands the tender flowers, until they droop their sad heads beneath his hot anger; but wooing them with warm and genial smiles from their gentle mother's breast, beneath which they have been sleeping safely through the chill winter. All things beneath his beams rejoice. The river; the fields in their delicate green robes, which, as they grow bolder under his gaze, they will change for sweeping kirtles of ruddy gold; the silver clouds cradled in the sky's fair arms; even the modest river-buds which scarcely lift their shy eyes above the water. Around us float the pure cups of the water-lilies. The banks by which we sit are fringed with pale forget-me-not; and delicate ferns push their tender fronds through their beds of last year's fallen leaves – life springing from death. The pale pink water-grasses rear their heads above the ripples, and the sun stares them out of countenance, until by-and-by they blush a celestial rosy red; kingfishers gleam by, their blue wings flashing streaks of turquoise.

How sharp and clear the shadows lie in the embrace of the soft stream! Which is the real world, I wonder? The one shining so joyously around and beyond us, or that other lying cool and still beneath our keel? How I should like to plunge down and see! But perhaps if I did, the water-pixies might throw their spells around me, and I might never return to the world above, which after all is fair enough for me.

As I make this reflection, we see the bow of a canoe peeping into our watery bower; and I am brought back to earth by hearing a merry young voice inquiring if we have any lunch to spare. So we unpack our baskets, and landing, spread our sweet country fare on the sward – crisp home-made bread, pats of golden butter, fragrant honey, and fresh creamy milk. Then the talk, which has languished before, becomes brisk; and many a gay jest is bandied round the fallen moss-clad tree which forms our rustic table.

'Read us something,' says one of the merry group – 'something suited to the scene.' So a book is taken up by willing hands, and a voice we all love reads us fair thoughts which have arisen in poet-minds while gazing on Nature's lovely works. High and noble thoughts they are, and to me they are dear familiar friends; but to-day, my eyes wander to the poetry in God's creations round me, and I whisper to myself:

Ye are living poems,
And all the rest are dead.

So the bright afternoon wears away, pleasant talk alternating with snatches of luxurious silence, and the evening draws on apace. The shadows begin to lengthen, and lie like swartly-clad giants along the grass. The birds hush their song, and here and there the curious fishes spring from their cool bed to take a last look at the dying day. Reluctantly we turn our faces homewards.

Right before us the sun is sinking with passionate glowing cheeks into the murky arms of Night. The gates of heaven open to let Phœbus pass through, and from out them streams a sea of wondrous light, in which pearl and opal clouds float in a lake of delicate green and amber. The trees look inky black against the sky's pure spiritual face. An owl hoots mournfully from yonder, stately poplar; the silent bat flits by on noiseless wing; here and there a glow-worm is lighting its tiny lamp; and the frogs croak us a cheery 'Good-night!' as our boat glides softly by the rushes. But not yet do we return it. We say: 'We will come out again when the moon is up.'

And so we do. In defiance of any rheumatic or neuralgic future which our elders prophesy for us, evening after evening we come out to watch the fair Night lighting her beacon-fires overhead.

The mist-wreathed elms stand by the water like rows of ghostly sentinel monks with gray cowls drawn over their heads; the willows look like silver trees transplanted from some far Peruvian garden; and the water drops from the wet blades of the oars in little showers of diamond dew. Above our heads the nightingale is pouring his liquid melody over the land. We listen, still and hushed. Surely our hearts grow purified, and the cares and sorrows of the world drop from us unheeded as we listen.

Philomela's song makes the silence round us seem deeper and more calm. The flowers have folded their delicate robes more closely around them, and have lain down to dream beneath the stars; even the river seems asleep, and the dark shadows clasped so tightly to his breast. Slowly the pale moon climbs the purple vault of heaven, casts from her her gauzy veil, and looks down on us with her pure and vestal eyes. The stars awaken one by one, and come forth to do her homage. The gold-hearted cups of the water-lilies drink long draughts of silver dew. The willows, like Narcissus of old, gaze wistfully at their own fair faces in the stream; and the aspens quiver with eerie thoughts unknown to us. Surely, riding on the moonbeam which rests on yonder ripple, I see a water-pixie; and resting beneath the shadow of the dock-leaves, I spy a wood-elf! But some one speaks, and they are gone. We drift silently homewards; silently, for our enjoyment has become too deep for words. Silently we land, and still silently I seek my chamber, and opening my window, gaze into the moonlit garden beyond.

The flowers have folded their leaves beneath the soft kisses of the night, and lie sleeping placidly in the dim and tender light; the air is laden with their fragrant breath, which is always sweetest when they lie dreaming beneath the summer stars. The flame-coloured geraniums, the white and wandlike lilies, and the many-tinted roses, are all alike, misty and indistinct; and the sinuous and mossy paths, touched here and there by the soft light, lose themselves in darkness beneath the dusky hedges. Beyond them lies my beloved river, on which the starry river-buds float tremulously. The earth is all at rest, and above it the moon hangs like a silver lamp in the star-lit sky; and overhead one nightingale, the last, for the rest have sunk into silence, trills forth his Elysian chant, and mingles with the dreams of the sleeping flowers.

What a fair world! Is it possible that sorrow exists, that these, God's ineffable works, can ever be defaced by sin?

Such are the days and nights I spend when I make holiday in the old house by the river. Alas! that ever the day should dawn when turning my back on its poetry, I return once more to the prose of our work-a-day world.

THE LAST OF THE HADDONS

CHAPTER XXV. – IN THE LANE

I had had a motive, which I fancied she did not perceive, in asking Lilian to accompany me on my errand to the Home that morning. It was Arthur Trafford's wedding-day. Mrs Tipper and I had done our best to keep the knowledge of it from her until it was over, and flattered ourselves that we had succeeded.

As we drew nearer home the sound of bells ringing merrily in the distance reached my ears; and in the hope of diverting her attention I talked on, apropos of anything or nothing. I fancied she was heeding, until she said gently: 'It is fortunate they have so fine a day, Mary.'

'I suppose it is,' I replied ungraciously. Then I presently added more pleasantly: 'But it is even more fortunate that you can say so.'

'Dear Mary, what did you expect me to say?'

I took the sweet face between my hands, and looked into the clear eyes, which did not flinch under my gaze, as she added in a low voice: 'I am not in love with another woman's husband, Mary.'

No; I came to the happy conclusion that she was not. There was no cause for further anxiety upon that score. Had I only been right in my fancy about Robert Wentworth, how pleasantly might things now have arranged themselves!

Again I felt obliged to postpone telling Lilian about my coming happiness. It had seemed difficult to talk of my engagement the night before, how much more so now – on Arthur Trafford's wedding-day. I must still wait for a more fitting season, I told myself.

Mrs Tipper had done her best to make the little parlour appear as cheerful and home-like as possible; and I saw that she watched Lilian with loving anxiety. She had prepared quite a feast for our favourite meal that day. If hot cakes and everything else the dear little woman could think of in the way of dainties had been remedies for disappointed love, Lilian might have owed her recovery to them, so plentifully were they provided. She had the comfort of seeing her niece partake of the good things with an appetite which quite set her mind at rest.

If it really cost Lilian something so to gratify her aunt, I believe it was very little. She shewed too that her thoughts had not been absent during our morning's work, by joining very earnestly in my narration of what had taken place, and giving a very decided opinion about Mrs Gower. Before we bade each other good-night, Lilian had succeeded in satisfying Mrs Tipper, as she had satisfied me, that she was 'not in love with another woman's husband.'

As days passed on my news remained still untold. Something seemed always to be intervening to cause me to put off the telling it until the morrow. Looking back, I see how very slight were some of the causes which I allowed to prevent me from opening my heart to my companions; although at the time they appeared sufficient.

Meantime we were occupied from morning till night, Lilian and I working together as with one mind. But we presently began to miss our master, as Lilian laughingly termed him, and I grew more than anxious as the days he had accustomed us to expect him passed without our seeing him. Not once had we heard from or seen him since that never-to-be-forgotten night. Did he really blame me? Could he not forgive me? I tormented myself with all sorts of doubts and fears, in my heart of hearts dreading something even worse than his blame or anger. Robert Wentworth was not the man either to judge harshly or to be unforgiving.

It was nearly a fortnight since we had seen him, when one evening Becky mysteriously beckoned me out of the room. Lilian was playing one of our favourite sonatas, and I made my escape unobserved.

'Another letter, Becky?' I asked, putting out my hand for it with a smile.

'No, Miss; it's a woman this time,' returned Becky. 'She says that she wants to see you alone, and she won't come in. I was to tell you she's waiting down at the end of the lane, and to be sure to say you are to go by yourself.'

'What kind of woman is she, Becky?' I asked, my thoughts at once reverting to Nancy Dean.

'A more disagreeable one I never see,' very decidedly returned Becky. 'And as to behaviour, she seemed just ready to snap my nose off when I asked what name I should tell you. "No name at all," she said.'

'I will go, Becky.'

'Poor Nancy!' was my mental ejaculation; 'she has got into trouble again. It was perhaps too much to expect her to remain with people who believe her to be so much worse than she really is, just when she needs to be encouraged and strengthened.' I was stepping from the porch, when Becky earnestly pleaded for permission to accompany me.

'Do, please, let me come too, Miss Haddon, dear!' she whispered. 'I could stand a little way off, so as not to hear; and if she touches you' —

'She will not hurt me, Becky. Do not fear it. I know who she is.'

Becky stood aside, silenced if not convinced. I went out into the summer-scented air, and just pausing by the way to gather a rose for Nancy, passed on down the lane.

Not the slightest doubt as to whom I should see for a moment crossed my mind. My surprise was all the greater when I came in sight of a woman standing erect by the stile with her arms folded across her chest; who, a moment's glance told me, was not at all like Nancy – a tall thin woman, dressed in a long old-fashioned cloak, and what used to be termed a coal-scuttle bonnet.

Quite taken by surprise, I paused a moment to reconnoitre before advancing. She turned her face towards me, and although I did not immediately recognise who she was, I knew that I had seen her before.

'Do you wish to speak to me? I am Miss Haddon.'

'Yes; I know you are.'

Then it flashed upon me who she was.

'You are Mr Wentworth's housekeeper?'

'Yes.'

My heart sank with a foreboding of some evil, and for a moment I could not utter a word. Then screwing up my courage, I asked in as matter-of-course a tone as I could assume: 'He is quite well, I hope?'

'Nobody cares whether he's ill or well, I expect.'

'You are very much mistaken!' I replied, in some agitation. 'Every one who knows him would care a great deal! You ought to know that they would.'

I suppose my face and tone satisfied her that I was so far saying what I thought, though she only shifted her ground of offence in consequence.

'If he was ill he wouldn't be wanting people's pity.'

'But I hope – Is he ill?'

'Why should he be ill?' she rejoined angrily. Then endeavouring to command herself, she went on: 'But I haven't come here to talk about that. Ill or well, he doesn't know I've come here, and would be very angry if he did. You must please to recollect that. I should have been here before, but it took me two days, putting this and that together, to find out where you live. You are living with the ladies at the cottage down there?'

'Yes.'

'Well, that can't be much of a place; but I suppose situations are not so plentiful, and anything is better than' —

'What is it you have come to say to me?' I asked shortly.

'You are very masterful, and know how to get your way when you want it. You two are a match for each other; and I knew you would find that out. I knew no good would come of it when I let you get the better of me that day; and I'd sooner do anything than come to you now. You may be sure of that.'

'I know that for some foolish reason you took a prejudice against me; but being disliked *before* one is known, ought not to distress one, though I should prefer not being disliked.'

'If you're not hurt you needn't complain,' she replied, as though determined not to yield an inch.

'What have you come to say to me?' I repeated. 'I suppose you did not come all this way to remind me that you are prejudiced against me?'

'No.' She looked over the hedge and around in all directions before continuing; then said in a low voice: 'You thought my master's looked but a poor place for a gentleman born to live in, that day. I saw how sharp you was to notice, and how poor and shabby you thought it all was.'

'You are too ready to ascribe thoughts to me,' I replied.

'But you did now; didn't you? You can't say that you didn't think things looked a bit poor?'

'Mr Wentworth can afford to be more careless about appearances than can most people,' I said, not in the least comprehending her drift. 'It was all well enough for a bachelor's home.'

'Ay, well enough for a bachelor's home perhaps; but not for a married couple, eh?'

'Really!'

'Try to keep your temper for another five minutes, if *you* please, Miss. I know there's no love lost between us two; but I've come here because I've got something to say; and proud and masterful as you are, I know you are the sort to be trusted, and I'm going to trust you. I carried Master Robert in my arms when he was a baby, and I know him and love him more than any fine madam ever can. He was left very poor, and he worked very hard, and a better master or kinder gentleman – But that's not what I've come to say; nobody will ever know his goodness as I do' – jealously. 'He was poor, and I was poor, and I've had some ado to keep things together for him. But about three years ago my brother died, and things changed for me. He was a small farmer down in Gloucestershire, and everybody called him a miser; but it is not for me to complain of his scraping and saving, for he left all he had to me, and a nice little nest-egg it turned out to be. It's been down in my will for Master Robert from the first day I had it; and it has been 'cumulating ever since; not a penny of it have I ever touched. The pleasure has been to think that there it was all ready for him, though I was too proud to see how much he liked working his way up in the world, to tell him about it before he wanted it.'

'I am sincerely glad to know he has so faithful a friend,' I said, holding out my hand to her.

'Wait a bit, Miss; let me say my say. To-morrow morning that money will be made over to Master Robert, and he will be told that he'll never see no more of me if he won't take it; and the lawyer he says it brings in pretty nigh ninety pounds a year, now!' Pausing a moment to give me time to recover that.

What could I say? Growing hot and confused and pained as her meaning began to dawn upon me, I murmured: 'It is a good sum – and' —

'And that's not all,' she said eagerly. 'You must remember Master Robert is getting on now and being talked about. I've brought this paper down with me that you may see his name in it for yourself;' taking a newspaper from her pocket, hastily unfolding it and pointing out with trembling finger a short but eulogistic notice of a pamphlet by R. Wentworth. 'There's no gainsaying that, you know.' Slipping it into her pocket again, she earnestly went on, laying her hand upon my arm, and seeing only him in her increased anxiety: 'I don't say that prudence isn't a good thing; I'm not for foolish marriages when there's nothing to depend on; but there's the ninety pounds a year, and what he earns, besides a house to live in, and my services for nothing; and master says my bark's worse than my bite; bless you, *his* wife's no call to be afraid of me!'

'Hush, pray hush!' I murmured, seeing all her meaning now. 'Do you think any one who loved Robert Wentworth would care about all that!'

'Then it is that he isn't loved? God help him!' The cold, hard, set look came into her face again – though she would seem cold and hard now to me never again – and she folded her cloak about her.

'Will you tell me how Mr Wentworth is?' I could not help asking.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.