
Actions and Reactions

by

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Rudyard Kipling

Actions and Reactions

My friend, if cause doth wrest thee,
Ere folly hath much oppressed thee,
Far from acquaintance kest thee
Where country may digest thee...
Thank God that so hath blessed thee,
And sit down, Robin, and rest thee.
—THOMAS TUSSER.

It came without warning, at the very hour his hand was outstretched to crumple the Holz and Gunsberg Combine. The New York doctors called it overwork, and he lay in a darkened room, one ankle crossed above the other, tongue pressed into palate, wondering whether the next brain-surge of prickly fire would drive his soul from all anchorages. At last they gave judgment. With care he might in two years return to the arena, but for the present he must go across the water and do no work whatever. He accepted the terms. It was capitulation; but the Combine that had shivered beneath his knife gave him all the honours of war: Gunsberg himself, full of condolences, came to the steamer and filled the Chapins' suite of cabins with overwhelming flower-works.

"Smilax," said George Chapin when he saw them. "Fitz is right. I'm dead; only I don't see why he let out the 'In Memoriam' on the ribbons!"

"Nonsense!" his wife answered, and poured him his tincture. "You'll be back before you can think."

He looked at himself in the mirror, surprised that his face had not been branded by the hells of the past three months. The noise of the decks worried him, and he lay down, his tongue only a little pressed against his palate.

An hour later he said: "Sophie, I feel sorry about taking you away from everything like this. I—suppose we're the two loneliest people on God's earth to-night."

Said Sophie his wife, and kissed him: "Isn't it something to you that we're going together?"

They drifted about Europe for months—sometimes alone, sometimes with chance met gipsies of their own land. From the North Cape to the Blue Grotto at Capri they wandered, because the next steamer headed that way, or because some one had set them on the road. The doctors had warned Sophie that Chapin was not to take interest even in other men's interests; but a familiar sensation at the back of the neck after one hour's keen talk with a Nauheim railway magnate saved her any trouble. He nearly wept.

“And I’m over thirty,” he cried. “With all I meant to do!”

“Let’s call it a honeymoon,” said Sophie. “D’ you know, in all the six years we’ve been married you’ve never told me what you meant to do with your life?”

“With my life? What’s the use? It’s finished now.” Sophie looked up quickly from the Bay of Naples. “As far as my business goes, I shall have to live on my rents like that architect at San Moritz.”

“You’ll get better if you don’t worry; and even if it rakes time, there are worse things than—How much have you?”

“Between four and five million. But it isn’t the money. You know it isn’t. It’s the principle. How could you respect me? You never did, the first year after we married, till I went to work like the others. Our tradition and upbringing are against it. We can’t accept those ideals.”

“Well, I suppose I married you for some sort of ideal,” she answered, and they returned to their forty-third hotel.

In England they missed the alien tongues of Continental streets that reminded them of their own polyglot cities. In England all men spoke one tongue, speciously like American to the ear, but on cross-examination unintelligible.

“Ah, but you have not seen England,” said a lady with iron-grey hair. They had met her in Vienna, Bayreuth, and Florence, and were grateful to find her again at Claridge’s, for she commanded situations, and knew where prescriptions are most carefully made up. “You ought to take an interest in the home of our ancestors as I do.”

“I’ve tried for a week, Mrs. Shonts,” said Sophie, “but I never get any further than tipping German waiters.”

“These men are not the true type,” Mrs. Shonts went on. “I know where you should go.”

Chapin pricked up his ears, anxious to run anywhere from the streets on which quick men, something of his kidney, did the business denied to him.

“We hear and we obey, Mrs. Shonts,” said Sophie, feeling his unrest as he drank the loathed British tea.

Mrs. Shonts smiled, and took them in hand. She wrote widely and telegraphed far on their behalf till armed with her letter of introduction, she drove them into that wilderness which is reached from a ash-barrel of a station called Charing Cross. They were to go to Rockett’s—the farm of one Cloke, in the southern counties—where, she assured them, they would meet the genuine England of folklore and

song.

Rocketts they found after some hours, four miles from a station, and, so far as they could, judge in the bumpy darkness, twice as many from a road. Trees, kine, and the outlines of barns showed shadow about them when they alighted, and Mr. and Mrs. Cloke, at the open door of a deep stone-floored kitchen, made them shyly welcome. They lay in an attic beneath a wavy whitewashed ceiling, and because it rained, a wood fire was made in an iron basket on a brick hearth, and they fell asleep to the chirping of mice and the whimper of flames.

When they woke it was a fair day, full of the noises, of birds, the smell of box lavender, and fried bacon, mixed with an elemental smell they had never met before.

“This,” said Sophie, nearly pushing out the thin casement in an attempt to see round the corner, “is—what did the hack-cabman say to the railway porter about my trunk—‘quite on the top?’”

“No; ‘a little bit of all right.’ I feel farther away from anywhere than I’ve ever felt in my life. We must find out where the telegraph office is.”

“Who cares?” said Sophie, wandering about, hairbrush in hand, to admire the illustrated week-end pictures pasted on door and cupboard.

But there was no rest for the alien soul till he had made sure of the telegraph office. He asked the Clokes’ daughter, laying breakfast, while Sophie plunged her face in the lavender bush outside the low window.

“Go to the stile a-top o’ the Barn field,” said Mary, “and look across Pardons to the next spire. It’s directly under. You can’t miss it—not if you keep to the footpath. My sister’s the telegraphist there. But you’re in the three-mile radius, sir. The boy delivers telegrams directly to this door from Pardons village.”

“One has to take a good deal on trust in this country,” he murmured.

Sophie looked at the close turf, scarred only with last night’s wheels, at two ruts which wound round the rickyard, and at the circle of still orchard about the half-timbered house.

“What’s the matter with it?” she said. “Telegrams delivered to the Vale of Avalon, of course,” and she beckoned in an earnest-eyed hound of engaging manners and no engagements, who answered, at times to the name of Rambler. He led them, after breakfast, to the rise behind the house where the stile stood against the skyline, and, “I wonder what we shall find now,” said Sophie, frankly prancing with joy on the grass.

It was a slope of gap-hedged fields possessed to their centres by clumps of brambles. Gates were no

and the rabbit-mined, cattle-rubbed posts leaned out and in. A narrow path doubled among the bushes
scores of white tails twinkled before the racing hound, and a hawk rose, whistling shrilly.

“No roads, no nothing!” said Sophie, her short skirt hooked by briars. “I thought all England was garden. There’s your spire, George, across the valley. How curious!”

They walked toward it through an all abandoned land. Here they found the ghost of a patch of lucerne that had refused to die: there a harsh fallow surrendered to yard-high thistles; and here a breadth rampant kelk feigning to be lawful crop. In the ungrazed pastures swaths of dead stuff caught the feet, and the ground beneath glistened with sweat. At the bottom of the valley a little brook had undermined its footbridge, and frothed in the wreckage. But there stood great woods on the slope beyond—old, tall, and brilliant, like unfaded tapestries against the walls of a ruined house.

“All this within a hundred miles of London,” he said. “Looks as if it had had nervous prostration, too. The footpath turned the shoulder of a slope, through a thicket of rank rhododendrons, and crossed what had once been a carriage drive, which ended in the shadow of two gigantic holm-oaks.

“A house!” said Sophie, in a whisper. “A Colonial house!”

Behind the blue-green of the twin trees rose a dark-bluish brick Georgian pile, with a shell-shaped fanlight over its pillared door. The hound had gone off on his own foolish quests. Except for some stir in the branches and the flight of four startled magpies; there was neither life nor sound about the square house, but it looked out of its long windows most friendlily.

“Cha-armed to meet you, I’m sure,” said Sophie, and curtsied to the ground. “George, this is history you can understand. We began here.” She curtsied again.

The June sunshine twinkled on all the lights. It was as though an old lady, wise in three generations of experience, but for the present sitting out, bent to listen to her flushed and eager grandchild.

“I must look!” Sophie tiptoed to a window, and shaded her eyes with her hand. “Oh, this room’s half full of cotton-bales—wool, I suppose! But I can see a bit of the mantelpiece. George, do come! Isn’t that some one?”

She fell back behind her husband. The front door opened slowly, to show the hound, his nose whiffing with milk, in charge of an ancient of days clad in a blue linen ephod curiously gathered on breast and shoulders.

“Certainly,” said George, half aloud. “Father Time himself. This is where he lives, Sophie.”

“We came,” said Sophie weakly. “Can we see the house? I’m afraid that’s our dog.”

“No, ’tis Rambler,” said the old man. “He’s been, at my swill-pail again. Staying at Rocketts, be ye sure. Come in. Ah! you runagate!”

The hound broke from him, and he tottered after him down the drive. They entered the hall—just such a high light hall as such a house should own. A slim-balustered staircase, wide and shallow and once creamy-white, climbed out of it under a long oval window. On either side delicately moulded doors gave on to wool-lumbered rooms, whose sea-green mantelpieces were adorned with nymphs, scrolls, and Cupids in low relief.

“What’s the firm that makes these things?” cried Sophie, enraptured. “Oh, I forgot! These must be the originals. Adams, is it? I never dreamed of anything like that steel-cut fender. Does he mean us to get everywhere?”

“He’s catching the dog,” said George, looking out. “We don’t count.”

They explored the first or ground floor, delighted as children playing burglars.

“This is like all England,” she said at last. “Wonderful, but no explanation. You’re expected to know beforehand. Now, let’s try upstairs.”

The stairs never creaked beneath their feet. From the broad landing they entered a long, green-panelled room lighted by three full-length windows, which overlooked the forlorn wreck of a terrace garden, and wooded slopes beyond.

“The drawing-room, of course.” Sophie swam up and down it. “That mantelpiece—Orpheus and Eurydice—is the best of them all. Isn’t it marvellous? Why, the room seems furnished with nothing else! How’s that, George?”

“It’s the proportions. I’ve noticed it.”

“I saw a Heppelwhite couch once”—Sophie laid her finger to her flushed cheek and considered. “With, two of them—one on each side—you wouldn’t need anything else. Except—there must be one perfect mirror over that mantelpiece.”

“Look at that view. It’s a framed Constable,” her husband cried.

“No; it’s a Morland—a parody of a Morland. But about that couch, George. Don’t you think Empi might be better than Heppelwhite? Dull gold against that pale green? It’s a pity they don’t make spinets nowadays.”

“I believe you can get them. Look at that oak wood behind the pines.”

“While you sat and played toccatas stately, at the clavichord,” Sophie hummed, and, head on one side, nodded to where the perfect mirror should hang:

Then they found bedrooms with dressing-rooms and powdering-closets, and steps leading up and down—boxes of rooms, round, square, and octagonal, with enriched ceilings and chased door-locks.

“Now about servants. Oh!” She had darted up the last stairs to the chequered darkness of the top floor where loose tiles lay among broken laths, and the walls were scrawled with names, sentiments, and hop records. “They’ve been keeping pigeons here,” she cried.

“And you could drive a buggy through the roof anywhere,” said George.

“That’s what I say,” the old man cried below them on the stairs. “Not a dry place for my pigeons all.”

“But why was it allowed to get like this?” said Sophie.

“Tis with housen as teeth,” he replied. “Let ’em go too far, and there’s nothing to be done. Time was they was minded to sell her, but none would buy. She was too far away along from any place. Time was they’d ha’ lived here theyselves, but they took and died.”

“Here?” Sophie moved beneath the light of a hole in the roof.

“Nah—none dies here excep’ falling off ricks and such. In London they died.” He plucked a lock of wool from his blue smock. “They was no staple—neither the Elphicks nor the Moones. Shart and brittle all of ’em. Dead they be seventeen year, for I’ve been here caretakin’ twenty-five.”

“Who does all the wool belong to downstairs?” George asked.

“To the estate. I’ll show you the back parts if ye like. You’re from America, ain’t ye? I’ve had a son there once myself.” They followed him down the main stairway. He paused at the turn and swept one hand toward the wall. “Plenty room, here for your coffin to come down. Seven foot and three men each end wouldn’t brish the paint. If I die in my bed they’ll ‘ave to up-end me like a milk-can. ’Tis a luck, dye see?”

He led them on and on, through a maze of back kitchens, dairies, larders, and sculleries, that melted along covered ways into a farm-house, visibly older than the main building, which again rambled on among barns, byres, pig-pens, stalls and stables to the dead fields behind.

“Somehow,” said Sophie, sitting exhausted on an ancient well-curb—“somehow one wouldn’t insult these lovely old things by filling them with hay.”

George looked at long stone walls upholding reaches of silvery-oak weather-boarding; buttresses mixed flint and bricks; outside stairs, stone upon arched stone; curves of thatch where grass sprouted roundels of house-leaked tiles, and a huge paved yard populated by two cows and the repentant Rambler. He had not thought of himself or of the telegraph office for two and a half hours.

“But why,” said Sophie, as they went back through the crater of stricken fields,—“why is one expected to know everything in England? Why do they never tell?”

“You mean about the Elphicks and the Moones?” he answered.

“Yes—and the lawyers and the estate. Who are they? I wonder whether those painted floors in the green room were real oak. Don’t you like us exploring things together—better than Pompeii?”

George turned once more to look at the view. “Eight hundred acres go with the house—the old man told me. Five farms altogether. Rocketts is one of ’em.”

“I like Mrs. Cloke. But what is the old house called?”

George laughed. “That’s one of the things you’re expected to know. He never told me.”

The Clokes were more communicative. That evening and thereafter for a week they gave the Chapin the official history, as one gives it to lodgers, of Friars Pardon the house and its five farms. But Sophie asked so many questions, and George was so humanly interested, that, as confidence in the strange grew, they launched, with observed and acquired detail, into the lives and deaths and doings of the Elphicks and the Moones and their collaterals, the Haylings and the Torrells. It was a tale told serially by Cloke in the barn, or his wife in the dairy, the last chapters reserved for the kitchen o’ nights by the big fire, when the two had been half the day exploring about the house, where old Iggulden, of the blue smock, cackled and chuckled to see them. The motives that swayed the characters were beyond the comprehension; the fates that shifted them were gods they had never met; the sidelights Mrs. Cloke threw on act and incident were more amazing than anything in the record. Therefore the Chapin listened delightedly, and blessed Mrs. Shonts.

“But why—why—why—did So-and-so do so-and-so?” Sophie would demand from her seat by the pothook; and Mrs. Cloke would answer, smoothing her knees, “For the sake of the place.”

“I give it up,” said George one night in their own room. “People don’t seem to matter in this country compared to the places they live in. The way she tells it, Friars Pardon was a sort of Moloch.”

“Poor old thing!” They had been walking round the farms as usual before tea. “No wonder they love it. Think of the sacrifices they made for it. Jane Elphick married the younger Torrell to keep it in the family. The octagonal room with the moulded ceiling next to the big bedroom was hers. Now what d

he tell you while he was feeding the pigs?" said Sophie.

"About the Torrell cousins and the uncle who died in Java. They lived at Burnt House—behind High Pardons, where that brook is all blocked up."

"No; Burnt House is under High Pardons Wood, before you come to Gale Anstey," Sophie corrected.

"Well, old man Cloke said—"

Sophie threw open the door and called down into the kitchen, where the Clokes were covering the fire.

"Mrs. Cloke, isn't Burnt House under High Pardons?"

"Yes, my dear, of course," the soft voice answered absently. A cough. "I beg your pardon, Madam. What was it you said?"

"Never mind. I prefer it the other way," Sophie laughed, and George re-told the missing chapter as she sat on the bed.

"Here today an' gone tomorrow," said Cloke warningly. "They've paid their first month, but we've only that Mrs. Shonts's letter for guarantee."

"None she sent never cheated us yet. It slipped out before I thought. She's a most humane young lady. They'll be going away in a little. An' you've talked a lot too, Alfred."

"Yes, but the Elphicks are all dead. No one can bring my loose talking home to me. But why do they stay on and stay on so?"

In due time George and Sophie asked each other that question, and put it aside. They argued that the climate—a pearly blend, unlike the hot and cold ferocities of their native land—suited them, as the thick stillness of the nights certainly suited George. He was saved even the sight of a metalled road which, as presumably leading to business, wakes desire in a man; and the telegraph office at the village of Friars Pardon, where they sold picture post-cards and pegtops, was two walking miles across the fields and woods.

For all that touched his past among his fellows, or their remembrance of him, he might have been on another planet; and Sophie, whose life had been very largely spent among husbandless wives of lofty ideals, had no wish to leave this present of God. The unhurried meals, the foreknowledge of deliciously empty hours to follow, the breadths of soft sky under which they walked together and reckoned time only by their hunger or thirst; the good grass beneath their feet that cheated the miles of their discoveries, always together, amid the farms—Griffons, Rocketts, Burnt House, Gale Anstey, and the Home Farm, where Iggulden of the blue smock-frock would waylay them, and they would ransack the old house once more; the long wet afternoons when, they tucked up their feet on the

bedroom's deep window-sill over against the apple-trees, and talked together as never till then had they found time to talk—these things contented her soul, and her body throve.

“Have you realized,” she asked one morning, “that we’ve been here absolutely alone for the last thirty-four days?”

“Have you counted them?” he asked.

“Did you like them?” she replied.

“I must have. I didn’t think about them. Yes, I have. Six months ago I should have fretted myself sick. Remember at Cairo? I’ve only had two or three bad times. Am I getting better, or is it senile decay?”

“Climate, all climate.” Sophie swung her new-bought English boots, as she sat on the stile overlooking Friars Pardon, behind the Clokes’s barn.

“One must take hold of things though,” he said, “if it’s only to keep one’s hand in.” His eyes did not flicker now as they swept the empty fields. “Mustn’t one?”

“Lay out a Morrystown links over Gale Anstey. I dare say you could hire it.”

“No, I’m not as English as that—nor as Morrystown. Cloke says all the farms here could be made pay.”

“Well, I’m Anastasia in the ‘Treasure of Franchard.’ I’m content to be alive and purr. There’s no hurry.”

“No.” He smiled. “All the same, I’m going to see after my mail.”

“You promised you wouldn’t have any.”

“There’s some business coming through that’s amusing me. Honest. It doesn’t get on my nerves at all.”

“Want a secretary?”

“No, thanks, old thing! Isn’t that quite English?”

“Too English! Go away.” But none the less in broad daylight she returned the kiss. “I’m off to Pardons. I haven’t been to the house for nearly a week.”

“How’ve you decided to furnish Jane Elphick’s bedroom?” he laughed, for it had come to be permanent Castle in Spain between them.

“Black Chinese furniture and yellow silk brocade,” she answered, and ran downhill. She scattered a few cows at a gap with a flourish of a ground-ash that Iggulden had cut for her a week ago, and singing as she passed under the holmoaks, sought the farm-house at the back of Friars Pardon. The old man was not to be found, and she knocked at his half-opened door, for she needed him to fill her idleness in the forenoon. A blue-eyed sheep-dog, a new friend, and Rambler’s old enemy, crawled out and besought her to enter.

Iggulden sat in his chair by the fire, a thistle-spud between his knees, his head drooped. Though she had never seen death before, her heart, that missed a beat, told her that he was dead. She did not speak or cry, but stood outside the door, and the dog licked her hand. When he threw up his nose, she heard herself saying: “Don’t howl! Please don’t begin to howl, Scottie, or I shall run away!”

She held her ground while the shadows in the rickyard moved toward noon; sat after a while on the steps by the door, her arms round the dog’s neck, waiting till some one should come. She watched the smokeless chimneys of Friars Pardon slash its roofs with shadow, and the smoke of Iggulden’s last lighted fire gradually thin and cease. Against her will she fell to wondering how many Mooneys, Elphicks, and Torrells had been swung round the turn of the broad Mall stairs. Then she remembered the old man’s talk of being “up-ended like a milk-can,” and buried her face on Scottie’s neck. At last a horse’s feet clinked upon flags, rustled in the old grey straw of the rickyard, and she found herself facing the vicar—a figure she had seen at church declaiming impossibilities (Sophie was a Unitarian) in an unnatural voice.

“He’s dead,” she said, without preface.

“Old Iggulden? I was coming for a talk with him.” The vicar passed in uncovered. “Ah!” she heard him say. “Heart-failure! How long have you been here?”

“Since a quarter to eleven.” She looked at her watch earnestly and saw that her hand did not shake.

“I’ll sit with him now till the doctor comes. D’you think you could tell him, and—yes, Mrs. Betts the cottage with the wistaria next the blacksmith’s? I’m afraid this has been rather a shock to you.”

Sophie nodded, and fled toward the village. Her body failed her for a moment; she dropped beneath the hedge, and looked back at the great house. In some fashion its silence and stolidity steadied her for her errand.

Mrs. Betts, small, black-eyed, and dark, was almost as unconcerned as Friars Pardon.

“Yiss, yiss, of course. Dear me! Well, Iggulden he had had his day in my father’s time. Muriel, get me my little blue bag, please. Yiss, ma’am. They come down like ellow-branches in still weather. No warnin’ at all. Muriel, my bicycle’s be’ind the fowlhouse. I’ll tell Dr. Dallas, ma’am.”

She trundled off on her wheel like a brown bee, while Sophie—heaven above and earth beneath—changed—walked stiffly home, to fall over George at his letters, in a muddle of laughter and tears.

“It’s all quite natural for them,” she gasped. “They come down like ellow-branches in still weather. Yiss, ma’am.’ No, there wasn’t anything in the least horrible, only—only—Oh, George, that poor shiny stick of his between his poor, thin knees! I couldn’t have borne it if Scottie had howled. I didn’t know the vicar was so—so sensitive. He said he was afraid it was rather a shock. Mrs. Betts told me to go home, and I wanted to collapse on her floor. But I didn’t disgrace myself. I—I couldn’t have left him—could I?”

“You’re sure you’ve took no ‘arm?” cried Mrs. Cloke, who had heard the news by farm-telegraph, which is older but swifter than Marconi’s.

“No. I’m perfectly well,” Sophie protested.

“You lay down till tea-time.” Mrs. Cloke patted her shoulder. “THEY’ll be very pleased, though she ‘as ‘ad no proper understandin’ for twenty years.”

“They” came before twilight—a black-bearded man in moleskins, and a little palsied old woman, who chirruped like a wren.

“I’m his son,” said the man to Sophie, among the lavender bushes. “We ‘ad a difference—twenty years back, and didn’t speak since. But I’m his son all the ‘same, and we thank you for the watching.”

“I’m only glad I happened to be there,” she answered, and from the bottom of her heart she meant it.

“We heard he spoke a lot o’ you—one time an’ another since you came. We thank you kindly,” the man added.

“Are you the son that was in America?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am. On my uncle’s farm, in Connecticut. He was what they call rood-master there.”

“Whereabouts in Connecticut?” asked George over her shoulder.

“Veering Holler was the name. I was there six year with my uncle.”

“How small the world is!” Sophie cried. “Why, all my mother’s people come from Veering Hollow. There must be some there still—the Lashmars. Did you ever hear of them?”

“I remember hearing that name, seems to me,” he answered, but his face was blank as the back of a spade.

A little before dusk a woman in grey, striding like a foot-soldier, and bearing on her arm a long pole, crashed through the orchard calling for food. George, upon whom the unannounced English workman mysteriously, fled to the parlour; but Mrs. Cloke came forward beaming. Sophie could not escape.

“We’ve only just heard of it;” said the stranger, turning on her. “I’ve been out with the otter-hound all day. It was a splendidly sportin’ thing—”

“Did you—er—kill?” said Sophie. She knew from books she could not go far wrong here.

“Yes, a dry bitch—seventeen pounds,” was the answer. “A splendidly sportin’ thing of you to do. Poor old Iggulden—”

“Oh—that!” said Sophie, enlightened.

“If there had been any people at Pardons it would never have happened. He’d have been looked after. But what can you expect from a parcel of London solicitors?”

Mrs. Cloke murmured something.

“No. I’m soaked from the knees down. If I hang about I shall get chilled. A cup of tea, Mrs. Cloke, and I can eat one of your sandwiches as I go.” She wiped her weather-worn face with a green and yellow silk handkerchief.

“Yes, my lady!” Mrs. Cloke ran and returned swiftly.

“Our land marches with Pardons for a mile on the south,” she explained, waving the full cup, “but our people has quite enough to do with one’s own people without poachin’. Still, if I’d known, I’d have sent Dora of course. Have you seen her this afternoon, Mrs. Cloke? No? I wonder whether that girl did sprain her ankle. Thank you.” It was a formidable hunk of bread and bacon that Mrs. Cloke presented. “As I was sayin’, Pardons is a scandal! Lettin’ people die like dogs. There ought to be people there who do their duty. You’ve done yours, though there wasn’t the faintest call upon you. Good night. Tell Dora, if she comes, I’ve gone on.”

She strode away, munching her crust, and Sophie reeled breathless into the parlour, to shake the door, shaking George.

“Why did you keep catching my eye behind the blind? Why didn’t you come out and do your duty?”

“Because I should have burst. Did you see the mud on its cheek?” he said.

“Once. I daren’t look again. Who is she?”

“God—a local deity then. Anyway, she’s another of the things you’re expected to know by instinct.”

Mrs. Cloke, shocked at their levity, told them that it was Lady Conant, wife of Sir Walter Conant, Baronet, a large landholder in the neighbourhood; and if not God; at least His visible Providence. George made her talk of that family for an hour.

“Laughter,” said Sophie afterward in their own room, “is the mark of the savage. Why couldn’t you control your emotions? It’s all real to her.”

“It’s all real to me. That’s my trouble,” he answered in an altered tone. “Anyway, it’s real enough to mark time with. Don’t you think so?”

“What d’you mean?” she asked quickly, though she knew his voice.

“That I’m better. I’m well enough to kick.”

“What at?”

“This!” He waved his hand round the one room. “I must have something to play with till I’m fit for work again.”

“Ah!” She sat on the bed and leaned forward, her hands clasped. “I wonder if it’s good for you.”

“We’ve been better here than anywhere,” he went on slowly. “One could always sell it again.”

She nodded gravely, but her eyes sparkled.

“The only thing that worries me is what happened this morning. I want to know how you feel about it. If it’s on your nerves in the least we can have the old farm at the back of the house pulled down, or perhaps it has spoiled the notion for you?”

“Pull it down?” she cried. “You’ve no business faculty. Why, that’s where we could live while we’re putting the big house in order. It’s almost under the same roof. No! What happened this morning seemed to be more of a—of a leading than anything else. There ought to be people at Pardons. Lady Conant’s quite right.”

“I was thinking more of the woods and the roads. I could double the value of the place in six months.”

“What do they want for it?” She shook her head, and her loosened hair fell glowingly about her cheeks.

“Seventy-five thousand dollars. They’ll take sixty-eight.”

“Less than half what we paid for our old yacht when we married. And we didn’t have a good time
her. You were—”

“Well, I discovered I was too much of an American to be content to be a rich man’s son. You aren’t
blaming me for that?”

“Oh, no. Only it was a very businesslike honeymoon. How far are you along with the deal, George?”

“I can mail the deposit on the purchase money tomorrow morning, and we can have the thing
completed in a fortnight or three weeks—if you say so.”

“Friars Pardon—Friars Pardon!” Sophie chanted rapturously, her dark gray eyes big with delight. “All
the farms? Gale Anstey, Burnt House, Rocketts, the Home Farm, and Griffons? Sure you’ve got ’em
all?”

“Sure.” He smiled.

“And the woods? High Pardons Wood, Lower Pardons, Suttons, Dutton’s Shaw, Reuben’s Ghyll,
Maxey’s Ghyll, and both the Oak Hangers? Sure you’ve got ’em all?”

“Every last stick. Why, you know them as well as I do.” He laughed. “They say there’s five thousand
—a thousand pounds’ worth of lumber—timber they call it—in the Hangers alone.”

“Mrs. Cloke’s oven must be mended first thing, and the kitchen roof. I think I’ll have all the
whitewashed,” Sophie broke in, pointing to the ceiling. “The whole place is a scandal. Lady Conant
quite right. George, when did you begin to fall in love with the house? In the greenroom that first day
I did.”

“I’m not in love with it. One must do something to mark time till one’s fit for work.”

“Or when we stood under the oaks, and the door opened? Oh! Ought I to go to poor Iggulden’s
funeral?” She sighed with utter happiness.

“Wouldn’t they call it a liberty now?” said he.

“But I liked him.”

“But you didn’t own him at the date of his death.”

“That wouldn’t keep me away. Only, they made such a fuss about the watching”—she caught her
breath—“it might be ostentatious from that point of view, too. Oh, George”—she reached for his hand
—“we’re two little orphans moving in worlds not realized, and we shall make some bad breaks. B

we're going to have the time of our lives."

"We'll run up to London tomorrow, and see if we can hurry those English law solicitors. I want to get to work."

They went. They suffered many things ere they returned across the fields in a fly one Saturday night nursing a two by two-and-a-half box of deeds and maps—lawful owners of Friars Pardon and the five decayed farms therewith.

"I do most sincerely 'ope and trust you'll be 'appy, Madam," Mrs. Cloke gasped, when she was told the news by the kitchen fire.

"Goodness! It isn't a marriage!" Sophie exclaimed, a little awed; for to them the joke, which to an American means work, was only just beginning.

"If it's took in a proper spirit"—Mrs. Cloke's eye turned toward her oven.

"Send and have that mended tomorrow," Sophie whispered.

"We couldn't 'elp noticing," said Cloke slowly, "from the times you walked there, that you an' your lady was drawn to it, but—but I don't know as we ever precisely thought—" His wife's glance checked him.

"That we were that sort of people," said George. "We aren't sure of it ourselves yet."

"Perhaps," said Cloke, rubbing his knees, "just for the sake of saying something, perhaps you'll pardon it?"

"What's that?" said George.

"Turn it all into a fine park like Violet Hill"—he jerked a thumb to westward—"that Mr. Sangres bought. It was four farms, and Mr. Sangres made a fine park of them, with a herd of faller deer."

"Then it wouldn't be Friars Pardon," said Sophie. "Would it?"

"I don't know as I've ever heard Pardons was ever anything but wheat an' wool. Only some gentlemen say that parks are less trouble than tenants." He laughed nervously. "But the gentry, o' course, the keep on pretty much as they was used to."

"I see," said Sophie. "How did Mr. Sangres make his money?"

"I never rightly heard. It was pepper an' spices, or it may ha' been gloves. No. Gloves was S. Reginald Liss at Marley End. Spices was Mr. Sangres. He's a Brazilian gentleman—very sunburnt."

like.”

“Be sure o’ one thing. You won’t ‘ave any trouble,” said Mrs. Cloke, just before they went to bed.

Now the news of the purchase was told to Mr. and Mrs. Cloke alone at 8 P.M. of a Saturday. None left the farm till they set out for church next morning. Yet when they reached the church and were about to slip aside into their usual seats, a little beyond the font, where they could see the red-furred tails of the bellropes waggle and twist at ringing time, they were swept forward irresistibly, a Cloke on either flank (and yet they had not walked with the Clokes), upon the ever-retiring bosom of a black-gown’d verger, who ushered them into a room of a pew at the head of the left aisle, under the pulpit.

“This,” he sighed reproachfully, “is the Pardons’ Pew,” and shut them in.

They could see little more than the choir boys in the chancel, but to the roots of the hair of their necks they felt the congregation behind mercilessly devouring them by look.

“When the wicked man turneth away.” The strong, alien voice of the priest vibrated under the hammer-beam roof, and a loneliness unfelt before swamped their hearts, as they searched for places in the unfamiliar Church of England service. The Lord’s Prayer “Our Father, which art”—set the seal of that desolation. Sophie found herself thinking how in other lands their purchase would long ere this have been discussed from every point of view in a dozen prints, forgetting that George for months had not been allowed to glance at those black and bellowing head-lines. Here was nothing but silence—no even hostility! The game was up to them; the other players hid their cards and waited. Suspense, she felt, was in the air, and when her sight cleared, saw, indeed, a mural tablet of a footless bird brooding upon the carven motto, “Wayte awhyle—wayte awhyle.”

At the Litany George had trouble with an unstable hassock, and drew the slip of carpet under the pewseat. Sophie pushed her end back also, and shut her eyes against a burning that felt like tears. When she opened them she was looking at her mother’s maiden name, fairly carved on a black flagstone on the pew floor: Ellen Lashmar. ob. 1796. aetat 27.

She nudged George and pointed. Sheltered, as they kneeled, they looked for more knowledge, but the rest of the slab was blank.

“Ever hear of her?” he whispered.

“Never knew any of us came from here.”

“Coincidence?”

“Perhaps. But it makes me feel better,” and she smiled and winked away a tear on her lashes, and took his hand while they prayed for “all women labouring of child”—not “in the perils of childbirth”; and

the sparrows who had found their way through the guards behind the glass windows chirped above the faded gilt and alabaster family tree of the Conants.

The baronet's pew was on the right of the aisle. After service its inhabitants moved forth without haste, but so as to block effectively a dusky person with a large family who champed in their rear.

"Spices, I think," said Sophie, deeply delighted as the Sangres closed up after the Conants. "Let 'em get away, George."

But when they came out many folk whose eyes were one still lingered by the lychgate.

"I want to see if any more Lashmars are buried here," said Sophie.

"Not now. This seems to be show day. Come home quickly," he replied.

A group of families, the Clokes a little apart, opened to let them through. The men saluted with jerks of the head, the women with remnants of a curtsy. Only Iggulden's son, his mother on his arm, lifted his hat as Sophie passed.

"Your people," said the clear voice of Lady Conant in her ear.

"I suppose so," said Sophie, blushing, for they were within two yards of her; but it was not a question.

"Then that child looks as if it were coming down with mumps. You ought to tell the mother she shouldn't have brought it to church."

"I can't leave 'er behind, my lady," the woman said. "She'd set the 'ouse afire in a minute, she's thumping forward with the matches. Ain't you, Maudie dear?"

"Has Dr. Dallas seen her?"

"Not yet, my lady."

"He must. You can't get away, of course. M-m! My idiotic maid is coming in for her teeth tomorrow at twelve. She shall pick her up—at Gale Anstey, isn't it?—at eleven."

"Yes. Thank you very much, my lady."

"I oughtn't to have done it," said Lady Conant apologetically, "but there has been no one at Pardon for so long that you'll forgive my poaching. Now, can't you lunch with us? The vicar usually comes too. I don't use the horses on a Sunday"—she glanced at the Brazilian's silver-plated chariot. "It's only a mile across the fields."

“You—you’re very kind,” said Sophie, hating herself because her lip trembled.

“My dear,” the compelling tone dropped to a soothing gurgle, “d’you suppose I don’t know how feels to come to a strange county—country I should say—away from one’s own people? When I first left the Shires—I’m Shropshire, you know—I cried for a day and a night. But fretting doesn’t make loneliness any better. Oh, here’s Dora. She did sprain her leg that day.”

“I’m as lame as a tree still,” said the tall maiden frankly. “You ought to go out with the otter-hound Mrs. Chapin. I believe they’re drawing your water next week.”

Sir Walter had already led off George, and the vicar came up on the other side of Sophie. There was no escaping the swift procession or the leisurely lunch, where talk came and went in low-voiced eddies that had the village for their centre. Sophie heard the vicar and Sir Walter address her husband lightly as Chapin! (She also remembered many women known in a previous life who habitually addressed their husbands as Mr. Such-an-one.) After lunch Lady Conant talked to her explicitly of maternity and that is achieved in cottages and farm-houses remote from aid, and of the duty thereto of the mistress of Pardons.

A gate in a beech hedge, reached across triple lawns, let them out before tea-time into the unkempt south side of their land.

“I want your hand, please,” said Sophie as soon as they were safe among the beech boles and the lawless hollies. “D’you remember the old maid in ‘Providence and the Guitar’ who heard the Commissary swear, and hardly reckoned herself a maiden lady afterward? Because I’m a relative of hers. Lady Conant is—”

“Did you find out anything about the Lashmars?” he interrupted.

“I didn’t ask. I’m going to write to Aunt Sydney about it first. Oh, Lady Conant said something at lunch about their having bought some land from some Lashmars a few years ago. I found it was at the beginning of last century.”

“What did you say?”

“I said, ‘Really, how interesting!’ Like that. I’m not going to push myself forward. I’ve been hearing about Mr. Sangres’s efforts in that direction. And you? I couldn’t see you behind the flowers. Was it very deep water, dear?”

George mopped a brow already browned by outdoor exposures.

“Oh no—dead easy,” he answered. “I’ve bought Friars Pardon to prevent Sir Walter’s birds straying.

A cock pheasant scuttered through the dry leaves and exploded almost under their feet. Sophie jumped.

“That’s one of ’em,” said George calmly.

“Well, your nerves are better, at any rate,” said she. “Did you tell ’em you’d bought the thing to play with?”

“No. That was where my nerve broke down. I only made one bad break—I think. I said I couldn’t see why hiring land to men to farm wasn’t as much a business proposition as anything else.”

“And what did they say?”

“They smiled. I shall know what that smile means some day. They don’t waste their smiles. D’you see that track by Gale Anstey?”

They looked down from the edge of the hanger over a cup-like hollow. People by twos and threes with their Sunday best filed slowly along the paths that connected farm to farm.

“I’ve never seen so many on our land before,” said Sophie. “Why is it?”

“To show us we mustn’t shut up their rights of way.”

“Those cow-tracks we’ve been using cross lots?” said Sophie forcibly.

“Yes. Any one of ’em would cost us two thousand pounds each in legal expenses to close.”

“But we don’t want to,” she said.

“The whole community would fight if we did.”

“But it’s our land. We can do what we like.”

“It’s not our land. We’ve only paid for it. We belong to it, and it belongs to the people—our people they call ’em. I’ve been to lunch with the English too.”

They passed slowly from one bracken-dotted field to the next—flushed with pride of ownership, plotting alterations and restorations at each turn; halting in their tracks to argue, spreading apart to embrace two views at once, or closing in to consider one. Couples moved out of their way, but smiling covertly.

“We shall make some bad breaks,” he said at last.

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