

## Bill Parker's Legacy

end, after some difficulties elsewhere that nobody ever heard about, and he'd meant to bide there till he found how the land lay, and guessed it might be good enough. For "Three Larches" was a freehold property, just outside the bounds of Duchy land, and it had been in the Jordan family time out of mind; so when John dropped, it would belong to his girl, and none else.

**T**HEREFORE, Blades, he took stock of the chances, and worked well, and soon got farmer swearing there never was such a head man afore. And, little by little, Job began to think of Milly in earnest. He made no sign for a good bit, and learned her inside out, and saw she was a partner well suited to a poor man, though not by any means his idea of a beauty; and then, very gradual, and clever, he began to pay court to her—so gradual, in fact, that along of her busy, bustling life Milly hardly realised what he was minded to do for a long while.

But by the time of Parker's arrival things had gone farther than that, and even John himself couldn't but see how it was with his cowman. And first he hated the thought most ferocious, but presently he got to confess that a son-in-law was a certainty sooner or later with such a rare maid as Milly; and then he considered that if Job Blades won his girl's fancy he wouldn't have to part with her, because Blades would bide on and take his own place in the future.

Of course, John Jordan didn't know more about human nature than a mole—his sort never do—and for all he could see, Blades was so good as he was good-looking, and full of goodwill also, and very jealous for "Three Larches."

So he steeled his heart to the change and expected some fine day to hear the young people had come to an understanding. Already he planned the wedding feast, and wondered how many of the neighbours was like to give his girl gifts, and what sort of a dip he'd make in his own mighty small savings on account of the young pair.

But it looked as if nothing was doing for the minute, and, along of the excitement of his new horseman, and Bill's great power of listening, Johnny forgot the matter for a while, though he had

wit to see Mildred was a lot taken up with Blades.

She never praised him much, however, though she did praise Will Parker a lot, and was more friendly to the eye along with him than Job. But Blades knew a deal about the girls; and a good few girls knew a deal about him, for that matter. He was very well content to go slow and steady, and his large experience told him that Milly was hooked, and might be landed when it suited his convenience.

And so they jogged along together very well content, and she waited his time and felt in no great hurry; and the next thing that happened was to William Parker.

For, after he'd been at "Three Larches" six months, he well knew he loved Milly Jordan better'n anything on earth, and was cruel put about in secret to make the discovery. He'd heard of love, of course, as we all do, but never thought twice upon a maiden in his life; and when he found he was smote with the passion and that his hope of happiness lay in this young woman and nowhere else, William went dazed for a month, and his silences grew upon him till Jordan began to fear again for his wits.

**H**E wasn't built to hide much, William wasn't; yet, being overwhelmed with the thing that had overtook him, he strove so hard as he might to be cunning about it, and his natural hatred of speech helped him; but in secret, when along with the horses, he'd give vent to his feelings, and even speak of her blessed name aloud sometimes. That he could safely do, for a fine cart mare, born and bred at "Three Larches," was called "Milly," after the mistress, and Will would, therefore, utter the word when along with the hoss, though in his mind 'twas a blasphemous act to call a dumb creature after such a wonder of a woman.

Of course love made him quick as lightning in certain particulars, and he very soon got to find out that Milly Jordan cared a good bit for Job Blades; but what took a lot longer was to learn exactly how much Job really felt addicted to her.

The men were very good friends, and

Job soon got to hold William much like he held any other useful and trustable machine. He thought him a dull fashion of a chap, with no more wits than please God he should have, and it wasn't till Milly praised Will pretty hearty, and went even so far as to belaud his blue eyes, that Blades thought twice about him.

And then he thought wrong, for judging the girl by other girls, he reckoned Milly was going to set out to make him jealous, if she could, and so push him into a proposal.

Whereas, in truth, no such thought had entered the girl's head. She did like Will, and always liked him till the crash came; but she loved Job Blades, and, of course, knew it.

And then he set himself to the task of offering for her, and chose a fine evening in late June, when the hay was down. For they'd cut early that year, to give aftermath a chance, and was lucky in their weather.

Milly remembered as they set out that a letter had come, and she took it in the house-place and put it on the mantelshelf; and both she and Job had a laugh, because it was for William, and the thought of a letter for him amused 'em, because he weren't much the sort of man people write letters to, and had never been known to get one afore.

And so they went forth into the dimpsey, and unbeknown to the pair of 'em, Will himself watched 'em go. And if there was fire in the heart of Blades, and answering fire in Milly's, there's no doubt at that moment William felt mighty hot also, because he was a lot put about in secret. The things he knew and the things he felt both called for a friend to read 'em and help him; but a man with his hatred of speech didn't have no companionable fellow-man, and, even if he had done, what was tormenting the horseman would have been quite beyond his power to set out in words for another ear.

You see, he knew what was now going to happen very well, and for that matter Job made no mystery about it, and had told Will Parker long since that he was courting Milly; and Will had wished him luck and then—only a month

later—had found that Milly was the only woman on earth for himself.

And, as if that weren't plight enough, he'd got to larn down in the village from one tongue and another that Job was a very gay bird indeed. Some laughed at his ways, and, here and there, a man cussed him good and hard, and swore he was a black sheep and a waster under his fine appearance and pleasant manners.

SO there it was: William felt only too cruel sure Blades would make no young girl happy for life—least of all the girl he loved himself—and he also knew that when Blades asked Milly Jordan to wed him she would say "Yes."

He didn't dream that she'd even seen love in the corner of his own eye; but she was a woman, and so she'd marked it, and liking Will very well, felt sorry for him. And Blades had guessed it also, and was much tickled at the thought.

In fact, when he came to offer for Milly, which he now did do, it was Parker's name rose first to his lips.

They wandered down in the grey light, with the dorbeetles humming round the fir-trees, and, afar off, a goatsucker churning his strange song, which rose and fell from the stony edge of a furze break on a hill. And then the moon hove out of the night mist and sailed over moor-edge so red as a blood-orange, but turned to silver as she rose.

Then Milly saw a glow-worm, like a green jewel of fire, by her foot, and then Job came to business.

"'Tis time I spoke what I be full of," he said, "else I'll miss my market, I reckon, you lovely creature. For Will Parker be gone the same way as me, and what man in his sense wouldn't be bowled over likewise? You're a darling, dinky thing, Milly, and I've been breaking my heart about you this longful time, and God, He knows I won't bide no more and breathe the same air as you if you can't take me. I grant I am not worthy to tie your shoe-lace, nor any other man; but I love the ground you tread, and I love every inch of you, and your brave opinions and all; and if you could but give me a spark of hope I'd walk on

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air and be twice the man I am, and worship you for evermore."

He put his arm round her as he spoke, and her virgin ear didn't feel a word he spoke was wrong, nor guess that such a flowing, humble and fluent speech argued a good bit of practice. To her 'twas all very fine indeed, and just the fashion of offer that might have come from such a good, handsome fellow.

"I love you, Job," she said, "and I guess you very well know it."

But he swore such a marvel of good fortune was beyond his highest hope or dream, and he took her in his arms and blessed his Maker, and kissed her on the mouth. And she kissed him back, and felt a bit uplifted.

"And the moon shining and all," said Milly Jordan.

"No moonshine about our courting," he told her. "I'll worship you under sun and moon for ever, and if any man can be worthy of such a darling wonder, I swear that I'll soon prove to be that man."

They praised each other and compared notes for an hour and a half, and Milly told the pretty truth about her love, and how it growed day by day, and how proud she felt when she found it was returned; and Job lied like truth, and swore that never was known such another as her in his opinion, and that, till now, all girls had been but shadows to his mind, and she was the only wonderful living reality that had made him wake up and know he was alive. And he said how he'd fretted unseen and often couldn't sleep at night.

And he was going to say how she'd robbed him even of his hunger and thirst till he could hardly let down his food. But then he remembered that they ate at the same table, and so knew that falsehood wouldn't carry, and didn't tell it.

**T**HEN the church clock told ten, and Milly was in a maze of wonder to think that three hours had fled; and they went home, to find Will Parker and the master in deep talk.

So interested was Johnny that he forgot to rate them for such late hours, and before his daughter could break her great news, John Jordan told still greater. Or so it seemed to him, for

long he'd guessed how it was going to be with Mildred and his head man.

"Here's an amazing affair," he said. "Let me tell 'em, Bill. Here's Parker been left a thousand pounds! A thousand pounds he's gotten along of his father's brother dying far ways off, and all because Will did the man a good turn long since, and Will thought as his Uncle George had gone dead years and years ago. Yet it happened but last month. And the money's his."

But William weren't half so much interested in his big come-by-chance of cash as John Jordan was. He knew what Milly was going to tell her father, for deep in his bones he'd got the certainty that to-night was the night with 'em; and he'd seen the light in her eyes and the triumph in Job's when they returned together, and he could have told his master what now the farmer learned.

They congratulated Will first, however, and even Job Blades spoke in a new tone, and sounded the note that always creeps into some men's voices when they're talking to a richer man than themselves.

And then Milly said:

"Our news be small to yours, Will; but so it is. Job have offered for me, and I've took him, and there's none so happy as we."

"Unless it's Parker here." Job laughed. "A thousand pounds would go far to heal most wounds. A quid a week for evermore, Will; and you'll pocket it like a gentleman without having to work for it neither."

And Johnny swore it was a poetical sort of night and made 'em all have a drop along with him. So they drank, and the two men wished each other luck; yet such is human nature that Parker went to his rest a lot more sad than happy, while as for Job Blades, along of some twist in the man, his easy triumph with Milly looked nought against Parker's thousand pounds, and he didn't go to sleep thanking the Lord for his own luck, but only envying the other man's.

For Job, along of his spacious tastes, had an amazing respect for money; and the thought of being a capitalist and having a bit to burn, and all the adventures that may come to a man

with cash, and the darned few within the reach of them that ain't got none—these ideas and a sort of bitter wonder as to what a dead-alive chap like William could do with four figures spoiled his sleep a lot.

And if he slept ill, so did Parker. It weren't his money keeping him awake, but the tremendous thought that Milly Jordan had took Job.

Of course he knew that she was going to do it, yet the force of the thing, seen by the light of his hidden knowledge of Blades, made him a very miserable man. And his love was straight also, and far less selfish than male love is wont to be, for he was thinking not of his everlasting loss; he'd never had a ray of hope for that matter, seeing where her mind was set. He weren't thinking of that, but of Milly's future life, and how it was like to be with her when the gilt was off the gingerbread, and Job firm in the saddle at "Three Larches" for ever.

**A** MONTH passed, and all went very well, seemingly. Johnny Jordan was full of fine ideas for Will, and wanted him to put his money in a new tin mine started within two mile of the farm; but the rich horseman didn't see his cash in no such doubtful venture. He stuck it in "gilt-edged," as they say, and was told that his investment would fetch him home five-and-twenty of the best on the first of December next; and no more did he think upon it; for all his thoughts centred on the coming match.

Because, when it got out that Job was going to marry Milly, one or two other maidens opened their mouths, and though Job contrived to keep rumours from flying to "Three Larches," he didn't keep 'em out of Parker's ear, and Will found himself faced with the greatest problem of his existence.

Indeed, it was a pretty good puzzle for a far cleverer man than him, and he lost a stone fretting over it and putting it to himself day and night, when he lay down and when he rose up, at the plough and in the byre.

And 'twas not till a day at the edge of autumn, coming back with Milly, the cart mare, from the farrier's, where he'd took her for a new shoe, that light at

last flashed into William's darkness and shone upon him, like the blaze to Paul.

He was up against this, you see: he knew, firstly, that Milly loved Job very quiet and steadfast; and he knew, secondly, that Job weren't half nor yet a quarter good enough for such a rare fine woman; and, lastly, he knew that he loved Milly himself. And that was both ends and the middle of his problem.

And, in his painstaking way, Will arrived at this conclusion first, and next he arrived at how that conclusion might be reached; and 'twas the great thought of reaching it that took him coming up along from the forge.

The first thing was to break off the match for Milly's sake, which meant, of course, that Milly would hate him for evermore. But this had got to happen anyway, and he thought he'd better bear her hate than know she was like to be sorrowing. For, if you love a person, their hate be less to bear than their grief.

So he faced that and set himself to break the match.

And as for how to do it decent and in order, he got a thought far keener than ever you would have expected in such a man—a most masterly idea that doubtless only great love would have power to quicken.

And after the thought came, William chewed over it for another week, and then—two months before the banns was due to go up for the first time of axing—he struck.

Him and Job was pulling turnips at the time, walking down the rows side by side, and heaving the great roots out of the ground for the cart to fetch next day; and sitting presently under the lew side of the hedge, eating their dinner after noon, talk fell on Job's marriage and the alterations he ordained to make at "Three Larches" afterwards.

He took his luck amazing calm, and Will knew that the man didn't really think he'd done a very clever stroke, but just reckoned that Milly and the farm were about good enough and no more. And he'd also gathered that, though he could act love easy enough, Job Blades didn't show no adoring passion for his future wife when out of sight of her.

And so he began casual, about love

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and cash, and so on, and axed the other what he counted to be the best thing in the world.

"**M**ONEY," said Job instanter. "There ain't two opinions in a sane mine."

"Would you put it higher than love of a woman?" went on Parker; and the other laughed.

"With money," he said, "you can love where you like. 'Tis the golden key opens the door quickest."

Which showed his bent of mind.

"You did ought to know what money means with a thousand pounds behind you," he went on, and then William, showing great astonishment, spoke again.

"Good Lord! Would you set your wondrous fortune, to win such a woman as Milly Jordan, lower than my thousand pounds?" he axed; and Job pointed out how it looked to him.

"I would," he answered, "because ready money in a strong hand is the power that wins all else. Between you and me, there's a lot finer than Milly in the world, and though even such a farm as this sounds all right to a beggar, you've got to consider the waiting and the doubtful side. Johnny's good for another ten years, and the turnover here at best ain't nothing to write home about. It would always be hand-to-mouth—a certainty, if you like, but a small certainty. I'm very fond of Milly, and I shall run straight after I'm wed, and all that; but if I had a thousand quid in my pocket instead of just nothing at all, I shouldn't be messing about here waiting for dead men's shoes and milking cows."

"What would you do?" inquired William.

"I'd beat it," answered Job. "I'd go to Canada or else Australia, and take up land and start afresh. There's a good deal I'd like to forget, and though I'm not saying a word against Milly, yet I feel that way; and why the mischief you can stick here doing labourer's work with a thousand pounds in your pocket is a mystery."

"Very interesting," replied the horse-man, "very interesting indeed, Blades. And you mustn't think I've forgot my manners to ax these private questions,

because it may surprise you to hear I think a lot of Milly myself."

"I know you do," replied t'other; "such a lot of her that I wonder you can bide here now your hope's dead. Lucky I offered afore your thousand blew in, or she might have chose you."

"Hope's dead as you say; or it might be truer to answer there never was no hope," replied Will. "But you can often do a person a good turn, though they be powerless to do you one."

Job's eyes brightened at that.

"If you be minded to give her a fine wedding present, let it be cash, Will," he begged. "The backbone of matrimony is a bit in the bank."

"No," answered Parker, "I ban't minded to give her no present; but I'd very much like to see her wedding with you broke off, Job, if it could be."

"The hell you would!" answered Blades. "And what have I done to you?"

"**N**OTHING," answered the other man. "But 'tis what you'd do to her. No need to get hot. I'm talking serious, and I don't mean no harm whatever to you; but I know all about you—not that you've ever made any secrets to me, because you knew I was a trustable man and kept confidence. But there it is. I'm so certain as death you was never made to shine as a husband, unless you pick a female strong enough to master you, which you're too downy to do. And Milly Jordan ain't going to be happy after six months with you, and that's why I'd put a spoke in your wheel if I could."

"Well, as you cannot, I may tell you you're a damned, insolent, interfering fool; and when I reign here, the first to be fired will be you!" burst out Job, showing a good bit of indignation. "And if you say a word against me to her or her father, I'll have you up for libel!"

"I ain't going to say one word against you, Blades, because it ain't my place to do so, and she wouldn't believe an angel from Heaven if the creature flew down and told her the truth. And, anyway, truth's a libel so often as not. I'm saying nought to them; but I'm saying this to you, and don't you show no more temper till you've heard me.

I think so properly bad of you as a husband for that woman, and feel so terrible anxious for her to live in peace and contentment, that I'll give you money to be off your bargain. If you can put money higher than her, then there's no insolence in offering you money for that purpose."

Blades calmed down immediate.

"Now you're talking," he said. "But this I'll remind you, William: if you was to buy me out and she knew it, she'd never forgive you; and if you think by making it worth my while to clear, you'll be getting your money's worth presently out of her, you're wrong. She ain't that sort."

"She ain't that sort—far from it—and I think no such thing," replied t'other. "She's not for me, but I'd sooner stand her everlasting hate than you should wed her—you being what you are and, on your showing, setting money higher than her."

"Then it's only a question of how much," said Job.

"No question at all," said Parker. "I ban't the sort to haggle about a woman's happiness. You know what I've got—a thousand pounds—and if you'll cut your stick you shall have the lot."

"And the December dividender?" asked Job, licking his lips.

"Yes—that also. I've looked into it, because I've been hopeful for some time you might prove that sort of man. The shares shall be transferred into your name and the money will be yours, so long as you keep wise enough to cleave to it."

"Good lad!" answered Blades. "It's a go, William! A great upheaval, but like to suit my book better'n any plan you could imagine. And I owe you one for this; and if ever the chance comes to pay you back, I'll do so."

**T**HEY went to their swedes again then, and all fell out as Parker hoped. The details took mighty little time, and, a fortnight afore the banns went up, Job Blades had vanished. He didn't come indoors to his breakfast one morning, and hue and cry failed to find a button of the man. Nor could his old mother in the next parish throw any light upon it. And Milly

said he had been murdered, and took on terrible, and William watched and suffered and prayed for time to pass, but said nought.

Then the man's mother let it be known that he was alive and had gone out of England; after which the girl's native sense conquered, and she knew pretty well that Job had jilted her, and that was his beastly way of doing it.

'Twas a nine days' wonder, and the one to suffer most was poor Milly, who felt herself disgraced afore the nation for a bit. Her father comforted her, but he was a good bit shaken himself, and Will Parker had the weight of the farm on his shoulders for a fortnight till the old man pulled himself together.

Of course the happy thought was that Blades, being such a man, his sweetheart had made a merciful escape, and friends didn't hesitate to point that out; for when Job was sped, naturally a good deal about him came to be known that folk for decency had kept hid afore. So the worst passed over for Milly, and, being the brave sort, she stood up to her trouble presently and made shift to carry on.

And then a funny difficulty arose for William Parker, because them that do good by stealth often find themselves in quite as much of a mess as them that do evil; and presently Johnny Jordan axed him about his money.

"Your dividender did ought to have come along, Will," he said. "And what be you going to do with it? Never was a man with less ideas for spending money than you."

And Will, caught like that, didn't see his danger, but thought to give a safe answer.

"I ain't got it yet," he said, "and if it do come, I shall put it out to goody, I expect."

"If it do come!" cried Johnny. "What a man!" And he wouldn't let the subject drop, feeling such a zany as William over cash did ought to be protected. Because a thousand pounds is a lot of money to a poor chap, and the fame of William's legacy had got abroad.

So, much to Parker's vexation, Jordan nosed into it, and told Milly next time she was to the post office to inquire about the War Loan. And she done so, and heard the dividender was long overdue,

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and must have gone wrong in the post. And she told Will, and he said he'd inquire about it; but he felt very awkward, because lies and pretences made the man uncomfortable.

He fretted a lot, then came to a decision with himself, and reckoned to leave "Three Larches" after Christmas. He love Milly more than ever when he saw the way she mastered her grief and carried on. And so he gave notice, much to the sorrow of farmer, though far worse than Johnny's vexation it was to hear his daughter say frankly that she was sorry, too, and would miss him. But go he knew he must, owing to his opinions of honour.

He felt, you see, when he'd paid for her freedom from Job Blades, that he'd cut the ground from under his own feet also for good and all.

"Because," argued Parker with himself, "a man can't offer for a woman after he's done what I've done. You don't buy your partner in a Christian land!"

Which showed how little he knew of the upper people, of course.

**T**HEN came the wondrous letter from New York, in the United States; and chance willed that her for whom it was written got it when nobody was by to see, and she went faintly and falled in a chair at sight of it, for, of course, she knew the penmanship.

Milly felt half in a mind to burn the thing unread; but that was more than any female could do under the circumstances, so she went over the barefaced letter and learned the facts. And, strange to say, Job Blades told nothing much but the naked truth. Job wrote that William Parker thought he was not the right husband for Milly, and how he had grown to feel rather doubtful about it himself. And then he told that Will felt so strongly on the subject that Job couldn't but fear he must be right—Parker being such a very sensible man. And then he told how Will had offered him his thousand pounds, and the twenty-five dividender, to give her up. And, lastly, he said that, for everybody's sake, he reckoned the idea was a very clever one. And he hoped she'd forgive both him and William. And for his own part he said that America was a

fine place, and he was going down south to grow oranges, or else north to hunt fur.

Then he wished her luck and a good husband, and ended by admitting that he was really so fond of the girls in general that he felt sure she might have had a good bit to disquiet her presently if she'd took him.

Milly kept the letter to herself for a week, and then, one morn, after breakfast, she showed it to her father, and he raged most furious against both men, and thanked God that Parker would soon be gone also. In fact, he was for rushing out to give Will a bit of his mind that moment; but she stopped him there.

"Think twice," she said. "Think what he did, and also what he lost and kept dumb about it. You leave that man to me," she said. "I'll handle him and tell him all he needs to know. The point of view will be everything in a case like this, and there's something I want to know, too—and I will know, and only he can tell me."

Then she went in the stable, where Will was just putting the driving hoss in the market-cart, to go down to Chaggyford about a few things. And she said: "Bide a minute, and I'll don my hat and jacket and ride along with you."

So he bided. Nobody will ever know exactly how it went between 'em, or how the trap kept on the road, either; for when he heard about Job's letter, William gave up wanting to be alive, and wished the earth would open and let him go under.

"You done it for your own reasons," she said. "And that's all there is to it. And though some women would want to scratch your eyes out, I do not, yet. If Job Blades reckoned that one thousand and twenty-five pounds was better worth while than me, I'm a gainer so well as him by his taking it. And there's only one more thing to say on this shocking subject, William Parker, and that's for you to say. And, silent as the grave though you choose to be, I demand an answer."

**H**E stroked the horse's ears with his whip, and paltered, and put it off.

"So long as I be forgiven, 'tis no odds for that," he said.

"Forgiven or not forgiven, the question is why did you fling away all your big money to keep me from Job Blades? I will know, William."

"Because—because I wanted for your future to be all good," he said.

"And what did my future matter to you?" she asked.

He looked down at her, where she sat beside him, and saw tears in her brown eyes, and hungered terrible to dry 'em.

"Because I'd never have had no more peace if you'd been an unhappy woman," he said.

"But that's—that's love, William," answered Milly, glancing up at him for half a second.

"Think nothing of it," he said; "nothing of it at all."

"I know the size of what you've done, and never did I guess any sane man could have rose to such a dangerous and foolish deed," she went on, sniffing a bit.

"I'll get out of your sight in a week," he answered, "and if you can only forgive me, I'll go content, Mildred Jordan."

She didn't answer that, and they trotted a couple of miles in silence.

"Yet I wouldn't say I was wishful for you to do it, Will," she said in a small voice.

"Do what, my dear?" he asked.

"Leave 'Three Larches,'" she

answered. And then silence fell between 'em again for a long time.

That was going down-along; and such is the endless astonishment of human nature that, by the time they was coming up-along, Will Parker found himself in Heaven, and the woman content enough also. 'Twas a case where female understanding and power to weight up a man's motives came out in a very triumphant fashion, and brought a ray of sunshine for two very good people. And Johnny showed a flash of wit also, for when he learned about it and blessed 'em and forgave the horseman, and heard Parker say, "Thank God for all His wonders," he answered:

"Yes, that's all right, but seen with the long vision, William, you've got to thank Job Blades also. He wrote that letter on your account, so give the devil his due."

Will throbbed at such a thought, yet he was made of sense, and he couldn't deny the ugly truth of it, no more could Milly.

"Not that he guessed for a moment what would come of his shameful letter," she said.

"'Tis a case of throwing your bread upon the waters and seeing it return to you," explained John Jordan. "A very fine thing to happen, Will; and I wish it happened oftener to me."

## FEMININE LEAD

**B**RING me my paintbox;  
Curl up my hair, and while I red my lips  
Lay out my frocks—  
I'll choose the loveliest to wear to-night.  
Where are my rings?  
Fasten my pearls, and touch my ears with chypre,  
For these few things  
Are all I have to help me play a part.  
Dramatic, yes;  
Flaunted with courage and with artistry,  
They'll serve, I guess.  
. . . I'll never let him know he broke my heart.

D. M.



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Also :

**Cosmo Hamilton**

**Eden Phillpotts**

**P. G. WODEHOUSE**

And Others

The door rattled and a deep voice called: "Betty, I want to come in."

"You can say what you have to say from there."

"I cannot. Open at once or I will have this door broken down."

# *The Valley of*

# DRAGONS

*By*

BRUCE NORMAN

**I**F adventure came always to the adventurous it would never have come to John Anthony, who certainly did nothing to encourage it. Yet it descended upon him as suddenly as a happening in a dream. Indeed, it seemed to have its roots in a dream, for it began one sunlit evening when he awoke from a deep sleep on a mound of clover. He awoke in a cobbled courtyard a thousand years old. An old grey tower leaned over him, and from a window in the tower a girl looked down on him with radiant golden hair.

John Anthony was twenty-six years old, and the eight years since he had left school he had devoted to the interests of Messrs. Duke & Russell, Shipping Agents, of Finsbury Pavement, who found him a good, reliable worker. He lived in a bed-sitting-room in Bloomsbury, and saved money, and was on the verge of getting engaged to a quiet, cheerful, nice-looking girl whose name was Helen.

On the verge—

Probably he would have been engaged and on the verge of getting married by this time if it had not been for his friend Sharrow.

Sharrow was three years older than John Anthony, and romantic and adventurous. He had had a dozen different jobs, some of which he had abandoned, and some of which had abandoned him. But he always contrived to have money. He had travelled and seen life, and occasionally he would return to descend on John Anthony, untidy, disreputable and stimulating as ever. He would lead him round the corner to the nearest pub (left to his own devices, John Anthony preferred the Y.M.C.A. to any pub) and over a pot of beer he would talk magnificently of adventures and perils, of women and romance.

**J**OHAN ANTHONY admired and half feared him. He was unsettling. He smiled patronisingly and called him "old-stick-in-the-mud."

"I look upon you as one of the world's

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fixtures," he said indulgently. "Always in the same place. You'll marry this girl friend of yours and settle down—and there you'll be, for life."

Which was, perhaps, the reason why John Anthony had not settled down. He might have been quite satisfied with his prospects if Sharrow had not come to make them seem intolerably dull.

At all events it was Sharrow who finally dragged him out of his accustomed groove to spend his holiday in Austria; and it was Sharrow who was really responsible for everything that followed.

Sharrow fell romantically ill at Salzburg with a touch of his old malaria, and refused emphatically to allow John Anthony to linger by his bedside.

"Not on your life! You carry on, my lad, and make the most of your opportunities. In any case"—and here he grinned—"there's a dazzling brunette in the next room who gave me a kind look yesterday. I dare say she wouldn't be above holding my hand. Off you go! We'll meet at Ischl in a week's time."

John Anthony shrugged his shoulders and went. Dazzling brunettes never came his way, but they were the sort of thing that happened constantly to Sharrow. He set off with a rucksack on his back to walk alone through the hills and lakes of the Salzkammergut, and on the afternoon of the second day went lame with a blister on his heel. He was on a level, dusty road, and his map told him that the nearest village was a good many miles ahead.

He sat down to rest, and a cart drawn by oxen and loaded with clover lumbered past.

He did his best to talk to the carter, but was handicapped by the fact that he hardly knew a dozen words of the language. All he got from the sleepy peasant was an amiable "*Grüß Gott*." So in desperation he clambered up behind the cart without anyone's "By-your-leave," concluding that it must be going somewhere. The load of clover yielded like a feather bed, and it was a hot, dry day.

**N**OW, blinking, he was awake again in the courtyard of an ancient castle, gold and red and purple in the setting sun; and a girl

with vivid golden hair was looking down at him.

Quite an appreciable time elapsed before John Anthony could persuade himself that this was real, and not the continuation of a dream. The courtyard was deserted. The big, square tower, rising above its shadows, presented a face of light and a face of darkness, two contrasted lozenges, side by side; but stray, reflected beams crept round to disturb the face of darkness, and one of them fell on the golden hair of the girl at the window.

John Anthony could not see her very clearly. He guessed rather than knew that her face was as lovely as her hair. His cart, from which the oxen had been removed, was drawn up in a corner of the courtyard, and the tower was on the other side. The window was perhaps fifty feet above him. So that there was quite a distance between them, but not so great a distance that he could not have heard her if she had spoken.

She did not speak, however. She stood at the window regarding him in silence, and John Anthony, not knowing the language, had nothing to say.

The courtyard was very quiet, but from the depths of the castle came remote, mysterious sounds of gypsy music, like the voice of another world. And he felt, indeed, that he was an intruder in another world. What must she think of him. Was she smiling?

He must look a pretty good fool, sprawled there on the clover, with his rucksack by his side.

She did not stay there very long. After a little interval she vanished, leaving the courtyard a darker place, and John Anthony came down to earth out of a fairy tale. He supposed she had gone to tell someone he was there, and wondered uncomfortably what he should say, and how he should say it, not knowing the language.

But now something else happened to disturb the fairy tale. A strident sound, like the note of a mis-blown bugle, cut through the still air and was followed by the muffled roar of an engine.

A car had drawn up outside the castle. Instantly there was a stir of life. Figures appeared amid the shadows of the courtyard, and the big gates at the

base of the tower swung noisily apart. Peering down from his vantage point, John Anthony watched a big car drive in. A door in the castle opened, and two men dressed as lackeys, running out, stood waiting in respectful attitudes for the occupant of the car to descend.

He was a round little man in a frock coat and a top hat. He stepped out briskly, hurried across the cobbles, and vanished through the lighted doorway, followed by the two lackeys carrying rugs and bags. The car backed out of the courtyard, and one or two attendants vanished into the shadows, leaving John Anthony to reflect upon the episode.

And while he was doing so a voice from behind him called softly :

"Hallo !"

HE turned quickly. Set in the grey stone wall just above his cart was a barred window which, as he now saw, had opened. Someone was regarding him. He made out a round, friendly face. And the voice said in an urgent undertone :

"*Amerikaner, nicht wahr ?*"

John Anthony had discovered enough German to understand this. He replied, mechanically adopting the same cautious tone :

"*Nein, English.*"

"English ? So——"

The person at the window hesitated. He could now see her more clearly. She was wearing a neckless blouse without sleeves, such as the peasant girls wore. He guessed that she must be a servant. She seemed to be taken aback by his information, but after a pause she spoke rapidly and unintelligibly in German.

He shook his head.

She pointed downwards. Beneath the window, in the corner of the courtyard, was a door. John Anthony nodded brightly. Clutching his rucksack, he slipped cautiously down from the wagon and waited.

There was a muffled drawing of bolts. The door opened slowly. The servant girl looked hastily to left and right, and beckoned to him to enter.

They stood in darkness at the bottom of a stone circular staircase. Here, within the precincts of the castle, the sound of music came quite thunderously to his ears. The door was closed and

bolted. A rough, warm hand grasped his. A voice in his ear whispered :

"*Bitte, mitkommen.*"

Nothing like this had ever happened to the unadventurous John Anthony. He was being led through darkness into mysteries. He would have liked to inquire the reason of this caution, this secrecy, but could inquire nothing. At the top of the stairs a long, low passage was lit by a single oil-lamp hanging from the ceiling. The music reached them only faintly. The passage, running beyond the oil-lamp, lost itself in the shadows ; but at the end of it, and at the head of another flight of stairs, the girl stopped and looking upwards called softly :

"Gretl ! *Schnell !*"

John Anthony saw that there was a trap-door above them. It opened and a face peered down. There was a rapid exchange of words. His guide was peering fearfully in the direction of the staircase. She said something, and a light wooden chair was lowered from the trap-door to the floor.

He gathered that he must mount on this and scramble through the trap-door. Never was any man more nearly distracted by the questions he was unable to ask. He could only obey and help his conductress, a most substantial young woman, to clamber up after him. And now he found himself under the sloping, grey slate roof of the castle.

A SECOND servant girl, holding a candle, looked at him with bright, inquisitive eyes, but did not speak. She led the way hastily along a low, encumbered attic heavy with dust, and at the end they came to a small, irregular opening in what seemed to be a wooden wall. John Anthony saw that a portion of boarding had been removed, revealing a black space. Beyond this space was a stone wall on which the girl knocked three times with her clenched fist.

There was a pause, and then a creak.

A part of the wall itself swung aside, and light came brilliantly through from a room that lay beyond. Someone was holding back a heavy tapestry. John Anthony saw a slim, white hand, and had a glimpse of vivid, golden hair.

The first girl passed quickly through

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into the room. John Anthony followed, and receiving no invitation to enter lingered in the narrow space between the walls. The second girl joined him, pulling the boards into place behind them. Meanwhile there was a rapid buzz of conversation in the room of which his unaccustomed ear could distinguish only the word "*Engländer.*"

Then the tapestry was withdrawn again, and he found himself face to face with the owner of the golden hair.

He saw now that she was as lovely as his highest hopes had pictured her in those moments when she looked down at him from the tower. She was quite small. A white silk wrap, drawn tightly, revealed her slenderness. Her hair was like a fabled treasure. And her face, with big eyes and full lips, was a face to set poets sighing of Helen, to set Sharrow gloating over "ravishing blondes," and to arouse in John Anthony a feeling of adoration most uncommon in this talkie-ridden age.

But her expression was not very encouraging. She looked coldly and suspiciously at him, and said, with the soft drawl of the Southern States:

"I'd like to know just who you are."

John Anthony wriggled slightly in his cramped quarters. He was an embarrassed and bewildered and adoring young man, but he also possessed the stocky, independent qualities of his English middle-class descent.

"Well, I'd like to know who you are," he said rather coldly. "I'd like to know why I've been brought here like this."

"Why did you come to the castle, anyway?"

"I—I fell asleep on that cart."

"Oh!"

She was disappointed, as well as surprised. After a little pause she laughed and said:

"Well, you'd better come in."

John Anthony scrambled through a narrow rectangle into the room itself. She pushed, and a slab of stone swung softly into place, fitting so tightly that one might hardly guess at its mobility. The tapestry hung down and hid it from sight.

She stood regarding John Anthony, and smiled, perhaps despite herself, for with his shabby grey flannel trousers,

his rucksack, and his stiff, fair hair standing on end, he was a disarming sight.

SHE said rather wistfully:

"I was expecting someone. You're sure you haven't brought a message, or—or anything?"

John Anthony shook his head. He guessed that he was in a lower room of the tower, and was rather overawed by its magnificence. Thick rugs and tapestries and queer old furniture induced an impression of unreality in his mind. And she was smiling at him, and that was more unbelievable still.

"No," he said regretfully. "I haven't. I—I would have, like a shot."

He found it necessary to account for himself, and did so, rather breathlessly—all about Sharrow and the walking tour, and the blister on his heel. She said something to one of the maids, who stood attentively in a corner of the room, and the girl turned to a side table on which was a flagon of wine.

"You'll be needing a drink after all your adventures," she said, half laughing. And then she said seriously: "Well, you're a queer person to have walked in on this affair."

"I'd like to know what the affair is," said John Anthony.

She looked doubtfully at him, and did not reply. The maid brought him a tall, thin-stemmed goblet of wine and he drank it down. He really had needed a drink.

"For instance," he said, feeling better, "I should like to know what this castle is, and where I am. You see, being asleep——"

"This is the Schloss Drachenthal. The Drachenthal is the valley outside—the valley of dragons, as it's called. I expect you've heard of it."

"I've seen the name in the guide book," John Anthony said.

"Well, it's a tiny independent principality under Austria—like Lichtenstein. And my husband's the ruling prince. I'm Elizabeth, Princess von Drachenthal."

John Anthony was sipping another glass of wine. He was now feeling so full of confidence that even the word "princess" did not daunt him. He said politely:

"You speak very good English for a—  
a foreigner."

"But I'm not a foreigner. I come  
from Virginia. I'm a Hewlett," she  
said.

Then John Anthony remembered.  
The Hewletts were among the most  
fabulously rich of American families,  
and the beautiful Betty Hewlett was  
an heiress in her own right. Her  
runaway marriage with a foreign prince  
in the face of bitter family opposition,  
had occasioned a scandal, a sensation,  
and a front-page double-column news-  
paper romance. It had all happened  
only a few months before.

"So now you know," she said.

"Yes," said John Anthony. "But  
—"

Suddenly her face changed. She  
stood erect, with her hands clenched,  
and it seemed to him that something  
like a flame of defiance was burning in  
her slim form.

"Well!" she cried. "Surely you  
can guess the rest. I married him  
because I loved him. My family didn't  
want me to. They were right and I  
was wrong. I trusted him! But he  
wanted my money, nothing else.  
And now here I am, a prisoner in this  
castle—in this tower!"

"Yes——" said John Anthony.

**H**E did not understand, but still he  
was not surprised. He had half  
expected this. A princess in a  
tower is, after all, a proper part of every  
fairy story, and before he could say any-  
thing more the story moved on. One of  
the maids, who had been standing by a  
window, let fall the curtain and came  
excitedly towards them, saying some-  
thing in German.

The Princess turned and went to the  
window, and John Anthony, following,  
looked over her shoulder. The window  
gave on to the front of the castle; the  
Valley of Dragons lay before them  
clothed in a purple mist, and far away  
twin peaks, like sentinels, were starkly  
silhouetted against the red outer rim of  
the sunset.

But it was not this magnificent and  
sombre prospect that had excited the  
little maid. She was pointing down-  
wards to where, a short distance from the

castle, an orange glow lit the shadows.  
A procession was approaching. A line of  
torches like a chain of fire was advancing  
slowly up the hill.

"So——" said the Princess Elizabeth.

She drew back from the window, and  
John Anthony saw that her face was  
grave. But then she laughed. "Do  
you know what that means? To-night  
we are celebrating. Do you know that  
we have an uncrowned king beneath  
our roof? The uncrowned king of  
Adria! And to-morrow he may be  
crowned, if only I will agree!"

John Anthony stared. "You?"

"Yes, I. I! Isn't that thrilling?  
I hold history in my hands! I can  
make a revolution in Adria and perhaps  
change the map of Europe—who  
knows?"

"But how——?"

"How?" She looked at him and  
laughed. "Money! The almighty  
dollar! How else do you suppose?"

So that was it. John Anthony was  
seeing clearer every minute. It was,  
after all, the most modern sort of fairy  
tale. He regarded the small, resolute  
face.

"And you're not going to?"

"No!" she cried. "No, no, no!"

And then her attitude changed. She  
held up a warning hand and stood  
listening, with her head a little on one  
side. Someone was approaching the  
room from below.

They heard feet heavily ascending the  
stairs. The visitor evidently did not  
consider it necessary to knock. The  
next indication of his presence was the  
rattle of a key in the door. Then  
the door itself rattled, and John Anthony  
noticed that it was heavily bolted on  
the inside. A deep voice called:

"Betty, I wish to come in."

"What do you want?"

"I must speak to you."

She had moved a little way across the  
room, and now, as though out of breath,  
she leaned against a table with her hands  
at her sides.

"You can say what you have to say  
from there."

"I cannot!" The sudden harshness  
of the voice caused a pricking up John  
Anthony's spine. "Kindly open at  
once, or I will have this door broken  
down."

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THE Princess shrugged her shoulders. She was pale but quite calm. She looked about her swiftly, and crossing the room on tiptoe drew back the tapestry over the hidden door and beckoned to John Anthony. She must have pressed or pulled something, for a moment later the rectangle of stone swung quietly aside.

John Anthony carefully picked up his hat and rucksack. As he stood by the opening she bent forward, so that her lips almost touched his ear.

"Would you help me if you could?"

"Yes," said John Anthony.

"Then wait. Perhaps you can. I must talk to you before you go."

He nodded and huddled down between the walls, and the door closed.

There must have been a ventilator or some other inlet in the wall, for he found that he could hear sounds from within the room with an unexpected clarity. He heard the door open, and the rapid entry of heavy feet. A voice said gruffly:

"You haf kept me waiting a very long time."

"I was changing."

"So! If you were changing into a *toilette* to come down and entertain your guests I do not complain."

"Oh? So that's what you're after? You know perfectly well that I was doing nothing of the kind."

"Then I wish you to do so immediately. It is abominable that His Majesty should be under our roof and neglected by his hostess. I have said that you are unwell, but I do not think he believes me. You must come down at once."

"Must!" She laughed. "So you're willing to let me out if I'll entertain your fellow-conspirators! Well, Fritz, I give you fair warning. I'll come if you want. I'll grace the party. And I'll walk out of the castle first chance I get, and you'll never see me again."

"So that is what you would do?" He paused, and then said in an altered voice: "Do you by any chance know a gentleman named Hugo Barnes?"

There was a long silence. When next she spoke her voice had dropped almost to a whisper.

"Hugo Barnes? What do you know about him?"

"You know him, yes? He is an American gentleman. I think he was a very great friend of yours before you married me. And perhaps you have written to him—yes?—not so long ago?"

"Well?"

"He has been in Austria, this American gentleman. He has been in the Salzkammergut, quite near to here. And this morning—it is very sad!—he had an accident to his car."

"What!"

"He must have driven it very badly. Perhaps he was drunk. I think American gentlemen are often drunk. The car fell over a precipice into a stream. It has been found by the police, but there is no body found. They do not know if he has been washed away by the stream, or if he is still alive!"

"You beast! What have you done with him?"

"Ah! Perhaps he is now in the mud at the bottom of the river, or perhaps——"

"You've got him! Let go of my arm!"

THERE were sounds of movement. John Anthony was also moving. He was pressing his hands feverishly against the stone, and if he could have opened the secret door would certainly have made his presence felt. But the door, perhaps fortunately for everyone, would not yield.

The man said in a low, threatening voice:

"Betty, this is enough! It has gone far enough. You shall not play with me any more. We have been forced to change our plans. His Majesty must leave at once for Adria, and he must have funds. Dr. Kurz is here, and will arrange everything. But we must have your signature, on a letter and on a cheque. We must have fifty thousand pounds."

She said breathlessly:

"So you must move at once, must you? I saw a procession coming up the hill."

"Yes. The local people have discovered that His Majesty is here, I do not know how. To-morrow all the world will know. There is no time to lose."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then, perhaps, your friend Hugo Barnes——"

"How do I know you're not lying?"

"You must think for yourself. At least you see that I know a great deal about him."

And then she cried desperately:

"Oh, God, what am I to do?"

It was at this intense moment that John Anthony, who had been listening with boiling emotions, had his attention diverted. Suddenly the black darkness in which he was crouching was broken by a spot of light that travelled over the stone wall. The light came through a hole in the wooden partition on the other side of him, and it was accompanied by a sound of movement in the attic.

He rose cautiously and peeped through the hole.

Two men had entered the attic by way of the trap-door. One bore a candle, and both wore the plain black clothes of gentlemen's servants. They advanced by the light of the candle to a pile of lumber against the far side of the attic, talking in undertones. One of the men went down on his knees and rummaged under the pile, and presently he emerged with a bottle and a couple of glasses.

He produced a corkscrew from the tail of his coat and, with a hospitable smile, filled the glasses. The two men gravely drank a toast.

John Anthony, who was not familiar with the ways of servants in big houses, found this very interesting. Evidently the man who played host was in the habit of using this stronghold for the entertainment of his friends. They chatted for a few minutes; then the lackey, who seemed to be in a hurry, bowed very correctly, smiled, and departed through the trap-door, leaving the other man alone.

He sat down, lit a cigarette, and began to read a newspaper. John Anthony watched him and reflected. Certain quite desperate thoughts were moving in his mind. Then he gave his attention once more to the scene in the room.

Apparently the discussion was drawing to a close. He heard the Princess say:

"Well, I'll come down anyway. I won't promise about the money. I've

got to think. I won't pretend I trust you. You're a treacherous beast. But we'll see."

"I hope you will think quickly, or else, perhaps, I shall ask for even more money. I do not like that even my wife should call me names."

THE heavy footsteps went towards the door, which closed behind them. John Anthony heard the bolts being drawn on the inside. A moment later the door in the wall opened.

He stepped out quickly, with a hand held warningly to his lips, and did not speak until the door had closed.

"There's a man in the attic," he said. She did not seem very surprised.

"A servant? There's one of them's got his own private speakeasy in there. My maid told me."

"They don't know about"—he jerked his head—"about the door?"

"No. You can't tell anything from the attic. The boards all look the same. And the door in the wall was made a long time ago and forgotten about. It was all cemented up. But there's an old servant in the place who remembered, and he's been a good friend to me."

She had uttered the explanation mechanically. Evidently her thoughts were elsewhere.

Now she said: "But listen. You must go. I'm afraid there's nothing you can do. I wanted you to take a message to someone, but it's no use now."

"I heard," said John Anthony. "Your friend. Do you think they've got him here, in the castle?"

She smiled rather bitterly.

"So you heard? I'd forgotten. I wouldn't be surprised if they'd got him here. There's room enough."

"Do you think one could find him if—supposing one were togged up in a servant's clothes?"

She seemed to be quite startled by the idea.

"Why! What do you mean?"

John Anthony took a pace forward. His eyes were glowing and his face was flushed. He looked really heroic without being in the least aware of the fact.

"If it *can* be done, I'll do it," he said. "But that fellow may clear out any



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minute. There's no time to lose. I must hurry."

He did not think that he was proposing to do things quite unprecedented in his uneventful life. He had forgotten that this was a fairy tale, and only remembered that it was real. And this youthful impetuosity aroused the youth in her. She said nothing, but her face was suddenly radiant. She reached out, and for a moment clasped his hand.

She went quickly to a locked drawer and returned with a small, pearl-handled revolver.

"I was keeping this, in case— But you may need it. Ask your way to the kitchens—*die Küche*—and ask for Ignaz. Give him this." She pressed a handkerchief into his hand. "He'll help if he can. He knows everything that's going on in the castle. He speaks a little English. You oughtn't to be noticed, because there are a lot of strange servants in the castle to-night. And if you should manage to rescue Hugo, find some way of letting me know when I come downstairs. I won't care for anything if I know he's safe."

She swung the door open and John Anthony turned towards it.

"But take care of yourself!"

"I'm going to enjoy myself," John Anthony said.

It occurred to him to wonder, in a random way, if Sharrow, in his vast experience, had ever known what it felt like to hold a man up at the point of a gun. It was thrilling but not really eventful.

The manservant, a plumpish, comfortable man, was too startled by his stealthy appearance, and too impressed by his weapon, to make any attempt at resistance. He protested bitterly when at length he understood what was required of him, but he obeyed. John Anthony bound and gagged him carefully with a pair of braces, a belt and a woollen scarf. It was a great relief that he had surrendered so easily because he could never have shot him.

The black suit was an abominable fit.

HE dropped down into the passage, letting the trap-door close after him, and made for the flight of stairs which he had noticed before.

They led him to the intersecting point between two broad corridors, running at right angles; and now a sound of great uproar, the shouting of many voices, reached his ears. He went along the shorter corridor and looked out of a window at the end.

A great crowd of people was gathered in front of the castle. Cheers mingled with the sound of music. Torches blazed into the night. Evidently the people of the Drachenthal were greatly excited by the presence of uncrowned royalty (Adria? The King of Adria? Where the deuce was Adria? John Anthony wondered) in their midst.

He turned back towards the stairs, and as he did so someone approached. It was another servant. John Anthony shrank within his loose-hanging black suit. But he need not have worried. The man nodded amiably at him and passed on. There must be plenty of strangers within the castle that night.

When he reached the ground floor he received confirmation of this. He found his way to the door of what was evidently a very big room, and listened to the tumult of voices within. Then the tumult died and one voice was left speaking. Some sort of meeting was going on. Servants passed in and out with trays of liqueurs and big dishes of *hors d'œuvres*.

John Anthony buttonholed one of them and said politely, "*Die Küche, bitte schön,*" thereby employing almost all the German he knew. The man stared. "*Die Küche? Also, komm' mit.*" He followed him down into the depths of the castle, into the immense kitchens, where a good deal of activity was in progress.

And here, directing operations, was an old, white-haired man, immaculately dressed, who answered to the name of Ignaz.

Old Ignaz, in the course of a long life, must have seen many disturbances. He did not appear unduly surprised by the sudden arrival of John Anthony, babbling urgently and flourishing a handkerchief. He gave him a keen glance and took him into a small room furnished as an office.

"You are a friend of her Highness? I will not ask how you come here."

"There isn't time, anyway," said

John Anthony. "I'm looking for an American—a prisoner. Has one been brought to the castle?"

"A prisoner?" The old man stared. "*Aber doch!* I heard something. I did not believe it. But perhaps it is true."

"He's a friend of the Princess," said John Anthony quickly. "I've got to find him. Can you help me?"

The old man hesitated, frowning.

"I would like to help her Highness, but you must understand that the Prince is my master. If he should discover, I am a ruined man, and my wife and family too."

"I only want to know where this fellow's likely to be."

"So!" The old man sighed. "I will do what I can. The castle is full, but the dungeons are not occupied." He smiled grimly. "Perhaps he is there. We can see."

He produced a large bunch of keys and an electric torch out of a drawer.

The dungeons! John Anthony had visited such places, accompanied by hordes of fellow-tourists and a loud-voiced guide. He had not really thought that they could be real. But old Ignaz led him deeper and deeper underground, opening heavy, studded doors.

THEY walked with bent heads, and the beam of the torch fell upon damp stone walls overgrown here and there with fungus; and once two eyes glared at them out of the darkness, and a rat went scuttling away.

Suddenly Ignaz stopped. A faint glow shone through the darkness ahead. He pressed the torch into John Anthony's hand and whispered in his ear:

"There is someone there. I think you will find him. I dare not come any farther. I will leave the doors unlocked, but in an hour I will come back and lock them again."

John Anthony nodded and went on alone with a rather empty feeling inside. The passage came abruptly to a turn, and he peeped cautiously round.

A short, narrow passage lay before him lighted by a candle and flanked on either side by heavy, studded doors, in each of which there was a small grille. A large man of rather forbidding

appearance was seated at the far end, apparently half asleep. John Anthony contemplated him for a moment in silence. Then he advanced into the candle-light with his gun levelled.

"Barnes!" he called. "Barnes! Hoi! Hugo Barnes!"

The man on the chair leapt up with a startled exclamation and stood blinking. He may have been armed, but appreciating the fact that John Anthony had got there first he made no attempt to produce any weapon. A moment later a face appeared at one of the grilles, and a brisk, transatlantic voice said:

"Hugo Barnes? Sure! That's me."

"I'm a rescue party," said John Anthony. "Do you happen to speak German? If so you might tell this blighter to open the door of your cell."

He was quivering from head to foot, and he could not help wondering if it was not plainly evident that this was the first time in his life that he had ever handled a gun. But he held himself rigidly erect.

"Tell him that if he doesn't I'll shoot him in the stomach, which is frightfully painful. And you might add that I never miss," he said.

NOBODY loves a conspirator. When governments discover that persons within their territories are conspiring to upset the peace of a neighbouring State, it is their duty, by the dictates of international law, to step in promptly and put a stop to the business. The presence of the uncrowned King of Adria in the Schloss Drachenthal, which was under the Austrian government, was therefore a dead secret, and the consternation of the party of exiled politicians, ex-generals, and adventurers who wished to restore him to his throne, may be imagined when, viewing the crowd that had assembled outside the castle, they realised that the secret had leaked out.

In an atmosphere of gloom and tension a general meeting was called at which it was resolved that the King must set off without delay for Adria, where a regiment of loyalist troops awaited his arrival. Ways and means were discussed. An aeroplane was in readiness. Everything, indeed, was ready, and only

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one difficulty remained to be overcome: his Majesty was in need of funds.

And at this point all eyes were fixed upon their host, the burly, bull-necked Prince von Drachenthal; and the Prince, smiling hopefully but undecidedly, looked towards the door through which he expected his wife to enter.

But the Princess was in no hurry. She kept them waiting to the last, grim limits of their patience. Even the King, a tall, suave man, who knew how necessary it was to be tactful with everyone, was growing terse when finally she appeared.

She wore a long black gown. Her golden hair shone softly in the shaded lights of the salon. If she was pale, her face was very resolute. She curtseyed gravely to the King, politely welcomed her other guests and, ignoring her husband's gaze, gave that gentleman a lot of trouble before, finally, he managed to manoeuvre her into a corner.

"Well, are you going to sign?"

"I haven't decided."

"You have till the end of dinner. If you refuse——"

He did not finish the sentence. Inquisitive eyes were watching them. Most of those present must know how the land lay—her husband's reasons for marrying her, his poverty and his ambition to shine at the court of Adria. But she faced them coldly.

"We shall see."

Ignaz entered to announce that dinner was served.

She walked towards the great dining-hall on the arm of the King of Adria, and thought despondently that she had very little to hope for. Her husband still had absolute power in his own valley, where so much was left over from the Middle Ages. She knew that he would not scruple to have Hugo Barnes done away with if he had him prisoner. If— She could not tell whether he was lying or not. But how could she run the risk?

And what could she expect of that plucky little fair-haired English boy, who did not even know the language? Poor lad! She felt remorsefully that she should never have allowed him to attempt anything. After all——

And then suddenly her heart lifted. Suddenly she saw him.

THEY were crossing the hall. Lackeys in uniform stood rigidly as they passed. Behind them, standing by the door of the kitchens in a place where servants had no business to be, was a young man in an ill-fitting black suit. For one instant his eyes met hers, and quickly, almost imperceptibly, he nodded and smiled.

John Anthony had said that he was going to enjoy himself, and he was doing so, but he was acutely aware that his run of luck could not last. The conspirators' attempt to make conspiracy look like an ordinary house party had filled the castle with servants, most of whom were strange to one another; so it had been possible for him, in the guise of a gentleman's gentleman, to move about without attracting notice. But meanwhile a plump, comfortable man was bound and gagged in the attic, and a large, uncouth one was down in the dungeon in the cell recently occupied by Hugo Barnes; it could not be long before one or the other of them was discovered.

Meanwhile he had a lot to do. He was beginning to know quite a lot about the downstairs geography of the castle. He made his way to a small room filled with a lumber of brooms and buckets and a few old trunks. Crouching behind one of these was Hugo Barnes.

"That's all right," said John Anthony cheerfully. "I gave her a nod. I think she understood."

"That's fine," said Hugo Barnes. "What do we do now?"

"Well," said John Anthony, "there's going to be a spot of bother when they discover that you've escaped. We can't possibly leave her here to face them. What we need is a car."

Hugo, a tall, well-built, curly-haired young man, regarded him rather as one of his generals must have regarded Napoleon.

"Sure! Anything you say."

"Now listen," said John Anthony. "I've managed to get matey with a chauffeur who drives for a bloke called Baron Hirsch. Fortunately he spoke about eight words of French, and so do I. I invented an excuse to have a look at his room, which is just over the stables. You go straight up the stairs and it's the second door on the left."

His uniform's hanging behind the door. The servants will be having supper soon. All you do——"

"I walk in and snatch it. Well, so long as I don't get seen by any of the gang who held me up and wrecked my car that sounds O.K. And then?"

"The car's garaged in the stables. Just go in and ask for it. Say that Baron Hirsch has sent you on an errand. Grouse a bit, I should. It'll be easy for you, knowing the language. Then drive it up the road till you're out of sight, and wait. That's all."

"Fine! I bet you're a general in the next Great War. Meanwhile, what will you do?"

"I don't quite know yet. If I could get a message to the Princess it would be easy. But I expect I shall think of something. Well, good-bye."

HE went out thoughtfully. He would have liked to join the servants at their supper, but old Ignaz had made it clear that if he was not to take official notice of his presence he must keep out of sight. So he would have to go without his supper. And in any case it was rather necessary to keep an eye on things.

A gypsy orchestra was playing on the musicians' gallery overlooking the big banqueting hall. Following the strains of music, and moving in the preoccupied manner of a gentleman's gentleman going about his master's business, John Anthony presently located it. He passed through a door on to a narrow gallery and found the musicians all playing hard. They glanced curiously at him. He grinned in a confidential way intended to suggest that he could not resist the music, and they grinned back.

He crept to a corner of the gallery.

From this point he had an excellent view. The Princess was facing him at the head of her table. He thought she was looking more cheerful than when he had seen her last. Directly she rose to leave he would slip downstairs and have a word with her.

Meanwhile, he watched the proceedings, which did not strike him as being very lively. Even from that remote point he seemed to feel the tension in the air. There was a lot of talk and

rather boisterous laughter, but it was not very convincing. The big man at the foot of the table, presumably Prince Drachenthal, was doing his best to make the party go, but every now and then he broke off to gaze at the dark-gowned, golden-haired figure at the other end, who met his eyes defiantly.

It was a very long banquet, and John Anthony grew hungrier than ever. Until at length something happened to make him forget his appetite. A lackey went hurriedly up to the Prince and spoke in his ear. John Anthony saw the big man's face grow red. He clenched his fist and thumped it on the table. Then he rose, and with a perfunctory word to his guests turned and left the hall.

"Ten to one they've discovered about Barnes," reflected John Anthony. "There's going to be a spot of bother now."

He remained where he was for some moments, thinking very rapidly. Then he stole out of the gallery and hurried downstairs.

As he crossed the hall the sound of a deep voice, furiously thundering, rolled through an open doorway. Prince Drachenthal was evidently finding a lot to say about the emergency, whatever it was. John Anthony hurried on. He went boldly up to the door of the banqueting hall, opened it, and walked in.

The atmosphere of tension over the banquet had grown more pronounced. Heads were turned to regard him as he approached the Princess, but no one seemed to find anything abnormal in his appearance. He stood beside her and, bowing low, whispered in her ear:

"His Highness would like to speak to you at once."

HE had seen bewilderment in her eyes as he drew near, but now she recovered herself. She rose, made her excuses to the King of Adria, and walked towards the door. What, after all, could be more natural than that the Prince, in an unexpected emergency, should wish to consult his Princess? And John Anthony walked behind her as though he had been following Princesses out of banqueting halls all his life.

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But when they were outside the door he came close to her and said quickly :

"Look here, we've got to hop it. Barnes is waiting up the road with a car. Which is the quickest way out?"

She stood staring.

"What! You mean——?"

"Well, gosh," said John Anthony. "you didn't think we were going to leave you here alone? There's no time to lose. Which way?"

For another moment she hesitated, and then she took his hand.

"All right. Come on."

She led him swiftly across the hall—and they reached the other side just in time to come face to face with Prince Drachenthal.

It was now that John Anthony showed that even in the most unassuming and unadventurous of citizens there may be something truly Napoleonic. In this moment of crisis he did not hesitate. The Prince was staring at them in stupefaction, and a large, uncouth man who had recently been the gaoler of Hugo Barnes stood staring by his side. John Anthony hurled himself forward like the charge of the Light Brigade.

The Prince was a very big and powerful man, but John Anthony's eleven stone was all good, solid stuff, and not for nothing had he turned out season after season for a London Rugger club. His hard head landed squarely in the middle of the enemy's diaphragm, and Prince Fritz Otto August von Drachenthal, completely winded, sat down on the floor.

"Run like hell!" shouted John Anthony. "Don't wait for me!"

He had whipped out his revolver. Flourishing it vaguely he turned and doubled up the stairs, and the uncouth man, crying loudly for assistance, went after him. Prince Drachenthal, gasping and groaning, remained where he was.

John Anthony paused at the top of the stairs. The Princess had vanished. Lackeys were pouring into the hall, talking and shouting. The uncouth man started to bound up the stairs, explaining loudly and volubly as he went. John Anthony waited to make quite sure that the pursuit was coming his way and then bolted across the landing and along a passage, heading

in the direction opposite to that which the Princess should have taken.

It was a long passage with a window at the end. He reached the window with the pursuers almost on his heels, opened it and jumped into the pitch black night. It might have been an eighty foot drop, for all he knew.

Fortunately it was not. He dropped a matter of twenty feet and went rolling over and over down a grassy bank, with a feeling that every bone in his body was broken. It was quite surprising to discover that he could still stand.

A great noise came from the castle. The pursuers were grouped about the window. A thud told him that one of them had followed his example. He turned and ran, stumbling over flowerbeds, and came at length to a high, ivy-covered wall. That was difficult, but the ivy was old and tough. There were spikes on top of the wall, and he left part of his trousers behind.

**A**ND now he was out of the castle. He set off to circle the back of it, and thence to strike the road winding up the hill.

This was the worst part of the adventure. This part, indeed, was plain hell. It was pitch dark, and the going was rough. The uproar in the castle was growing. A search-party with lanterns was after him.

And meanwhile, he was tortured with anxiety for the Princess. Had she got clean away? Had Hugo Barnes managed to get the car? Would they be such fools as to hang about, waiting for him? He hoped they would, and still hoped they wouldn't. Finally he ceased to hope anything. Gasping and suffering, he struggled on.

It was pure luck, however richly deserved, that brought him staggering out on to the road in the very headlights of the car. Lower down the hill other headlights were moving. A voice called sharply :

"Hoi! Here you are! Come on in!"

John Anthony reeled towards the lights and collapsed through the open door. The car started forward. For a little while he was dizzy and not properly aware of things. But he heard

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quite distinctly a voice saying, "Poor lad! Poor lad!"

And he felt two arms about him—could they be those of the Princess von Drachenthal?—and a cheek against his own.

A FEW days later John Anthony walked into an hotel at Ischl and found Sharrow awaiting him. He was wearing a new suit of clothes, not much more modish than his last, and a new rucksack; and Sharrow, regarding him, said:

"Hullo, why the new outfit?"

"I needed a change," said John Anthony. "How are you?"

"Quite fit again. The dazzling brunette was very kind. Well, let's hear all the news." Sharrow smiled indulgently. "Been enjoying yourself?"

"Oh, rather!" said John Anthony, and said nothing more. His story was his own affair. Nothing should reveal his secrets unless it was the secret light in his eyes.

"There's a letter for you," said Sharrow. "Feminine hand."

"From Helen," said John Anthony, and took it eagerly. "Good egg!"

## NOSTALGIA

THE day will come when I shall go  
Back to the land I love and know,  
Seeking the old familiar places  
My heart remembers, and the faces  
Of far-off friends.

I often dream  
Of lily islands in the stream,  
The scarves of mist along green hills  
Before night falls, and window-sills  
And gates—such common things—that soon  
Will be transmuted by the moon;  
The still dark trees with silver hair  
And folded hands that stand in pray'r  
Above the deeply breathing earth  
That nurtured them and gave them birth.

I have seen silken cobwebs hung  
Between tall grasses or among  
The dew-wet stalks of scented thyme—  
Frail hammocks swinging to the chime  
Rung from crowded bluebell steeples. . . .

My dreams are these—let other peoples'  
Be more elaborate, more fine—  
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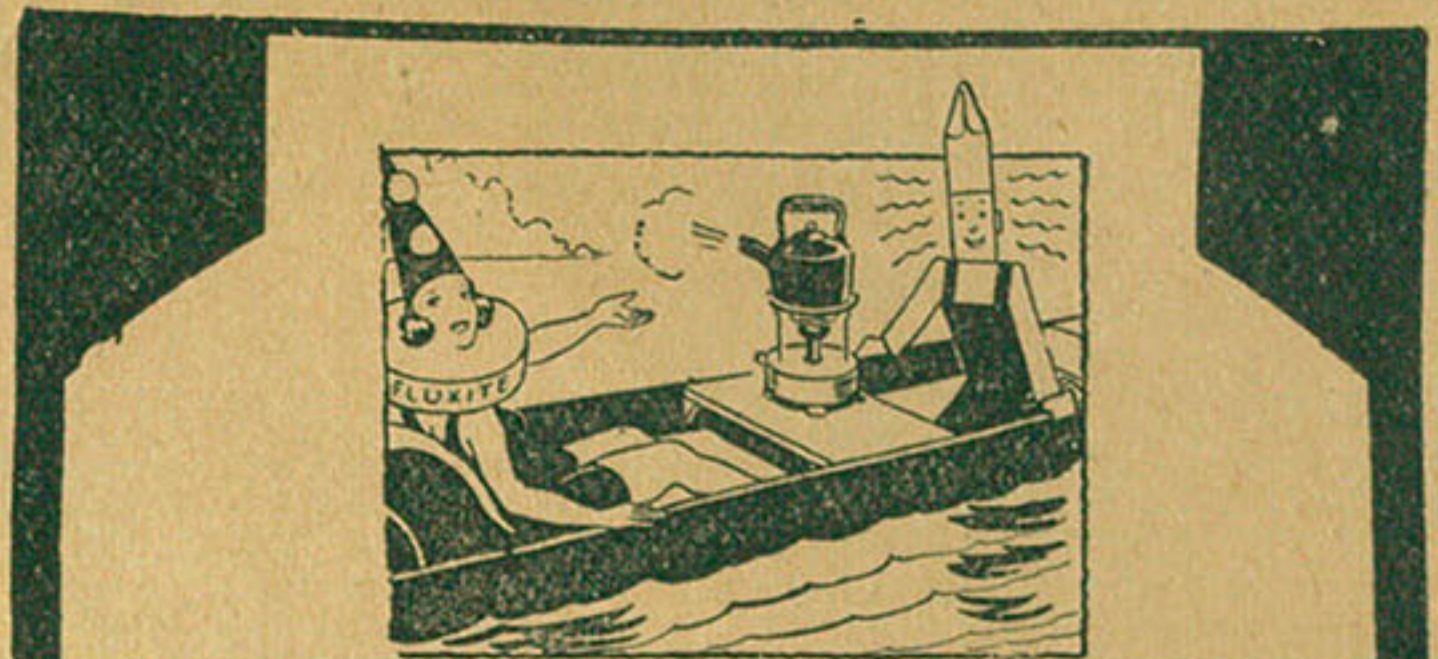
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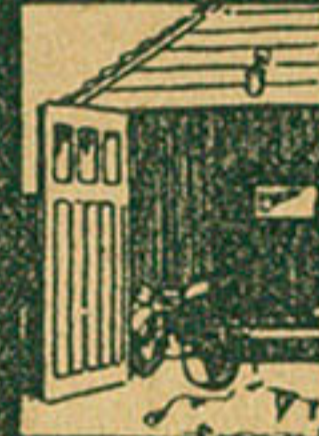
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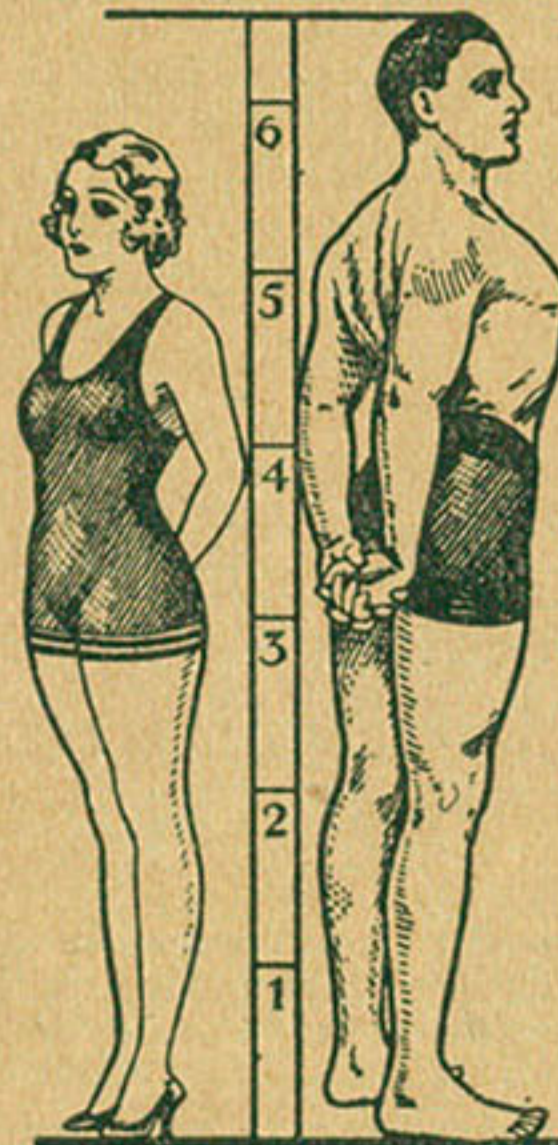
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