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In a Thunderstorm

THERE are some curious people at Bessing-on-Sea, and they entertain peculiar ideas as to what is the safest thing to do in a thunderstorm. My experience of their quaintness in this respect was a very brief one, but my recollections of it are remarkably vivid and distinct.

I went down to Bessing to spend a fortnight's vacation with my Aunt Esther, and the thunderstorm took place on the morning after my somewhat sudden arrival. Immediately after breakfast the atmosphere became hushed and sullen, while clouds of a heavy bluish complexion gathered overhead. My aunt viewed these omens with manifest uneasiness, natural, I thought, in a nervous old lady. Presently she left me to myself, and I retired to my own room to write a letter or two. This took me about an hour, and the storm was still gathering when I had finished.

The hush which prevailed without seemed to have found its way to the inmost quarters of my aunt's household, for there was not a sound to be heard anywhere. After some trouble I discovered Aunt Esther in the library, seated in an easy chair, with her eyes fast closed. The expression she wore was one of intense pain.

"Good gracious, aunt!" I cried, "what on earth is the matter?" She opened her eyes suddenly. "Dear me, Harold," she said, mildly, "how you startled me! There is nothing the matter. It is the thunderstorm."

"The thunderstorm?" "Yes. I am very nervous about thunder, and I have found that the best thing to do is to try to forget it. I sit down with my eyes closed and try to concentrate my thoughts upon something else. Indeed, I have found this plan most successful."

"Really?" I asked. "And are all your servants doing the same?" "Yes," answered the old lady, gravely. "I have ordered them to do so."

This accounted for the prevailing silence. The cook, the housemaid, and probably the gardener were all sitting down in the kitchen with their eyes closed, trying hard to concentrate their thoughts on anything but the storm. Before I had quite realized this, Aunt Esther went on:

"I am not so foolish as some people about thunder. I know one person who refuses to stay in the house at such times because there are so many steel articles about her. Mine, however, is a good plan, and I give my servants the full benefit of it. I think, Harold—"

In another moment she might have ordered me to follow the general example, so I left the room hastily. I sat down in the hall for a few moments, to enjoy the vision which her words had suggested, then I took my traveling cap from the stand and went into the garden.

Aunt Esther's garden, which I had

not seen for some ten years, was an extensive and old-fashioned one, with wide walks and the privacy secured by high stone walls. On reaching the further end I found that the house behind me was quite hidden from view by the abundance of foliage. Before me was the wall, covered by peach and pear trees, and against the wall stood a light hand ladder. The gardener had left it there when he had been called in to concentrate his mind upon something else.

I felt an idle curiosity to know what was on the other side of the wall. Probably I should find a field, or perhaps another garden. With cautious steps I began to mount the ladder. I am inquisitive by nature.

Slowly my head rose above the wall. It was a large garden that came into view, with a house half concealed among the trees. Everything was very still, and there seemed to be nobody about. I raised myself another step to make a closer scrutiny.

Then I gave a start, and for a moment drew back. It was only for a moment, for then, with increasing boldness, I was peering down at the scene which had startled me.

Just below, built against the wall, was a kind of rustic summer house. It was a wooden erection, covered with the ornamental bark so frequently used for flower boxes. There was no door, but it was open at the end, and within I could see a couple of tall carpet chairs and a wicker table. On the table lay two books, one of them open, and in one of the chairs sat a lady. The first glance told me she was fast asleep; the second, that she was young and charming—quite young and decidedly charming!

For some seconds I could only gaze helplessly. She sat leaning back, with her face turned in my direction and the Tam o'Shanter cap set daintily upon her head. Her gloveless hands were beautifully white and small.

When I had observed all these points I mounted a step higher!

Let me say here that I am shockingly susceptible and exceedingly romantic. The sound of a girl's voice, the very rustle of her skirts, can always set my pulse in rapid motion, while I am prepared to read the opening of a romance in a simple chance meeting or in the commonest everyday remark. As a rule I am shy and reserved, but, like some other men of this character, I can occasionally act in an absolutely reckless and daredevil way. These facts must be taken in explanation of my further conduct.

I gazed upon that picture for another minute. Then I mounted another step. Again I gazed for a space, and then I found myself seated astride the wall. By this time the spirit of adventure was in me, and I was capable of any madness. A thousand foolish and romantic fancies came rushing to my brain. I was already in love!

Who and what the sleeper was, her name, nature and station—all these things had nothing to do with the matter. Happy chance and a providential thunderstorm had led me to the spot. The same thunderstorm, no doubt, had sent her to sleep with the book open before her.

I looked the ground carefully over, but there was no sign of life. While I was doing this I thought I heard the sleeper stir, but when I glanced quickly down she was as still as ever. With perfect caution I lifted the ladder over and I let it down on the other side. A moment later I was in the entrance to the summer house.

Save for the breathing of the sleeper, the stillness was almost painful. It occurred to me once to wonder what she would say if she found me there, but I did not trouble to answer the question. I had read of similar cases before, and everything always came out nicely. Of course she would see at once the romance and beauty of the situation. I felt quite sure of this when I saw that the volume before her was a volume of Tennyson, open at "The Coming of Arthur." My own name is Arthur—Harold Arthur Simpson.

She was absolutely charming. Beneath the rakish cap stray curls of dark, glossy hair wandered down to the graceful little ears and about the ivory temples. The cheeks were rather pale, and the lips were closed just a trifle too firmly for perfect repose; but—all that only seemed to increase the charm. I did not gaze too earnestly, fearing to disturb her, and presently took up the other book which lay on the table. It was a morocco bound autograph album, with the majority of the leaves empty. I turned them silently to read a number of unfamiliar names and commonplace quotations. While I was doing this a bright idea came to me, full of the spirit of ro-

I would write something in the album!

As I searched for my pencil I decided what this something should be. Finding a vacant page I quickly drew upon it the outline of a heart. Within this I wrote the name "Arthur." When she awoke after I had gone she would find this symbol, and know that her prince had been with her. I would leave the book open at that place.

Prince! As I laid the book down another thought flashed to my mind. It made my heart beat madly and sent the hot blood rushing to my cheeks. Here was the Sleeping Beauty—here was Prince. There was one thing wanted to make the story whole. One thing.

Somehow I felt that it would not waken her; otherwise, perhaps, I should not have dared. But her slumber was sound, and I was strung to the highest pitch of reckless excitement. No, it would not waken her. It would be but a touch.

With intense caution I drew nearer. There was no difficulty whatever, for her face was turned toward me. I trembled as I bent down; the fragrance of her breath was in my face; and then . . . It was just a touch and nothing more.

But it sent a tremor through her frame as from a shock. For a breathless moment I stood still behind her chair, and then I saw the madness, the utter folly, of what I had done. I had a vague thought of police and turned cold with fear.

"Good heavens!" I said to myself, "that was the maddest thing a man ever did."

I walked twice around the garden to quiet my nerves and then went indoors. With the relief of my sudden panic came the desire to know more of my Sleeping Beauty. The romance had begun well, and now it should move forward. I had some twelve days in which to work it out.

Naturally I had forgotten all about the thunderstorm; and now I found that it had passed over without breaking. The skies were clearer, and my aunt had gone to the kitchen to make arrangements for luncheon. As soon as she came back I opened the subject.

"Aunt Esther," I said, "whose is the garden next to yours? When I looked over the wall I saw a young woman sitting in a little summer house, fast asleep."

My aunt seemed surprised. "Asleep?" she said. "That is strange. But it must have been Mrs. Portingdale."

"Mrs. Portingdale?" I gasped. "Mrs.—"

"Yes," said Aunt Esther, quietly. "She is the person I was about to tell you of this morning. When there is thunder about she dare not stay in the house, because there are so many steel articles in it. She goes to that ridiculous little summer house until the storm is over. But she could hardly have gone to sleep there; she would be too nervous."

I felt a horrible sensation of bewilderment.

"But—but," I cried helplessly, "this was quite a young girl. She was not 20—"

"Mrs. Portingdale," said my aunt, nodding, "is just 20. She was married six months ago. There is no other young woman there."

These measured words struck me with dumbness. Aunt Esther looked at my face with increasing surprise, and seemed just about to ask a question when a noisy interruption took place. The front door bell was rung with an alarming clang, clang, clang, eloquent of haste and urgency. We heard the housemaid running to the door, and then there was a sound of voices. We listened and waited, my aunt in surprise, myself in growing guilt and fear.

In a moment the housemaid knocked, and entered. "If you please, ma'am," she said, excitedly, "Mr. Portingdale's compliments, and can you run over to see Mrs. Portingdale? She has had a fright in the garden, and fainted!"

My aunt rose in agitation, but she was not the one to delay a kindness for the sake of asking questions.

"Dear me! dear me!" she said in distress. "It must have been the thunder. Ask the girl to wait, Mary, and I'll go back with her."

The messenger was taken to the kitchen, to tell her story at greater length, while Aunt Esther hurried upstairs for her bonnet and mantle. Five minutes later she came down again, and left the house with the girl. As soon as she had disappeared I went to find the housemaid.

"Mary," I said hastily, "what did the girl tell you? What is wrong with Mrs. Portingdale?"

And Mary told me, pleased to find an interested listener. The first part of

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The story was exactly as I expected to find it. Mrs. Portingdale had gone to the summer house because of the thunderstorm, and had taken a couple of books with her. The heaviness of the air had given her a headache, and she had closed her eyes for awhile to rest them. Presently a slight sound had disturbed her, and, looking up, she had seen a most terrifying sight.

"It was a lunatic, sir," said Mary, "sitting on the wall, and looking round the garden so eager and fierce-like, it made the poor lady's blood run cold to see him. She knew at once that he must have escaped from the Bessing asylum, because he was a strange face, and such things is happening continually. So she shut her eyes fast, knowing as her only chance was to pretend to be asleep. Then he got down off the wall, she almost dying of fear. It must have been awful! Then she peeped again between her eyelashes, and there was the madman grinning, silly like, over her books. After that he was still so long that she expected every second that he would spring at her, but he didn't. What do think he did, sir?"

"Who knows?" I gasped, falsely and painfully.

"Well, sir, he—kissed her!" Mary blushed at this point, even in her excitement. "Fancy being kissed by a lunatic! It sent cold shivers all through the poor woman, and indeed it must have been a horrible feeling, but she didn't stir a finger. Then there was quiet so long that she made bold to peep again, and, lo and behold! he was clean gone. Then she

(Concluded on page 4.)

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