The Tryst

Algernon Blackwood

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As he got out of the train at the little wayside station he remembered the conversation as if it had been yesterday, instead of fifteen years ago—and his heart went thumping against his ribs so violently that he almost heard it. The original thrill came over him again with all its infinite yearning. He felt it as he had felt it then—not with that tragic lessening the interval had brought to each repetition of its memory. Here, in the familiar scenery of its birth, he realised with mingled pain and wonder that the subsequent years had not destroyed, but only dimmed it. The forgotten rapture flamed back with all the fierce beauty of its genesis, desire at white heat. And the shock of the abrupt discovery shattered time. Fifteen years became a negligible moment; the crowded experiences that had intervened seemed but a dream. The farewell scene, the conversation on the steamer's deck, were clear as of the day before. He saw the hand holding her big hat that fluttered in the wind, saw the flowers on the dress where the long coat was blown open a moment, recalled the face of a hurrying steward who had jostled them; he even heard the voices—his own and hers:

'Yes,' she said simply; 'I promise you. You have my word. I'll wait—'

'Till I come back,' he interrupted.

Steadfastly she repeated his actual words, then added: 'Here; at home—that is.'

'I'll come to the garden gate as usual,' he told her, trying to smile. 'I'll knock. You'll open the gate—as usual—and come out to me.'

These words, too, she attempted to repeat, but her voice failed, her eyes filled suddenly with tears; she looked into his face and smiled. It was just then that her little hand went up to hold the hat on—he saw the very gesture still. He remembered that he was vehemently tempted to tear his ticket up there and then, to go ashore with her, to stay in England, to brave all opposition—when the siren roared its third horrible warning ... and the ship put out to sea.

Fifteen years, thick with various incident, had passed between them since that moment. His life had risen, fallen, crashed, then risen again. He had come back at last, fortune won by a lucky coup—at thirty−five; had come back to find her, come back, above all, to keep his word. Once every three months they had exchanged the brief letter agreed upon: 'I am well; I am waiting; I am happy; I am unmarried. Yours—' For his youthful wisdom had insisted that no 'man' had the right to keep 'any woman' too long waiting; and she, thinking that letter brave and splendid, had insisted likewise that he was free—if freedom called him. They had laughed over this last phrase in their agreement. They put five years as the possible limit of separation. By then he would have won success, and obstinate parents would have nothing more to say.

But when five years ended he was 'on his uppers' in a western mining town, and with the end of ten in sight those uppers, though changed, were little better, apparently, than patched and mended. It was just then, too, that the change which had been stealing over him first betrayed itself. He realised it abruptly, a sense of shame and horror in him. The discovery was made unconsciously: it disclosed itself. He was reading her letter as a labourer on a Californian fruit farm: 'Funny she doesn't marry—someone else!' he heard himself say. The words were out before he knew it, and certainly before he could suppress them. They just slipped out, startling him into the truth; and he knew instantly that the thought was fathered in him by a hidden wish....

He was older. He had lived. It was a memory he loved.

Despising himself in a contradictory fashion—both vaguely and fiercely—he yet held true to his boyhood's promise. He did not write and offer to release her as he knew they did in stories; he persuaded himself that he meant to keep his word. There was this fine, stupid, selfish obstinacy in his character. In any case, she would misunderstand and think he wanted to set free—himself. 'Besides—I'm still—awfully fond of her,' he asserted.

And it was true; only the love, it seemed, had gone its way. Not that another woman took it; he kept himself clean, held firm as steel. The love, apparently, just faded of its own accord; her image dimmed, her letters had ceased to thrill, then ceased to interest him.

Subsequent reflection made him realise other details about himself. In the interval he had suffered hardships, had learned the uncertainty of life that depends for its continuance on a little food, but that food often hard to come by, and had seen so many others go under that he held it more cheaply than of old. The wandering instinct, too, had caught him, slowly killing the domestic impulse; he lost his desire for a settled place of abode, the desire for children of his own, lost the desire to marry at all. Also—he reminded himself with a smile—he had lost other things: the expression of youth she was accustomed to and held always in her thoughts of him, two fingers of one hand, his hair! He wore glasses, too. The gentlemen−adventurers of life get scarred in those wild places where he lived. He saw himself a rather battered specimen well on the way to middle age.

There was confusion in his mind, however, and in his heart: a struggling complex of emotions that made it difficult to know exactly what he did feel. The dominant clue concealed itself.

Feelings shifted. A single, clear determinant did not offer. He was an honest fellow. 'I can't quite make it out,' he said. 'What is it I really feel? And why?' His motive seemed obscured. To keep the flame alight for the long buffeting years was no small achievement; better men had succumbed in half the time. Yet something in him still held fast to the girl as with a band of steel that would not let her go entirely. Occasionally there came strong reversions, when he ached with longing, yearning, hope; when he loved her again; remembered passionately each detail of the far−off courtship days in the forbidden rectory garden beyond the small, white garden gate. Or was it merely the image and the memory he loved 'again'? He hardly knew himself. He could not tell. That 'again' puzzled him. It was the wrong word surely.... He still wrote the promised letter, however; it was so easy; those short sentences could not betray the dead or dying fires.

One day, besides, he would return and claim her. He meant to keep his word.

And he had kept it. Here he was, this calm September afternoon, within three miles of the village where he first had kissed her, where the marvel of first love had come to both; three short miles between him and the little white garden gate of which at this very moment she was intently thinking, and behind which some fifty minutes later she would be standing, waiting for....

He had purposely left the train at an earlier station; he would walk the three miles in the dusk, climb the familiar steps, knock at the white gate in the wall as of old, utter the promised words, 'I have come back to find you,' enter, and—keep his word. He had written from Mexico a week before he sailed; he had made careful, even accurate calculations: 'In the dusk, on the sixteenth of September, I shall come and knock,' he added to the usual sentences. The knowledge of his coming, therefore, had been in her possession seven days. Just before sailing, moreover, he had heard from her—though not in answer, naturally. She was well; she was happy; she was unmarried; she was waiting.

And now, as by some magical process of restoration—possible to deep hearts only, perhaps, though even to them quite inexplicable—the state of first love had blazed up again in him. In all its radiant beauty it lit his heart, burned unextinguished in his soul, set body and mind on fire.

The years had merely veiled it. It burst upon him, captured, overwhelmed him with the suddenness of a dream. He stepped from the train. He met it in the face. It took him prisoner. The familiar trees and hedges, the unchanged countryside, the 'fields−smells known in infancy,' all these, with something subtly added to them, rolled back the passion of his youth upon him in a flood. No longer was he bound upon what he deemed, perhaps, an act of honourable duty; it was love that drove him, as it drove him fifteen years before. And it drove him with the accumulated passion of desire long forcibly repressed; almost as if, out of some fancied notion of fairness to the girl, he had deliberately, yet still unconsciously, said 'No' to it; that she had not faded, but that he had decided, 'I must forget her.' That sentence: 'Why dosen't she marry—someone else?'

had not betrayed change in himself. It surprised another motive: 'It's not fair to—her!'

His mind worked with a curious rapidity, but worked within one circle only. The stress of sudden emotion was extraordinary. He remembered a thousand things; yet, chief among them, those occasional reversions when he had felt he 'loved her again.' Had he not, after all, deceived himself? Had she ever really 'faded' at all? Had he not felt he ought to let her fade— release her that way? And the change in himself?—that sentence on the Californian fruit−farm—what did they mean? Which had been true, the fading or the love? The confusion in his mind was

hopeless, but, as a matter of fact, he did not think at all: he only felt. The momentum, besides, was irresistible, and before the shattering onset of the sweet revival he did not stop to analyse the strange result. He knew certain things, and cared to know no others: that his heart was leaping, his blood running with the heat of twenty, that joy recaptured him, that he must see, hear, touch her, hold her in his arms—and marry her. For the fifteen years had crumbled to a little thing, and at thirty−five he felt himself but twenty, rapturously, deliciously in love.

He went quickly, eagerly, down the little street to the inn, still feeling only, not thinking anything. The vehement uprush of the old emotion made reflection of any kind impossible. He gave no further thought to those long years 'out there,' when her name, her letters, the very image of her in his mind had found him, if not cold, at least without keen response. All that was forgotten as though it had not been. The steadfast thing in him, this strong holding to a promise which had never wilted, ousted the recollection of fading and decay that, whatever caused them, certainly had existed. And this steadfast thing now took command. This enduring quality in his character led him. It was only towards the end of the hurried tea he first received the singular impression—vague, indeed, but undeniably persistent—that he was being led.

Yet, though aware of this, he did not pause to argue or reflect. The emotional displacement in him, of course, had been more than considerable: there had been upheaval, a change whose abruptness was even dislocating, fundamental in a sense he could not estimate—shock. Yet he took no count of anything but the one mastering desire to get to her as soon as possible, knock at the small, white garden gate, hear her answering voice, see the low wooden door swing open— take her. There was joy and glory in his heart, and a yearning sweet delight. At this very moment she was expecting him. And he—had come.

Behind these positive emotions, however, there lay concealed all the time others that were of a negative character. Consciously, he was not aware of them, but they were there; they revealed their presence in various little ways that puzzled him. He recognised them absent−mindedly, as it were; did not analyse or investigate them. For, through the confusion upon his faculties, rose also a certain hint of insecurity that betrayed itself by a slight hesitancy or miscalculation in one or two unimportant actions. There was a touch of melancholy, too, a sense of something lost. It lay, perhaps, in that tinge of sadness which accompanies the twilight of an autumn day, when a.gentler, mournful beauty veils a greater beauty that is past. Some trick of memory connected it with a scene of early boyhood, when, meaning to see the sunrise, he overslept, and, by a brief half−hour, was just—too late. He noted it merely, then passed on; he did not understand it; he hurried all the more, this hurry the only sign that it was noted. 'I must be quick,' flashed up across his strongly positive emotions.

And, due to this hurry, possibly, were the slight miscalculations that he made. They were very trivial. He rang for sugar, though the bowl stood just before his eyes, yet when the girl came in he forgot completely what he rang for—and inquired instead about the late trains back to London. And, when the time−table was laid before him, he examined it without intelligence, then looked up suddenly into the maid's face with a question about flowers. Were there flowers to be had in the village anywhere? What kind of flowers? 'Oh, a bouquet or a'—he hesitated, searching for a word that tried to present itself, yet was not the word he wanted to make use of— 'or a wreath—of some sort?' he finished. He took the very word he did not want to take. In several things he did and said, this hesitancy and miscalculation betrayed themselves—such trivial things, yet significant in and elusive way that he disliked. There was sadness, insecurity somewhere in them. And he resented them, though aware of their existence only because they qualified his joy. There was a whispered 'No' floating somewhere in the dusk. Almost—he felt disquiet. He hurried, more and more eager to be off upon his journey—the final part of it.

Moreover, there were other signs of an odd miscalculation— dislocation, perhaps, properly speaking—in him. Though the inn was familiar from his boyhood days, kept by the same old couple, too, he volunteered no information about himself, nor asked a single question about the village he was bound for. He did not even inquire if the rector—her father—still were living.

And when he left he entirely neglected the gilt−framed mirror above the mantelpiece of plush, dusty pampas−grass in waterless vases on either side. It did not matter, apparently, whether he looked well or ill, tidy or untidy. He forgot that when his cap was off the absence of thick, accustomed hair must alter him considerably, forgot also that two fingers were missing from one hand, the right hand, the hand that she would presently clasp. Nor did it occur to him that he wore glasses, which must change his expression and add to the appearance of the years he bore.

None of these obvious and natural things seemed to come into his thoughts at all. He was in a hurry to be off.

He did not think. But though his mind may not have noted these slight betrayals with actual sentences, his attitude, nevertheless, expressed them. This was, it seemed, the feeling in him: 'What could such details matter to her now? Why, indeed, should he give to them a single thought? It was himself she loved and waited for, not separate items of his external, physical image.' As well think of the fact that she, too, must have altered—outwardly. It never once occurred to him. Such details were of To−day.... He was only impatient to come to her quickly, very quickly, instantly, if possible. He hurried.

There was a flood of boyhood's joy in him. He paid for his tea, giving a tip that was twice the price of the meal, and set out gaily and impetuously along the winding lane. Charged to the brim with a sweet picture of a small, white garden gate, the loved face close behind it, he went forward at a headlong pace, singing 'Nancy Lee' as he used to sing it fifteen years before.

With action, then, the negative sensations hid themselves, obliterated by the positive ones that took command. The former, however, merely lay concealed; they waited. Thus, perhaps, does vital emotion, overlong restrained, denied, indeed, of its blossoming altogether, take revenge.

Repressed element in his psychic life asserted themselves, selecting, as though naturally a dramatic form.

The dusk fell rapidly, mist rose in floating strips along the meadows by the stream; the old,.familiar details beckoned him forwards, then drove him from behind as he went swiftly past them. He recognised others rising through the thickening air beyond; they nodded, peered, and whispered, sometimes they almost sang. And each added to his inner happiness; each brought its sweet and precious contribution, and built it into the reconstructed picture of the earlier, long−forgotten rapture. It was an enticing and enchanted journy that he made, something impossibly blissful in it, something, too, that seemed curiously irresistible.

For the scenery had not altered all these years, the details of the country were unchanged, everything he saw was rich with dear and precious association, increasing the momentum of the tide that carried him along. Yonder was the stile over whose broken step he had helped her yesterday, and there the slippery plank across the stream where she looked above her shoulder to ask for his support; he saw the very bramble bushes where she scratched her hand, a−blackberrying, the day before ... and, finally, the weather−stained signpost, 'To the Rectory.' It pointed to the path through the dangerous field where Farmer Sparrow's bull provided such a sweet excuse for holding, leading—protecting her. From the entire landscape rose a stream of recent memory, each incident alive, each little detail brimmed with its cargo of fond association.

He read the rough black lettering on the crooked arm—it was rather faded, but he knew it too well to miss a single letter—and hurried forward along the muddy track; he looked about him for a sign of Farmer Sparrow's bull; he even felt in the misty air for the little hand, that he might take and lead her into safety. The thought of her drew him on with such irresistible anticipation that it seemed as if the cumulative drive of vanished and unsated years evoked the tangible phan−tom almost. He actually felt it, soft and warm and clinging in his own, that was no longer incomplete and mutilated.

Yet it was not he who led and guided now, but, more and more, he who was being led. The hint had first betrayed its presence at the inn; it now openly declared itself. It had crossed the frontier into a positive sensation. Its growth, swiftly increasing all this time, had accomplished itself; he had ignored, somehow, both its genesis and quick development; the result he plainly recognised. She was expecting him, indeed, but it was more than expectation; there was calling in it—she summoned him. Her thought and longing reached him along that old, invisible track love builds so easily between true, faithful hearts. All the forces of her being, her very voice, came towards him through the deepening autumn twilight. He had not noticed the curious physical restoration in his hand, but he was vividly aware of this more magical alteration—that she led and guided him, drawing him ever more swiftly towards the little, white garden gate where she stood at this very moment, waiting. Her sweet strength compelled him; there was this new touch of something irresistible about the familiar journey, where formerly had been delicious yielding only, shy, tentative advance.

His footsteps hurried, faster and ever faster; so deep was the allurement in his blood, he almost ran. He reached the narrow, winding lane, and raced along it. He knew each bend, each angle of the holly hedge, each separate incident of ditch and stone. He could have plunged blindfold down it at top speed. The familiar perfumes rushed at him—dead leaves and mossy earth and ferns and dock leaves, bringing the bewildering currents of strong emotion in him all together as in a rising wave. He saw, then, the crumbling wall, the cedars topping it with spreading branches, the chimneys of the rectory. On his right bulked the outline of the old, grey church; the

twisted, ancient yews, the company of gravestones, upright and leaning, dotting the ground like listening figures. But he looked at none of these. For, a little beyond, he already saw the five rough steps of stone that led from the lane towards a small, white garden gate. That gate at last shone before him, rising through the misty air. He reached it.

He stopped dead a moment. His heart, it seemed, stopped too, then took to violent hammering in his brain. There was a roaring in his mind, and yet a marvellous silence—just behind it. Then the roar of emotion died away. There was utter stillness. This stillness, silence, was all about him. The world seemed preternaturally quiet.

But the pause was too brief to measure. For the tide of emotion had receded only to come on again with redoubled power. He turned, leaped forward, clambered impetuously up the rough stone steps, and flung himself, breathless and exhausted, against the trivial barrier' that stood between his eyes and—hers. In his wild, half violent impatience, however, he stumbled. That roaring, too, confused him. He fell forward, it seemed, for twilight had merged in darkness, and he misjudged the steps, the distances he yet knew so well. For a moment, certainly, he lay at full length upon the uneven ground against the wall; the steps had tripped him. And then he raised himself and knocked. His right hand struck upon the small, white garden gate. Upon the two lost fingers he felt the impact. 'I am here,' he cried, with a deep sound in his throat as though utterance was choked and difficult. 'I have come back.'

For a fraction of a second he waited, while the world stood still and waited with him. But there was no delay. Her answer came at once: 'I am well.... I am happy.... I am waiting.'

And the voice was dear and marvellous as of old. Though the words were strange, reminding him of something dreamed, forgotten, lost, it seemed, he did not take special note of them. He only wondered that she did not open instantly that he might see her. Speech could follow, but sight came surely first! There was this lightning−flash of disappointment in him. Ah, she was lengthening out the marvellous moment, as often and often she had done before. It was to tease him that she made him wait. He knocked again; he pushed against the unyielding surface. For he noticed that it was unyielding; and there was a depth in the tender voice that he could not understand.

'Open!' he cried again, but louder than before. 'I have come back!' And, as he said it, the mist struck cold against his face.

But her answer froze his blood.

'I cannot open.'

And a sudden anguish of despair rose over him; the sound of her voice was strange; in it was faintness, distance as well as depth. It seemed to echo. Something frantic seized him then—the panic sense.

'Open, open! Come out to me!' he tried to shout. His voice failed oddly; there was no power in it. Something appalling struck him between the eyes. 'For God's sake, open. I'm waiting here!

Open, and come out to me!'

The reply was muffled by distance that already seemed increasing; he was conscious of freezing cold about him—in his heart:

'I cannot. You must come in to me.'

He knew not exactly then what happened, for the cold grew dreadful and the icy mist was in his throat. No words would come. He rose to his knees, and from his knees to his feet. He stooped. With all his force he knocked again; in a blind frenzy of despair he hammered and beat against the unyielding barrier of the small, white garden gate. He battered it till the skin of his knuckles was torn and bleeding—the first two fingers of a hand already mutilated. He remembered the torn and broken skin, for he noticed in the gloom that stains upon the gate bore witness to his violence; it was not till afterwards that he remembered the other fact—that the hand had already suffered mutilation, long, long years ago. The power of sound was feebly in him; he called aloud; there was no answer. He tried to scream, but the scream was muffled in his.throat before it issued properly; it was a nightmare scream. As a last resort he flung himself bodily upon the unyielding gate, with such precipitate violence, moreover, that his face struck against its surface.

From the friction, then, along the whole length of his cheek he knew that the surface was not smooth. Cold and rough that surface was; but also—it was not of wood. Moreover, there was writing on it he had not seen before. How he deciphered it in the gloom, he never knew. The lettering was deeply cut. Perhaps he traced it with his fingers; his right hand certainly lay stretched upon it. He made out a name, a date, a broken verse from the

Bible, and strange words:

'Je suis la première au rendez−vous. Je vous attends.' The lettering way sharply cut with edges that were new. For the date was of a week ago; the broken verse ran, 'When the shadows flee away ...' and the small, white garden gate was unyielding because it was of— stone.

At the inn he found himself staring at a table from which the tea things had not been deared away. There was a railway time−table in his hands, and his head was bent forwards over it, trying to decipher the lettering in the growing twilight. Beside him, still fingering a form, stood the serving−girl; her other hand held a brown tray with a running dog painted upon its dented surface. It swung to and fro a little as she spoke, evidently continuing a conversation her customer had begun. For she was giving information—in the colourless, disinterested voice such persons use:

'We all went to the funeral, sir, all the country people went. The grave was her father's—the family grave....' Then, seeing that her customer was too absorbed in the time−table to listen further, she said no more but began to pile the tea things on to the tray with noisy clatter.

Ten minutes later, in the road, he stood hesitating. The signal at the station just opposite was already down. The autumn mist was rising. He looked along the winding road that melted away into the distance, then slowly turned and reached the platform just as the London train came in.

He felt very old—too old to walk three miles....