

The Villa Lucienne

Ella D'Arcy

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Madame Koetlegon told the story, and told it so well that her audience seemed to know the sombre alley, the neglected garden, the shuttered house, as intimately as though they had visited it themselves, seemed to feel a faint reverberation of the incommunicable thrill which she had felt — which the surly guardian, the torn rag of lace, the closed pavilion had made her feel. And yet, as you will see, there is in reality no story at all; it is merely an account of how, when in the Riviera two winters ago, she went with some friends to look over a furnished villa, which one of them thought of taking.

It was afternoon when we started on our expedition, Madame de M—, Cécile her widowed daughter-in-law, and I. Cécile's little girl Renée, the nurse, and Médor, the boarhound of which poor Guy had been so inordinately fond, dawdled after us up the steep and sunny road.

The December day was deliciously blue and warm. Cécile took off her furs and carried them over her arm. We only put down our sunshades when a screen of olive-trees on the left interposed their grey-green foliage between us and the sunshine.

Up in these trees barefooted men armed with bamboos were beating the branches to knock down the fruit; and three generations of women, grandmothers, wives, and children, knelt in the grass, gathering up the little purplish olives into baskets. All these paused to follow us with black persistent eyes, as we passed by; but the men went on working, unmoved. The tap-tapping, swish-swishing, of their light sticks against the boughs played a characteristically southern accompaniment to our desultory talk.

We were reasonably happy, pleasantly exhilarated by the beauty of the weather and the scene.

Renée and Médor, with shrill laughter and deep-mouthed joy-notes, played together the whole way. And when the garden wall, which now replaced the olive-trees upon our right, gave place to a couple of iron gates standing open upon a broad straight drive, and we, looking up between the overarching palm-trees and cocoanuts, saw a white, elegant, sun-bathed house at the end, Cécile jumped to the conclusion that here was the Villa Lucienne, and that nowhere else could she find a house which on the face of it would suit her better.

But the woman who came to greet us, the jocund, brown-faced young woman, with the superb abundance of bosom beneath her crossed neckerchief of orange-coloured wool, told us no; this was the Villa Soleil (appropriate name!) and belonged to Monsieur Morgera, the deputy, who was now in Paris. The Villa Lucienne was higher up; she pointed vaguely behind her through the house; a long walk round by the road. But if these ladies did not mind a path which was a trifle damp perhaps, owing to Monday's rain, they would find themselves in five minutes at the Villa, for the two houses in reality were not more than a stone's throw apart.

She conducted us across a spacious garden golden with sunshine, lyric with bird-song, brilliant with flowers, where eucalyptus, mimosa, and tea-roses interwove their strong and subtle perfumes through the air, to an angle in a remote laurel hedge. Here she stooped to pull aside some ancient pine-boughs which ineffectually closed the entrance to a dark and trellised walk.

Peering up at it, it seemed to stretch away interminably into green gloom, the ground rising a little all the while, and the steepness of the ascent being modified every here and there by a couple of rotting wooden steps.

We were to go up this alley, our guide told us, and we would be sure to find Laurent at the top.

Laurent, she explained to us, was the gardener who lived at the Villa Lucienne and showed it to visitors. But there were not many who came, although it had been to let an immense time, ever since the death of old Madame Gray, and that had occurred before she, the speaker, had come south with the Morgeras. We were to explain to Laurent that we had been sent up from the Villa Soleil, and then it would be all right. For he sometimes used the alley himself, as it gave him a short cut into Antibes; but the passage had been blocked up many years ago, to

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prevent the Morgera children running into it.

Oh, Madame was very kind, it was no trouble at all, and of course if these ladies liked they could return by the alley also; but once they found themselves at the Villa they would be close to the upper road, which they would probably prefer. Then came her cordial voice calling after Cécile, 'Madame had best put on her furs again, it is cold in there.'

It was cold and damp too, with the damp coldness of places where sun and wind never penetrate. It was so narrow that we had to walk in single file. The walls on either hand, the low roof above our heads, were formed of trellised woodwork dropping into complete decay. But roof and walls might have been removed altogether, and the tunnel nevertheless would still have retained its shape; for the creepers which overgrew it had with time developed gnarled trunks and branches, which formed a second natural tunnelling outside. Through the broken places in the woodwork we could see the thick, inextricably twisted stems; and beyond again was a tangled matting of greenery, that suffered no drop of sunlight to trickle through. The ground was covered with lichens, deathstools, and a spongy moss exuding water beneath the foot, and one had the consciousness that the whole place, floor, walls, and roof, must creep with the repulsive, slimy, running life, which pullulates in dark and solitary places.

The change from the gay and scented garden to this dull alley, heavy with the smells of moisture and decay, was curiously depressing. We followed each other in silence; first Cécile; then Renée clinging to her nurse's hand, with Médor pressing close against them; Madame de M— next; and I brought up the rear.

You would have pronounced it impossible to find in any southern garden so sombre a place, but that, after all, it is only in the south that such extraordinary contrasts of gaiety and gloom ever present themselves.

The sudden tearing away of a portion of one of the wooden steps beneath my tread startled us all, and the circular scatter of an immense colony of woodlice that had formed its habitat in the crevices of the wood, filled me with shivering disgust. I was exceedingly glad when we emerged from the tunnel upon daylight again and the Villa.

Upon daylight, but not upon sunlight, for the small garden in which we found ourselves was ringed round by the compact tops of the umbrella-pines which climbed the hill on every side.

The site had been chosen, of course, on account of the magnificent view which we knew must be obtainable from the Villa windows, though from where we stood we could see nothing but the dark trees, the wild garden, the overshadowed house. And we saw none of these things very distinctly, for our attention was focussed on a man standing there in the middle of the garden, knee-deep in the grass, evidently awaiting us.

He was a short, thick-set peasant, dressed in the immensely wide blue velveteen trousers, the broad crimson sash, and the flannel shirt, open at the throat, which are customary in these parts.

He was strong-necked as a bull, dark as a mulatto, and his curling, grizzled hair was thickly matted over his head and face and breast. He wore a flat knitted cap, and held the inevitable cigarette between his lips, but he made no attempt to remove one or the other at our approach. He stood stolid, silent, his hands thrust deep into his pockets, staring at us, and shifting from one to another his suspicious and truculent little eyes.

So far as I was concerned, and though the Villa had proved a palace, I should have preferred abandoning the quest at once to going over it in his company; but Cécile addressed him with intrepid politeness.

'We had been permitted to come up from the Villa Soleil. We understood that the Villa Lucienne was to let furnished; if so, might we look over it?'

From his heavy, expressionless expression, one might have supposed that the very last thing he expected or desired was to find a tenant for the Villa, and I thought with relief that he was going to refuse Cécile's request. But, after a longish pause:

'Yes, you can see it,' he said, grudgingly, and turned from us, to disappear into the lower part of the house.

We looked into each other's disconcerted faces, then round the grey and shadowy garden: a garden long since gone to ruin, with paths and flower-beds inextricably mingled, with docks and nettles choking up the rose-trees run wild, with wind-planted weeds growing from the stone vases on the terrace, with grasses pushing between the marble steps leading up to the hall door.

In the middle of the lawn a terra-cotta faun, tumbled from his pedestal, grinned sardonically up from amidst the tangled greenery, and Madame de M— began to quote:

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'Un vieux faune en terre-cuite
Rit au centre des boulingrins,
Présageant sans doute une fuite
De ces instants sereins
Qui m'ont conduit et t'ont conduit. . .'

The Villa itself was as dilapidated, as mournful-looking as the garden. The ground-floor alone gave signs of occupation, in a checked shirt spread out upon a window-ledge to dry, in a worn besom, an earthenware pipkin, and a pewter jug, ranged against the wall. But the upper part, with the yellow plaster crumbling from the walls, the grey painted persiennes all monotonously closed, said with a thousand voices it was never opened, never entered, had not been lived in for years.

Our surly gardener reappeared, carrying some keys. He led the way up the steps. We exchanged mute questions; all desire to inspect the Villa was gone. But Cécile is a woman of character: she devoted herself.

'I'll just run up and see what it is like,' she said; 'it's not worth while you should tire yourself too, Mamma. You, all, wait here.'

We stood at the foot of the steps; Laurent was already at the top. Cécile began to mount lightly towards him, but before she was half-way she turned, and to our surprise, 'I wish you would come up, all of you,' she said, and stopped there until we joined her.

Laurent fitted a key to the door, and it opened with a shriek of rusty hinges. As he followed us, pulling it to behind him, we found ourselves in total darkness. I assure you I went through a bad quarter of a minute.

Then we heard the turning of a handle, an inner door was opened, and in the semi-daylight of closed shutters we saw the man's squat figure going from us down a long, old-fashioned, vacant drawing-room towards two windows at the further end.

At the same instant Renée burst into tears:

'Oh, I don't like it. Oh, I'm frightened!' she sobbed.

'Little goosie!' said her grandmother, 'see, it's quite light now!' for Laurent had pushed back the persiennes, and a magical panorama had sprung into view: the whole range of the mountains behind Nice, their snow-caps suffused with a heavenly rose colour by the setting sun.

But Renée only clutched tighter at Madame de M—'s gown, and wept:

'Oh, I don't like it, Bonnemaman! She is looking at me still. I want to go home!'

'No one is looking at you,' her grandmother told her: 'talk to your friend Médor. He'll take care of you.'

But Renée whispered:

'He wouldn't come in; he's frightened too.'

And, listening, we heard the dog's impatient and complaining bark calling to us from the garden.

Cécile sent Renée and the nurse to join him, and while Laurent let them out, we stepped on to the terrace, and for a moment our hearts were eased by the incomparable beauty of the view, for, raised now above the tree-tops, we looked over the admirable bay, the illimitable sky; we feasted our eyes upon unimaginable colour, upon matchless form. We were almost prepared to declare that the possession of the Villa was a piece of good fortune not to be let slip, when we heard a step behind us, and turned to see Laurent surveying us morosely from the window threshold, and again to experience the oppression of his ungenial personality.

Under his guidance we now inspected the century-old furniture, the faded silks, the tarnished gilt, the ragged brocades which had once embellished the room. The oval mirrors were dim with mildew, the parquet floor might have been a mere piece of grey drugget, so thick was the overlying dust. Curtains, yellowish, ropey, of undeterminable material, hung forlornly where once they had draped windows and doors.

Originally they may have been of rose satin, for there were traces of rose colour still on the walls and the ceiling, painted in gay southern fashion with loves and doves, festoons of flowers, and knots of ribbons. But these paintings were all fragmentary, indistinct, seeming to lose sequence and outline the more diligently you tried to

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decipher them.

Yet you could not fail to see that when first furnished the room must have been charming and coquettish. I wondered for whom it had been thus arranged, why it had been thus abandoned. For there grew upon me, I cannot tell you why, the curious conviction that the last inhabitant of the room having casually left it, had, from some unexpected obstacle, never again returned. They were but the merest trifles that created this idea: the tiny heap of brown ash which lay on a marble guéridon, the few withered twigs in the vase beside it, speaking of the last rose plucked from the garden; the big berceuse chair drawn out beside the sculptured mantelpiece which seemed to retain the impression of the last occupant; and in the dark recesses of the unclosed hearth the smouldering heat which my fancy detected in the half-charred logs of wood.

The other rooms in the Villa resembled the salon; each time our surly guide opened the shutters we saw a repetition of the ancient furniture, of the faded decoration; everything dust-covered and time-decayed. Nor in these other rooms was any sign of former occupation to be seen, until, caught upon the girandole of a pier-glass, a long ragged fragment of lace took my eye; an exquisitely fine and cobwebby piece of lace, as though caught and torn from some gala shawl or flounce, as the wearer had hurried by.

It was odd perhaps to see this piece of lace caught thus, but not odd enough surely to account for the strange emotion which seized hold of me: an overwhelming pity, succeeded by an overwhelming fear. I had had a momentary intention to point the lace out to the others, but a glance at Laurent froze the words on my lips. Never in my life have I experienced such a paralysing fear. I was filled with an intense desire to get away from the man and from the Villa.

But Madame de M—, looking from the window, had noticed a pavilion standing isolated in the garden. She inquired if it were to be let with the house. He gave a surly assent. Then she supposed we could visit it. No, said the man, that was impossible. Cécile pointed out it was only right that tenants should see the whole of the premises for which they would have to pay, but he refused this time with so much rudeness, his little brutish eyes narrowed with so much malignancy, that the panic which I had just experienced now seized the others, and it was a *sauve-qui-peut*.

We gathered up Renée, nurse, and Médor in our hasty passage through the garden, and found our way unguided to the gate upon the upper road.

At once at large beneath the serene evening sky, winding slowly westward down the olive-bordered ways: 'What an odious old ruffian!' said one; 'What an eerie, uncanny place!' said another. We compared notes. We found that each of us had been conscious of the same immense, the same inexplicable sense of fear.

Cécile, the least nervous of women, had felt it the first. It had laid hold of her when going up the steps to the door, and it had been so real a terror, she explained to us, that if we had not joined her she would have turned back. Nothing could have induced her to enter the Villa alone.

Madame de M—'s account was that her mind had been more or less troubled from the first moment of entering the garden, but that when the man refused us access to the pavilion, it had been suddenly invaded by a most intolerable sense of wrong. Being very imaginative (poor Guy undoubtedly derived his extraordinary gifts from her), Madame de M— was convinced that the gardener had murdered some one and buried the body inside the pavilion.

But for me it was not so much the personality of the man — although I admitted he was unprepossessing enough — as the Villa itself which inspired fear. Fear seemed to exude from the walls, to dim the mirrors with its clammy breath, to stir shudderingly among the tattered draperies, to impregnate the whole atmosphere as with an essence, a gas, a contagious disease.

You fought it off for a shorter or longer time, according to your powers of resistance, but you were bound to succumb to it at last. The oppressive and invisible fumes had laid hold of us one after the other, and the incident of the closed pavilion had raised our terrors to a ludicrous pitch.

Nurse's experiences, which she gave us a day or two later, supported this view. For she told us that when Renée began to cry, and she took her hand to lead her out, all at once she felt quite nervous and uncomfortable too, as though the little one's trouble had passed by touch into her.

'And what is very strange,' said she, 'when we reached the garden, there was Médor, his forepaws planted firmly on the ground, his whole body rigid, and his hair bristling all along his backbone from end to end.'

Nurse was convinced that both the child and the dog had seen something which we others could not see.

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This reminded us of a word of Renée's, a very curious word:

'I don't like it, she is looking at me still,' — and Cécile undertook to question her.

'You remember, Renée, when mother took you the other day to look over the pretty Villa— Renée opened wide apprehensive eyes.

'Why did you cry?'

'I was frightened at the lady,' she whispered.

'The lady . . . where was the lady?' Cécile asked her.

'She was in the drawing-room, sitting in the big chair.'

'Was she an old lady like grandmamma, or a young lady like mother?'

'She was like Bonnemaman,' said Renée, and her little mouth began to quiver.

'And what did she do?'

'She got up and began to — to come—'

But here Renée again burst into tears. And as she is a very nervous, a very excitable child, we had to drop the subject.

But what it all meant, whether there was anything in the history of the house or of its guardian which could account for our sensations, we never knew. We made inquiries, of course, concerning Laurent and the Villa Lucienne, but we learned very little, and that little was so vague, so remote, so irrelevant, that it does not seem worth while repeating.

The indisputable fact is the overwhelming fear which the adventure awoke in each and all of us; and this effect is impossible to describe, being just the crystallisation of one of those subtle, unformulated emotions in which only poor Guy himself could have hoped to succeed.