The Messengers

Richard Harding Davis

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When Ainsley first moved to Lone Lake Farm all of his friends asked him the same question. They wanted to know, if the farmer who sold it to him had abandoned it as worthless, how one of the idle rich, who could not distinguish a plough from a harrow, hoped to make it pay? His answer was that he had not purchased the farm as a means of getting richer by honest toil, but as a retreat from the world and as a test of true friendship. He argued that the people he knew accepted his hospitality at Sherry's because, in any event, they themselves would be dining within a taxicab fare of the same place. But if to see him they travelled all the way to Lone Lake Farm, he might feel assured that they were friends indeed.

Lone Lake Farm was spread over many acres of rocky ravine and forest, at a point where Connecticut approaches New York, and between it and the nearest railroad station stretched six miles of an execrable wood road. In this wilderness, directly upon the lonely lake, and at a spot equally distant from each of his boundary lines, Ainsley built himself a red brick house. Here, in solitude, he exiled himself; ostensibly to become a gentleman farmer; in reality to wait until Polly Kirkland had made up her mind to marry him.

Lone Lake, which gave the farm its name, was a pond hardly larger than a city block. It was fed by hidden springs, and fringed about with reeds and cat−tails, stunted willows and shivering birch. From its surface jutted points of the same rock that had made farming unremunerative, and to these miniature promontories and islands Ainsley, in keeping with a fancied resemblance, gave such names as the Needles, St. Helena, the Isle of Pines. From the edge of the pond that was farther from the house rose a high hill, heavily wooded. At its base, oak and chestnut trees spread their branches over the water, and when the air was still were so clearly reflected in the pond that the leaves seemed to float upon the surface. To the smiling expanse of the farm the lake was what the eye is to the human countenance. The oaks were its eyebrows, the fringe of reeds its lashes, and, in changing mood, it flashed with happiness or brooded in sombre melancholy. For Ainsley it held a deep attraction. Through the summer evenings, as the sun set, he would sit on the brick terrace and watch the fish leaping, and listen to the venerable bull−frogs croaking false alarms of rain. Indeed, after he met Polly Kirkland, staring moodily at the lake became his favorite form of exercise. With a number of other men, Ainsley was very much in love with Miss Kirkland, and unprejudiced friends thought that if she were to choose any of her devotees, Ainsley should be that one. Ainsley heartily agreed in this opinion, but in persuading Miss Kirkland to share it he had not been successful. This was partly his own fault; for when he dared to compare what she meant to him with what he had to offer her he became a mass of sodden humility. Could he have known how much Polly Kirkland envied and admired his depth of feeling, entirely apart from the fact that she herself inspired that feeling, how greatly she wished to care for him in the way he cared for her, life, even alone in the silences of Lone Lake, would have been a beautiful and blessed thing. But he was so sure she was the most charming and most wonderful girl in all the world, and he an unworthy and despicable being, that when the lady demurred, he faltered, and his pleading, at least to his own ears, carried no conviction.

"When one thinks of being married," said Polly Kirkland gently, "it isn't a question of the man you can live with, but the man you can't live without. And I am sorry, but I've not found that man."

"I suppose," returned Ainsley gloomily, "that my not being able to live without you doesn't affect the question in the least?"

"You HAVE lived without me," Miss Kirkland pointed out reproachfully, "for thirty years."

"Lived!" almost shouted Ainsley. "Do you call THAT living? What was I before I met you? I was an ignorant beast of the field. I knew as much about living as one of the cows on my farm. I could sleep twelve hours at a stretch, or, if I was in New York, I NEVER slept. I was a Day and Night Bank of health and happiness, a great, big, useless puppy. And now I can't sleep, can't eat, can't think−−except of you. I dream about you all night, think about you all day, go through the woods calling your name, cutting your initials in tree trunks, doing all the fool things a man does when he's in love, and I am the most miserable man in the world−−and the happiest!"

He finally succeeded in making Miss Kirkland so miserable also that she decided to run away. Friends had planned to spend the early spring on the Nile and were eager that she should accompany them. To her the separation seemed to offer an excellent method of discovering whether or not Ainsley was the man she could not "live without."

Ainsley saw in it only an act of torture, devised with devilish cruelty.

"What will happen to me," he announced firmly, "is that I will plain DIE! As long as I can see you, as long as I have the chance to try and make you understand that no one can possibly love you as I do, and as long as I know I am worrying you to death, and no one else is, I still hope. I've no right to hope, still I do. And that one little chance keeps me alive. But Egypt! If you escape to Egypt, what hold will I have on you? You might as well be in the moon. Can you imagine me writing love−letters to a woman in the moon? Can I send American Beauty roses to the ruins of Karnak? Here I can telephone you; not that I ever have anything to say that you want to hear, but because I want to listen to your voice, and to have you ask, 'Oh! is that YOU?' as though you were glad it WAS me. But Egypt! Can I call up Egypt on the long−distance? If you leave me now, you'll leave me forever, for I'll drown myself in Lone Lake."

The day she sailed away he went to the steamer, and, separating her from her friends and family, drew her to the side of the ship farther from the wharf, and which for the moment, was deserted. Directly below a pile−driver, with rattling of chains and shrieks from her donkey−engine, was smashing great logs; on the deck above, the ship's band was braying forth fictitious gayety, and from every side they were assailed by the raucous whistles of ferry−boats. The surroundings were not conducive to sentiment, but for the first time Polly Kirkland seemed a little uncertain, a little frightened; almost on the verge of tears, almost persuaded to surrender. For the first time she laid her hand on Ainsley's arm, and the shock sent the blood to his heart and held him breathless. When the girl looked at him there was something in her eyes that neither he nor any other man had ever seen there.

"The last thing I tell you," she said, "the thing I want you to remember, is this, that, though I do not care−−I WANT to care.

Ainsley caught at her hand and, to the delight of the crew of a passing tug−boat, kissed it rapturously. His face was radiant. The fact of parting from her had caused him real suffering, had marked his face with hard lines. Now, hope and happiness smoothed them away and his eyes shone with his love for her. He was trembling, laughing, jubilant.

"And if you should!" he begged. "How soon will I know? You will cable," he commanded. "You will cable 'Come,' and the same hour I'll start toward you. I'll go home now," he cried, "and pack!"

The girl drew away. Already she regretted the admission she had made. In fairness and in kindness to him she tried to regain the position she had abandoned.

"But a change like that," she pleaded, "might not come for years, may never come!" To recover herself, to make the words she had uttered seem less serious, she spoke quickly and lightly.

"And how could I CABLE such a thing!" she protested. "It would be far too sacred, too precious. You should be able to FEEL that the change has come."

"I suppose I should," assented Ainsley, doubtfully; "but it's a long way across two oceans. It would be safer if you'd promise to use the cable. Just one word: 'Come.'"

The girl shook her head and frowned.

"If you can't feel that the woman you love loves you, even across the world, you cannot love her very deeply."

"I don't have to answer that!" said Ainsley.

"I will send you a sign," continued the girl, hastily; "a secret wireless message. It shall be a test. If you love me you will read it at once. You will know the instant you see it that it comes from me. No one else will be able to read it; but if you love me, you will know that I love you.

Whether she spoke in metaphor or in fact, whether she was "playing for time," or whether in her heart she already intended to soon reward him with a message of glad tidings, Ainsley could not decide. And even as he begged her to enlighten him the last whistle blew, and a determined officer ordered him to the ship's side.

"Just as in everything that is beautiful," he whispered eagerly, "I always see something of you, so now in everything wonderful I will read your message. But," he persisted, "how shall I be SURE?"

The last bag of mail had shot into the hold, the most reluctant of the visitors were being hustled down the last remaining gangplank. Ainsley's state was desperate.

"Will it be in symbol, or in cipher?" he demanded. "Must I read it in the sky, or will you hide it in a letter, or−−where? Help me! Give me just a hint!"

The girl shook her head.

"You will read it−−in your heart," she said.

From the end of the wharf Ainsley watched the funnels of the ship disappear in the haze of the lower bay. His heart was sore and heavy, but in it there was still room for righteous indignation. "Read it in my heart!" he protested. "How the devil can I read it in my heart? I want to read it PRINTED in a cablegram."

Because he had always understood that young men in love found solace for their misery in solitude and in communion with nature, he at once drove his car to Lone Lake. But his misery was quite genuine, and the emptiness of the brick house only served to increase his loneliness. He had built the house for her, though she had never visited it, and was associated with it only through the somewhat indefinite medium of the telephone box. But in New York they had been much together. And Ainsley quickly decided that in revisiting those places where he had been happy in her company he would derive from the recollection some melancholy consolation. He accordingly raced back through the night to the city; nor did he halt until he was at the door of her house. She had left it only that morning, and though it was locked in darkness, it still spoke of her. At least it seemed to bring her nearer to him than when he was listening to the frogs in the lake, and crushing his way through the pines.

He was not hungry, but he went to a restaurant where, when he was host, she had often been the honored guest, and he pretended they were at supper together and without a chaperon. Either the illusion, or the supper cheered him, for he was encouraged to go on to his club. There in the library, with the aid of an atlas, he worked out where, after thirteen hours of moving at the rate of twenty−two knots an hour, she should be at that moment. Having determined that fact to his own satisfaction, he sent a wireless after the ship. It read: "It is now midnight and you are in latitude 40 degrees north, longitude 68 degrees west, and I have grown old and gray waiting for the sign."

The next morning, and for many days after, he was surprised to find that the city went on as though she still were in it. With unfeeling regularity the sun rose out of the East River. On Broadway electric−light signs flashed, street−cars pursued each other, taxicabs bumped and skidded, women, and even men, dared to look happy, and had apparently taken some thought to their attire. They did not respect even his widowerhood. They smiled upon him, and asked him jocularly about the farm and his "crops," and what he was doing in New York. He pitied them, for obviously they were ignorant of the fact that in New York there were art galleries, shops, restaurants of great interest, owing to the fact that Polly Kirkland had visited them. They did not know that on upper Fifth Avenue were houses of which she had deigned to approve, or which she had destroyed with ridicule, and that to walk that avenue and halt before each of these houses was an inestimable privilege.

Each day, with pathetic vigilance, Ainsley examined his heart for the promised sign. But so far from telling him that the change he longed for had taken place, his heart grew heavier, and as weeks went by and no sign appeared, what little confidence he had once enjoyed passed with them.

But before hope entirely died, several false alarms had thrilled him with happiness. One was a cablegram from Gibraltar in which the only words that were intelligible were "congratulate" and "engagement." This lifted him into an ecstasy of joy and excitement, until, on having the cable company repeat the message, he learned it was a request from Miss Kirkland to congratulate two mutual friends who had just announced their engagement, and of whose address she was uncertain. He had hardly recovered from this disappointment than he was again thrown into a tumult by the receipt of a mysterious package from the custom−house containing an intaglio ring. The ring came from Italy, and her ship had touched at Genoa. The fact that it was addressed in an unknown handwriting did not disconcert him, for he argued that to make the test more difficult she might disguise the handwriting. He at once carried the intaglio to an expert at the Metropolitan Museum, and when he was told that it represented Cupid feeding a fire upon an altar, he reserved a stateroom on the first steamer bound for the Mediterranean. But before his ship sailed, a letter, also from Italy, from his aunt Maria, who was spending the winter in Rome, informed him that the ring was a Christmas gift from her. In his rage he unjustly condemned Aunt Maria as a meddling old busybody, and gave her ring to the cook.

After two months of pilgrimages to places sacred to the memory of Polly Kirkland, Ainsley found that feeding his love on post−mortems was poor fare, and, in surrender, determined to evacuate New York. Since her departure he had received from Miss Kirkland several letters, but they contained no hint of a change in her affections, and search them as he might, he could find no cipher or hidden message. They were merely frank, friendly notes of travel; at first filled with gossip of the steamer, and later telling of excursions around Cairo. If they held any touch of feeling they seemed to show that she was sorry for him, and as she could not regard him in any way more calculated to increase his discouragement, he, in utter hopelessness, retreated to the solitude of the farm. In New York he left behind him two trunks filled with such garments as a man would need on board a steamer and in the early spring in Egypt. They had been packed and in readiness since the day she sailed away, when she had told him of the possible sign. But there had been no sign. Nor did he longer believe in one. So in the baggage−room of an hotel the trunks were abandoned, accumulating layers of dust and charges for storage.

At the farm the snow still lay in the crevices of the rocks and beneath the branches of the evergreens, but under the wet, dead leaves little flowers had begun to show their faces. The "backbone of the winter was broken" and spring was in the air. But as Ainsley was certain that his heart also was broken, the signs of spring did not console

him. At each week−end he filled the house with people, but they found him gloomy and he found them dull. He liked better the solitude of the midweek days. Then for hours he would tramp through the woods, pretending she was at his side, pretending he was helping her across the streams swollen with winter rains and melted snow. On these excursions he cut down trees that hid a view he thought she would have liked, he cut paths over which she might have walked. Or he sat idly in a flat− bottomed scow in the lake and made a pretence of fishing. The loneliness of the lake and the isolation of the boat suited his humor. He did not find it true that misery loves company. At least to human beings he preferred his companions of Lone Lake−−the beaver building his home among the reeds, the kingfisher, the blue heron, the wild fowl that in their flight north rested for an hour or a day upon the peaceful waters. He looked upon them as his guests, and when they spread their wings and left him again alone he felt he had been hardly used.

It was while he was sunk in this state of melancholy, and some months after Miss Kirkland had sailed to Egypt, that hope returned.

For a week−end he had invited Holden and Lowell, two former classmates, and Nelson Mortimer and his bride. They were all old friends of their host and well acquainted with the cause of his discouragement. So they did not ask to be entertained, but, disregarding him, amused themselves after their own fashion. It was late Friday afternoon. The members of the house−party had just returned from a tramp through the woods and had joined Ainsley on the terrace, where he stood watching the last rays of the sun leave the lake in darkness. All through the day there had been sharp splashes of rain with the clouds dull and forbidding, but now the sun was sinking in a sky of crimson, and for the morrow a faint moon held out a promise of fair weather.

Elsie Mortimer gave a sudden exclamation, and pointed to the east. "Look!" she said.

The men turned and followed the direction of her hand. In the fading light, against a background of sombre clouds that the sun could not reach, they saw, moving slowly toward them and descending as they moved, six great white birds. When they were above the tops of the trees that edged the lake, the birds halted and hovered uncertainly, their wings lifting and falling, their bodies slanting and sweeping slowly, in short circles.

The suddenness of their approach, their presence so far inland, something unfamiliar and foreign in the way they had winged their progress, for a moment held the group upon the terrace silent.

"They are gulls from the Sound," said Lowell.

"They are too large for gulls," returned Mortimer. "They might be wild geese, but," he answered himself, in a puzzled voice, "it is too late; and wild geese follow a leader."

As though they feared the birds might hear them and take alarm, the men, unconsciously, had spoken in low tones.

"They move as though they were very tired," whispered Elsie Mortimer.

"I think," said Ainsley, "they have lost their way."

But even as he spoke, the birds, as though they had reached their goal, spread their wings to the full length and sank to the shallow water at the farthest margin of the lake.

As they fell the sun struck full upon them, turning their great pinions into flashing white and silver.

"Oh!" cried the girl, "but they are beautiful!"

Between the house and the lake there was a ridge of rock higher than the head of a man, and to this Ainsley and his guests ran for cover. On hands and knees, like hunters stalking game, they scrambled up the face of the rock and peered cautiously into the pond. Below them, less than one hundred yards away, on a tiny promontory, the six white birds stood motionless. They showed no sign of fear. They could not but know that beyond the lonely circle of the pond were the haunts of men. From the farm came the tinkle of a cow−bell, the bark of a dog, and in the valley, six miles distant, rose faintly upon the stillness of the sunset hour the rumble of a passing train. But if these sounds carried, the birds gave no heed. In each drooping head and dragging wing, in the forward stoop of each white body, weighing heavily on the slim, black legs, was written utter weariness, abject fatigue. To each even to lower his bill and sip from the cool waters was a supreme effort. And in their exhaustion so complete was something humanly helpless and pathetic.

To Ainsley the mysterious visitors made a direct appeal. He felt as though they had thrown themselves upon his hospitality. That they showed such confidence that the sanctuary would be kept sacred touched him. And while his friends spoke eagerly, he remained silent, watching the drooping, ghost−like figures, his eyes filled with pity.

"I have seen birds like those in Florida," Mortimer was whispering, "but they were not migratory birds."

"And I've seen white cranes in the Adirondacks," said Lowell, "but never six at one time."

"They're like no bird I ever saw out of a zoo," declared Elsie Mortimer. "Maybe they ARE from the Zoo? Maybe they escaped from the Bronx?"

"The Bronx is too near," objected Lowell. "These birds have come a great distance. They move as though they had been flying for many days."

As though the absurdity of his own thought amused him, Mortimer laughed softly.

"I'll tell you what they DO look like," he said. "They look like that bird you see on the Nile, the sacred Ibis, they−−"

Something between a gasp and a cry startled him into silence. He found his host staring wildly, his lips parted, his eyes open wide.

"Where?" demanded Ainsley. "Where did you say?" His voice was so hoarse, so strange, that they all turned and looked.

"On the Nile," repeated Mortimer. "All over Egypt. Why?"

Ainsley made no answer. Unclasping his hold, he suddenly slid down the face of the rock, and with a bump lit on his hands and knees. With one bound he had cleared a flower−bed. In two more he had mounted the steps to the terrace, and in another instant had disappeared into the house.

"What happened to him?" demanded Elsie Mortimer.

"He's gone to get a gun!" exclaimed Mortimer. "But he mustn't! How can he think of shooting them?" he cried indignantly. "I'll put a stop to that!"

In the hall he found Ainsley surrounded by a group of startled servants.

"You get that car at the door in five minutes!" he was shouting, "and YOU telephone the hotel to have my trunks out of the cellar and on board the Kron Prinz Albert by midnight. Then you telephone Hoboken that I want a

cabin, and if they haven't got a cabin I want the captain's. And tell them anyway I'm coming on board to−night, and I'm going with them if I have to sleep on deck. And YOU," he cried, turning to Mortimer, "take a shotgun and guard that lake, and if anybody tries to molest those birds−−shoot him! They've come from Egypt! From Polly Kirkland! She sent them! They're a sign!"

"Are you going mad?" cried Mortimer.

"No!" roared Ainsley. "I'm going to Egypt, and I'm going NOW!"

Polly Kirkland and her friends were travelling slowly up the Nile, and had reached Luxor. A few hundred yards below the village their dahabiyeh was moored to the bank, and, on the deck, Miss Kirkland was watching a scarlet sun sink behind two palm−trees. By the grace of that special Providence that cares for drunken men, citizens of the United States, and lovers, her friends were on shore, and she was alone. For this she was grateful, for her thoughts were of a melancholy and tender nature and she had no wish for any companion save one. In consequence, when a steam−launch, approaching at full speed with the rattle of a quick−firing gun, broke upon her meditations, she was distinctly annoyed.

But when, with much ringing of bells and shouting of orders, the steam−launch rammed the paint off her dahabiyeh, and a young man flung himself over the rail and ran toward her, her annoyance passed, and with a sigh she sank into his outstretched, eager arms.

Half an hour later Ainsley laughed proudly and happily.

"Well!" he exclaimed, "you can never say I kept YOU waiting. I didn't lose much time, did I? Ten minutes after I got your C. Q. D. signal I was going down the Boston Post Road at seventy miles an hour."

"My what?" said the girl.

"The sign!" explained Ainsley. "The sign you were to send me to tell me"−−he bent over her hands and added gently−−"that you cared for me."

"Oh, I remember," laughed Polly Kirkland. "I was to send you a sign, wasn't I? You were to 'read it in your heart'," she quoted.

"And I did," returned Ainsley complacently. "There were several false alarms, and I'd almost lost hope, but when the messengers came I knew them."

With puzzled eyes the girl frowned and raised her head.

"Messengers?" she repeated. "I sent no message. Of course," she went on, "when I said you would 'read it in your heart' I meant that if you REALLY loved me you would not wait for a sign, but you would just COME!" She sighed proudly and contentedly. "And you came. You understood that, didn't you?" she asked anxiously.

For an instant Ainsley stared blankly, and then to hide his guilty countenance drew her toward him and kissed her.

"Of course," he stammered−−"of course I understood. That was why I came. I just couldn't stand it any longer."

Breathing heavily at the thought of the blunder he had so narrowly avoided, Ainsley turned his head toward the great red disk that was disappearing into the sands of the desert. He was so long silent that the girl lifted her eyes, and found that already he had forgotten her presence and, transfixed, was staring at the sky. On his face was bewilderment and wonder and a touch of awe. The girl followed the direction of his eyes, and in the swiftly

gathering darkness saw coming slowly toward them, and descending as they came, six great white birds.

They moved with the last effort of complete exhaustion. In the drooping head and dragging wings of each was written utter weariness, abject fatigue. For a moment they hovered over the dahabiyeh and above the two young lovers, and then, like tired travellers who had reached their journey's end, they spread their wings and sank to the muddy waters of the Nile and into the enveloping night.

"Some day," said Ainsley, "I have a confession to make to you."