THE VICAR'S GARDEN AND OTHER STORIES

THE VICAR'S GARDEN (1907)

The Vicar's Garden

She had been silent for some minutes. The hill from the Bay* is so steep that words only brew in the mind and are not uttered until the short stretch of level lane is reached. When she began to speak I knew she had been taking a wistful look into the Future from the delightful promontory of the Present which we had gained now after so long hoping, and planning, and working.

"This" said she "would be a perfect place for a honeymoon."

Then she blushed, and I smiled.

"You see" she said hastily "the hills and the headlands give us such a lovely, happy corner of the world to ourselves, and then there are such—"

"Snug little nests on the cliffs" I suggested; but she was meditating a higher flight:

"Such great stretches of moor* where you might fancy you were the only two in the world."

"Paradise Regained"* I commented.

The comment was lost on her. She had dropped my arm and was peeping through a doorway opening in a high stone wall by the roadside. I must peep also. She was already tip-toeing across a shadowy courtyard paved with blue and brown pebbles from the beach towards a cluster of inquisitive, beckoning sunbeams on the other side. Through a tall, narrow archway in the opposite wall crowded the sunbeams, forcing a way through the clusters of half-translucent young ivy-leaves, and tempting us on to a green and gold path of light, promising warmth and beauty beyond.

It was too tempting for the woman.* She crept on. I looked this way at the open house door, and that way, where was another egress from the cool shadows of the courtyard. There a man appeared, and I retreated hastily on to the lane. I heard his clattering tread across the narrow pebbles; I heard the rustle of a dress and the patter of feet as she flew towards me. But the man followed determinedly. She brushed her stray hair into place and prepared to meet him. I turned my back on him.

"Did you want anything?" asked a meek little voice.

"It looked so pretty and fascinating" she replied "I felt I must have just one look."

I took courage and turned round. He was a little man with ragged black whiskers, as meek as a maggot. The idea of fleeing before him! Moreover he was good-natured flowing with the milk of human kindness* and the honey of generosity. He carried a shallow basket, almost like a wicker-work tray, whereon rolled great gooseberries, heavy, and fat, and purple like aldermen,* and where reclined bunches of currants, black, and big with pale-green sweetness.

"The garden was open to visitors yesterday" said the delightful little man musingly. He saw her look of appeal, and continued almost bashfully:

"You can go in now if you like."

In an instant she was tripping across the gloomy courtyard, scorning the servant who stared through the black uncurtained window. Joy to tread the path of sunlight, joy to pass through that wonderful archway which tempted one so with its lofty promises! She waited for me impatiently on the lawn by the gleaming bay bush, then before I reached her she darted off again to the flower beds along the sides of the grass plot, hovering over them like a white butterfly. Having found a seat by the path at the far end of the lawn I sat down and looked before me.

At my feet the ground sloped downwards, slanting, I surmised, to the little beck,* the same that babbles through the village and rushes into the sea so eagerly between the waves. I lifted my eyes from the godetias* and pansies, over the rose bushes, over an arch of crimson ramblers,* over the tops of the tall trees that fill the beck valley, and I saw the little northern bay sleeping before me, and the great headland seeming in the morning haze an infinite distance away. Beyond the splendour of the flowers so near to me, crimson and scarlet, pink and purest white, lay the mysterious sea, pale grey-blue, and very still. The rugged beak* was softened and made tender also by the morning yet young and fond.

My companion was by my side reproaching me. "How can you sit still in this lovely place and not look at the flowers? Come, see this."

She lifted a heavy headed rose, and I must put my face to its cool fresh lips and inhale the sweetness and sympathy it breathed out to me; I must stroke with my finger the velvet smoothness of the darkest crimson blossoms; I must taste the piquancy of this strange tea-scented flower. Unless I admired and was ecstatic she was not satisfied; when I was all rapture she too was happy. She took a great spray in her arms,

and clasped the big loose-petalled blossoms till her breast was covered and her face glowed over a bank of roses. I did homage, and she led me on.

The paths wound down the hill now between dark high hedges, now out among the sunlit roses and under trailing clusters of honey-suckle and of clematis. Occasionally, when the ground was for a space level, or nearly so, we would come upon a glorious company of roses which leaned cheek to cheek in happy sisterhood, or flaunted bravely in the sun, or fluttered down to the ground like a cloud of butterflies settling. There were roses almost black, dusky and splendid, and the colour ran through crimson and carmine till it was found lingering like a faint pure passion in the heart of some virgin flower; there were nuns with white full bosoms in the depths of which purity reflecting upon purity showed cold and green, the colour of ice; there was the 'beauté inconstante',* flaming in the bud, but fickle, apt to turn out sullen reddish yellow.

How we gloried in the Vicar's roses. We followed the downward path to its end in the chilly pine wood, then wound our way up again on the other side of the garden. When we sat again on the seat at the end of the lawn the headland was less distant, and the morning older by over an hour.

"I have never" she sighed, sinking down onto the seat beside me "I have never been so happy."

She, however, had not looked across at the sea and felt again its immense mystery and aloofness.

"I wonder" she mused "what kind of a man the vicar is. I wish I were he. I could write sermons in this garden, and live holily in the vicarage. While I am toiling away, the vicars daughter sits here with her book or her canvas. But it's good of him to let us come, and perhaps we have something he has not. I will just go and get a glimpse of those green houses in the other garden."

So off she went again, as wandering and erratic as her thoughts.

"The vicars garden!" exclaimed our old landlady in her delightful accent—she was a charming woman—"Oh, we call it the vicarage garden, because the vicar doesn't live there. No—it's his son, you know, and he's mad"

"Mad!" echoed my companion, clinging to my arm "If I had known I should not have dared go by those windows. There now, that's why they have no curtains, front or back, for fear he would set fire to them. I knew there was a reason."

"Yes" continued our landlady, lifting her hands and shaking her head "The vicar, poor man, lost both of his sons. This one went out to a war,* —there was a war some time back?" I nodded, and she went on "Yes, he went to the war and he had a fever and it got in his head, poor man, and he's never been right since. So the vicar put him in the vicarage with his keepers, and himself lives in the Bay"

"And the other son?" she asked, in great concern.

"He went to Australia, a wild country, and got lost in the bushes,* and wandered round and round, but there's no water there, so he died of thirst, ay, very sad, very sad." The old lady wiped away a tear "And they were all he had" she concluded.

The honeymoon will not, I fear, be spent by that bonny northern bay.

THE SHADOW IN THE ROSE GARDEN
(1914)

The Shadow In The Rose Garden

A rather small young man sat by the window of a pretty seaside cottage trying to persuade himself that he was reading the newspaper. It was about half past eight. Outside, the "glory" roses* hung in the morning sunshine like little bowls of fire tipped up. The young man looked at the table, then at the clock, then at his own big silver watch. An air of resignation came onto his face. He rose and reflected on the miserable oil paintings that hung on the walls of the room, evidently getting some satisfaction out of "The Stag at Bay,"* which held him for a few moments. He tried the lid of the piano, and found it locked. He caught sight of his own face in a little mirror, pulled his brown mustache, and an alert interest sprang into his eyes. He was not ill-favored. He twisted his mustache. His figure was rather small, but alert and vigorous. As he turned from the mirror a look of self-commiseration mingled with the satisfaction he had derived from the sight of himself.

In a state of self-suppression, he went through into the garden. His jacket, however, did not look dejected. It had a smart and self-confident air, sitting upon a healthy body. He contemplated the Tree of Heaven* that flourished by the lawn, but derived no nourishment therefrom. There was more promise in a crooked apple tree covered with brown-red fruit. Glancing round guiltily, he broke off an apple and, with his back to the house, took a clean, sharp bite.* To his surprise the fruit was sweet. He took another. Then again he turned hastily to survey the bedroom windows overlooking the garden. He started, seeing a woman's figure, but it was only his wife. She was gazing across to the sea, apparently ignorant of him.

For a moment or two he looked at her wistfully and doubtfully. She was a good-looking woman who seemed older than he, rather pale, but healthy, her face yearning. Her rich auburn hair was heaped in folds on her forehead. She looked shut off from him and his world, gazing away to the sea. It irked her husband that she should continue to be in ignorance of him, so he pulled poppy fruits and threw them at the window. She started, glanced at him with a mild smile and looked away again. Then almost immediately she left the window. He went indoors

to meet her. She had a fine carriage, very proud, and wore a dress of soft white muslin.*

"I've been waiting for hours," he said.

"For me or for breakfast?" she said lightly. "You know we said nine o'clock. I should have thought you could have slept longer after the journey."

"You know I'm always up at five, and I couldn't stop in bed after six. You might as well be in pit as in bed, on a morning like this."

"If I were you," she said, "I should forget the pit while we're here."

She moved about examining the room, looking with a faint twitch of contempt at the ornaments under glass covers. He, planted on the hearthrug, watched her rather uneasily, and entirely indulgent. Evidently she found fault with their apartments.

"Come," she said, taking his arm, "let us go into the garden while Mrs. Coates lays the table. I can hear her setting the tray."

"I hope she'll be quick about it," he said, pulling his mustache.

She gave a short laugh, and leaned on his arm as they went. He had lighted a pipe.

Mrs. Coates, the desired, entered the room as they went down the steps. The delightful, erect old lady hastened to the window for a good view of her lodgers. Her china-blue eyes were bright as she watched the young couple go down the path, he walking proudly in an easy, masculine fashion, because his wife was on his arm. The landlady began talking to herself in a soft Yorkshire accent.

"Just of a height they are, just. She wouldn't ha' married a man less than herself in stature, I think, though he's not her equal in wits."

Here her granddaughter came in, setting a tray on the table. The girl went to the old woman's side.

"He's been eating the apples, gran'," she said.

"Has he, my pet? Well, if he's happy, why not?"

"I should ha' thought he'd want 'em more if he wasn't happy," said the child, in the tone of a wiseacre.*

Outside, the young, well-favored man listened with gratification to the chink of the teacups. At last, with a sigh of relief, he sat down to breakfast. After he had eaten for some time, he rested a moment, and said:

"Do you think it's any better place than Bridlington?"*

"I do," she said, "infinitely. Besides, I didn't come for that, either."

"What for, then?"

"You know I lived here for two years."

He ate reflectively.

"As a rule," he said, "there's nothing so miserable as going back to places where you used to live."

She became very silent, and then, stealthily, put out a feeler.

"And do you think I'm going to be miserable?" she asked.

He laughed comfortably, putting the marmalade thick on his bread.

"I hope not," he said.

She again took no notice of him.

"Don't talk about me in the village, Frank," she said casually. "Don't say who I am, or that I used to live here. I don't want them bothering me."

"Why?"

"'Why'? Can't you understand why?"

"Yes—only—I wondered why you came at all."

"To see the place, not the people."

He was satisfied, taking her for granted, like the sky above.

"Women," she said, "are different from men. I don't know why I wanted to come so badly—but I did."

She helped him to another cup of coffee, solicitously.

"Only," she resumed, "don't talk about me in the village." She laughed prettily. "They'd be sure to tell you what a little flirt I was." And she moved the crumbs on the cloth with her fingertip.

He looked at her as he drank his coffee, sucked his mustache, and putting down his cup, smiled to himself.

"I'll bet you were," he said comfortably.

She looked, with a little guiltiness that flattered him, down at the tablecloth.

"Well," she said, subdued, "you won't give me away, who I am, will you?"

"No," he said, laughing, "I won't give you away; I want to keep you myself."

He was pleased with himself, because of this speech.

She jerked up her head, changing the subject, and said, rather hard and yet forcing the tone of a caress:

"I must see Mrs. Coates this morning, and I've several little things to do. So you go into the bay, will you, and we'll have dinner at one; then I'll show you where I used to live—shall I?"

"But you can't be talking with Mrs. Coates for all morning," he said.

"Oh, well—then I've some letters to write, and I must get that mark out of my skirt. What a blessing I brought some benzine!"*