

Chapter III. Natalie

Now what Bastin had said about marriage stuck in my mind as his blundering remarks had a way of doing, perhaps because of the grain of honest truth with which they were often permeated. Probably in my position it was more or less my duty to marry. But here came the rub; I had never experienced any leanings that way. I was as much a man as others, more so than many are, perhaps, and I liked women, but at the same time they repelled me.

My old fastidiousness came in; to my taste there was always something wrong about them. While they attracted one part of my nature they revolted another part, and on the whole I preferred to do without their intimate society, rather than work violence to this second and higher part of me. Moreover, quite at the beginning of my career I had concluded from observation that a man gets on better in life alone, rather than with another to drag at his side, or by whom perhaps he must be dragged. Still true marriage, such as most men and some women have dreamed of in their youth, had always been one of my ideals; indeed it was on and around this vision that I wrote that first book of mine which was so successful. Since I knew this to be unattainable in our imperfect conditions, however, notwithstanding Bastin's strictures, again I dismissed the whole matter from my mind as a vain imagination.

As an alternative I reflected upon a parliamentary career which I was

not too old to begin, and even toyed with one or two opportunities that offered themselves, as these do to men of wealth and advanced views. They never came to anything, for in the end I decided that Party politics were so hateful and so dishonest, that I could not bring myself to put my neck beneath their yoke. I was sure that if I tried to do so, I should fail more completely than I had done at the Bar and in Literature. Here, too, I am quite certain that I was right.

The upshot of it all was that I sought refuge in that last expedient of weary Englishmen, travel, not as a globe-trotter, but leisurely and with an inquiring mind, learning much but again finding, like the ancient writer whom I have quoted already, that there is no new thing under the sun; that with certain variations it is the same thing over and over again.

No, I will make an exception, the East did interest me enormously. There it was, at Benares, that I came into touch with certain thinkers who opened my eyes to a great deal. They released some hidden spring in my nature which hitherto had always been striving to break through the crust of our conventions and inherited ideas. I know now that what I was seeking was nothing less than the Infinite; that I had "immortal longings in me." I listened to all their solemn talk of epochs and years measureless to man, and reflected with a thrill that after all man might have his part in every one of them. Yes, that bird of passage as he seemed to be, flying out of darkness into darkness, still he might have spread his wings in the light of other suns millions upon millions of

years ago, and might still spread them, grown radiant and glorious, millions upon millions of years hence in a time unborn.

If only I could know the truth. Was Life (according to Bickley) merely a short activity bounded by nothingness before and behind; or (according to Bastin) a conventional golden-harped and haloed immortality, a word of which he did not in the least understand the meaning?

Or was it something quite different from either of these, something vast and splendid beyond the reach of vision, something God-sent, beginning and ending in the Eternal Absolute and at last partaking of His attributes and nature and from aeon to aeon shot through with His light? And how was the truth to be learned? I asked my Eastern friends, and they talked vaguely of long ascetic preparation, of years upon years of learning, from whom I could not quite discover. I was sure it could not be from them, because clearly they did not know; they only passed on what they had heard elsewhere, when or how they either could not or would not explain. So at length I gave it up, having satisfied myself that all this was but an effort of Oriental imagination called into life by the sweet influences of the Eastern stars.

I gave it up and went away, thinking that I should forget. But I did not forget. I was quick with a new hope, or at any rate with a new aspiration, and that secret child of holy desire grew and grew within my soul, till at length it flashed upon me that this soul of mine was itself the hidden Master from which I must learn my lesson. No wonder

that those Eastern friends could not give his name, seeing that whatever they really knew, as distinguished from what they had heard, and it was little enough, each of them had learned from the teaching of his own soul.

Thus, then, I too became a dreamer with only one longing, the longing for wisdom, for that spirit touch which should open my eyes and enable me to see.

Yet now it happened strangely enough that when I seemed within myself to have little further interest in the things of the world, and least of all in women, I, who had taken another guest to dwell with me, those things of the world came back to me and in the shape of Woman the Inevitable. Probably it was so decreed since is it not written that no man can live to himself alone, or lose himself in watching and nurturing the growth of his own soul?

It happened thus. I went to Rome on my way home from India, and stayed there a while. On the day after my arrival I wrote my name in the book of our Minister to Italy at that time, Sir Alfred Upton, not because I wished him to ask me to dinner, but for the reason that I had heard of him as a man of archeological tastes and thought that he might enable me to see things which otherwise I should not see.

As it chanced he knew about me through some of my Devonshire neighbours who were friends of his, and did ask me to dinner on the following night. I accepted and found myself one of a considerable party, some of them distinguished English people who wore Orders, as is customary when one dines with the representative of our Sovereign. Seeing these, and this shows that in the best of us vanity is only latent, for the first time in my life I was sorry that I had none and was only plain Mr. Arbuthnot who, as Sir Alfred explained to me politely, must go in to dinner last, because all the rest had titles, and without even a lady as there was not one to spare.

Nor was my lot bettered when I got there, as I found myself seated between an Italian countess and a Russian prince, neither of whom could talk English, while, alas, I knew no foreign language, not even French in which they addressed me, seeming surprised that I did not understand them. I was humiliated at my own ignorance, although in fact I was not ignorant, only my education had been classical. Indeed I was a good classic and had kept up my knowledge more or less, especially since I became an idle man. In my confusion it occurred to me that the Italian countess might know Latin from which her own language was derived, and addressed her in that tongue. She stared, and Sir Alfred, who was not far off and overheard me (he also knew Latin), burst into laughter and proceeded to explain the joke in a loud voice, first in French and then in English, to the assembled company, who all became infected with merriment and also stared at me as a curiosity.

Then it was that for the first time I saw Natalie, for owing to a mistake of my driver I had arrived rather late and had not been introduced to her. As her father's only daughter, her mother being dead, she was seated at the end of the table behind a fan-like arrangement of white Madonna lilies, and she had bent forward and, like the others, was looking at me, but in such a fashion that her head from that distance seemed as though it were surrounded and crowned with lilies. Indeed the greatest art could not have produced a more beautiful effect which was, however, really one of naked accident.

An angel looking down upon earth through the lilies of Heaven--that was the rather absurd thought which flashed into my mind. I did not quite realise her face at first except that it seemed to be both dark and fair; as a fact her waving hair which grew rather low upon her forehead, was dark, and her large, soft eyes were grey. I did not know, and to this moment I do not know if she was really beautiful, but certainly the light that shone through those eyes of hers and seemed to be reflected upon her delicate features, was beauty itself. It was like that glowing through a thin vase of the purest alabaster within which a lamp is placed, and I felt this effect to arise from no chance, like that of the lily-setting, but, as it were, from the lamp of the spirit within.

Our eyes met, and I suppose that she saw the wonder and admiration in mine. At any rate her amused smile faded, leaving the face rather serious, though still sweetly serious, and a tinge of colour crept over

it as the first hue of dawn creeps into a pearly sky. Then she withdrew herself behind the screen of lilies and for the rest of that dinner which I thought was never coming to an end, practically I saw her no more. Only I noted as she passed out that although not tall, she was rounded and graceful in shape and that her hands were peculiarly delicate.

Afterwards in the drawing-room her father, with whom I had talked at the table, introduced me to her, saying:

"My daughter is the real archaeologist, Mr. Arbuthnot, and I think if you ask her, she may be able to help you."

Then he bustled away to speak to some of his important guests, from whom I think he was seeking political information.

"My father exaggerates," she said in a soft and very sympathetic voice, "but perhaps"--and she motioned me to a seat at her side.

Then we talked of the places and things that I more particularly desired to see and, well, the end of it was that I went back to my hotel in love with Natalie; and as she afterwards confessed, she went to bed in love with me.

It was a curious business, more like meeting a very old friend from whom one had been separated by circumstances for a score of years or so than

anything else. We were, so to speak, intimate from the first; we knew all about each other, although here and there was something new, something different which we could not remember, lines of thought, veins of memory which we did not possess in common. On one point I am absolutely clear: it was not solely the everyday and ancient appeal of woman to man and man to woman which drew us together, though doubtless this had its part in our attachment as under our human conditions it must do, seeing that it is Nature's bait to ensure the continuance of the race. It was something more, something quite beyond that elementary impulse.

At any rate we loved, and one evening in the shelter of the solemn walls of the great Coliseum at Rome, which at that hour were shut to all except ourselves, we confessed our love. I really think we must have chosen the spot by tacit but mutual consent because we felt it to be fitting. It was so old, so impregnated with every human experience, from the direst crime of the tyrant who thought himself a god, to the sublimest sacrifice of the martyr who already was half a god; with every vice and virtue also which lies between these extremes, that it seemed to be the most fitting altar whereon to offer our hearts and all that caused them to beat, each to the other.

So Natalie and I were betrothed within a month of our first meeting. Within three we were married, for what was there to prevent or delay? Naturally Sir Alfred was delighted, seeing that he possessed but

small private resources and I was able to make ample provision for his daughter who had hitherto shown herself somewhat difficult in this business of matrimony and now was bordering on her twenty-seventh year. Everybody was delighted, everything went smoothly as a sledge sliding down a slope of frozen snow and the mists of time hid whatever might be at the end of that slope. Probably a plain; at the worst the upward rise of ordinary life.

That is what we thought, if we thought at all. Certainly we never dreamed of a precipice. Why should we, who were young, by comparison, quite healthy and very rich? Who thinks of precipices under such circumstances, when disaster seems to be eliminated and death is yet a long way off?

And yet we ought to have done so, because we should have known that smooth surfaces without impediment to the runners often end in something of the kind.

I am bound to say that when we returned home to Fulcombe, where of course we met with a great reception, including the ringing (out of tune) of the new peal of bells that I had given to the church, Bastin made haste to point this out.

"Your wife seems a very nice and beautiful lady, Arbuthnot," he reflected aloud after dinner, when Mrs. Bastin, glowering as usual, though what at I do not know, had been escorted from the room by

Natalie, "and really, when I come to think of it, you are an unusually fortunate person. You possess a great deal of money, much more than you have any right to; which you seem to have done very little to earn and do not spend quite as I should like you to do, and this nice property, that ought to be owned by a great number of people, as, according to the views you express, I should have thought you would acknowledge, and everything else that a man can want. It is very strange that you should be so favoured and not because of any particular merits of your own which one can see. However, I have no doubt it will all come even in the end and you will get your share of troubles, like others. Perhaps Mrs. Arbuthnot will have no children as there is so much for them to take. Or perhaps you will lose all your money and have to work for your living, which might be good for you. Or," he added, still thinking aloud after his fashion, "perhaps she will die young--she has that kind of face, although, of course, I hope she won't," he added, waking up.

I do not know why, but his wandering words struck me cold; the proverbial funeral bell at the marriage feast was nothing to them. I suppose it was because in a flash of intuition I knew that they would come true and that he was an appointed Cassandra. Perhaps this uncanny knowledge overcame my natural indignation at such super-gaucherie of which no one but Bastin could have been capable, and even prevented me from replying at all, so that I merely sat still and looked at him.

But Bickley did reply with some vigour.

"Forgive me for saying so, Bastin," he said, bristling all over as it were, "but your remarks, which may or may not be in accordance with the principles of your religion, seem to me to be in singularly bad taste. They would have turned the stomachs of a gathering of early Christians, who appear to have been the worst mannered people in the world, and at any decent heathen feast your neck would have been wrung as that of a bird of ill omen."

"Why?" asked Bastin blankly. "I only said what I thought to be the truth. The truth is better than what you call good taste."

"Then I will say what I think also to be the truth," replied Bickley, growing furious. "It is that you use your Christianity as a cloak for bad manners. It teaches consideration and sympathy for others of which you seem to have none. Moreover, since you talk of the death of people's wives, I will tell you something about your own, as a doctor, which I can do as I never attended her. It is highly probable, in my opinion, that she will die before Mrs. Arbuthnot, who is quite a healthy person with a good prospect of life."

"Perhaps," said Bastin. "If so, it will be God's will and I shall not complain" (here Bickley snorted), "though I do not see what you can know about it. But why should you cast reflections on the early Christians who were people of strong principle living in rough times, and had to wage war against an established devil-worship? I know you are angry because they smashed up the statues of Venus and so forth, but had I

been in their place I should have done the same."

"Of course you would, who doubts it? But as for the early Christians and their iconoclastic performances--well, curse them, that's all!" and he sprang up and left the room.

I followed him.

Let it not be supposed from the above scene that there was any ill-feeling between Bastin and Bickley. On the contrary they were much attached to each other, and this kind of quarrel meant no more than the strong expression of their individual views to which they were accustomed from their college days. For instance Bastin was always talking about the early Christians and missionaries, while Bickley loathed both, the early Christians because of the destruction which they had wrought in Egypt, Italy, Greece and elsewhere, of all that was beautiful; and the missionaries because, as he said, they were degrading and spoiling the native races and by inducing them to wear clothes, rendering them liable to disease. Bastin would answer that their souls were more important than their bodies, to which Bickley replied that as there was no such thing as a soul except in the stupid imagination of priests, he differed entirely on the point. As it was quite impossible for either to convince the other, there the conversation would end, or drift into something in which they were mutually interested, such as natural history and the hygiene of the neighbourhood.

Here I may state that Bickley's keen professional eye was not mistaken when he diagnosed Mrs. Bastin's state of health as dangerous. As a matter of fact she was suffering from heart disease that a doctor can often recognise by the colour of the lips, etc., which brought about her death under the following circumstances:

Her husband attended some ecclesiastical function at a town over twenty miles away and was to have returned by a train which would have brought him home about five o'clock. As he did not arrive she waited at the station for him until the last train came in about seven o'clock--without the beloved Basil. Then, on a winter's night she tore up to the Priory and begged me to lend her a dog-cart in which to drive to the said town to look for him. I expostulated against the folly of such a proceeding, saying that no doubt Basil was safe enough but had forgotten to telegraph, or thought that he would save the sixpence which the wire cost.

Then it came out, to Natalie's and my intense amusement, that all this was the result of her jealous nature of which I have spoken. She said she had never slept a night away from her husband since they were married and with so many "designing persons" about she could not say what might happen if she did so, especially as he was "such a favourite and so handsome." (Bastin was a fine looking man in his rugged way.)

I suggested that she might have a little confidence in him, to which she replied darkly that she had no confidence in anybody.

The end of it was that I lent her the cart with a fast horse and a good driver, and off she went. Reaching the town in question some two and a half hours later, she searched high and low through wind and sleet, but found no Basil. He, it appeared, had gone on to Exeter, to look at the cathedral where some building was being done, and missing the last train had there slept the night.

About one in the morning, after being nearly locked up as a mad woman, she drove back to the Vicarage, again to find no Basil. Even then she did not go to bed but raged about the house in her wet clothes, until she fell down utterly exhausted. When her husband did return on the following morning, full of information about the cathedral, she was dangerously ill, and actually passed away while uttering a violent tirade against him for his supposed suspicious proceedings.

That was the end of this truly odious British matron.

In after days Bastin, by some peculiar mental process, canonised her in his imagination as a kind of saint. "So loving," he would say, "such a devoted wife! Why, my dear Humphrey, I can assure you that even in the midst of her death-struggle her last thoughts were of me," words that caused Bickley to snort with more than usual vigour, until I kicked him to silence beneath the table.