

The End of an Episode

By Evelyn Sharp

ALLAN DREW, the novelist, had gone blind. And the ladies who had come to inquire after him sat and discussed the matter over their afternoon tea. Most of the people from the country round who had come with the same object had gone away baffled by his uncompromising attitude ; for Allan Drew had never cultivated the particular set of social emotions which were demanded by his present situation ; and he had no intention of helping the people, who bored him, to get through a formula of compassion that he did not want. So this afternoon he sat and listened in silence while his visitors talked with conviction about a trial of which they had not the least experience.

“It is difficult, sometimes, to understand the workings of Providence, but——” said the Rector’s wife. In spite of the years of practice that she must have had in the work of consolation, she did not seem to be getting on very well now.

To the novelist she appeared to be wavering between an inclination to treat him like a villager who had to be patronised and a Parish Councillor who had to be propitiated.

“Almost impossible, yes,” said Allan Drew, and he shifted his position wearily.

“I think Fate is sometimes kinder than she seems at first sight,”
said

said the Squire's wife, who had read some modern novels, and therefore did not talk of Providence.

"No doubt there are instances," assented the blind man patiently, and he wondered vaguely why the third lady whom they had indistinctly mentioned to him on their arrival had not spoken at all. He had not lost his sight long, and it worried him to be unable to attach any kind of personality to her.

"Loss of physical sight may sometimes mean a gain of spiritual perception," the Rector's wife laboured onwards. She sometimes copied out her husband's sermons for him, and she had dropped unawares into the phraseology.

"It is to be hoped there are compensations," said her host, and he turned towards the sofa where he imagined his unknown guest to be sitting.

The third lady spoke at last.

"I suppose there's some good in being blind, as you both seem to think so, but I don't know where it comes in, I'm sure ; and I'm perfectly certain nothing can make up for it for all that," she said, not very clearly ; but the novelist hailed her incoherence with relief, and recognised the human note in it.

"Nothing can," he said, and nodded in her direction.

The third lady went on :

"I wonder, have you tried Dr. Middleton ?" His countenance fell again. After all, she was only like everybody else.

"Oh no, I haven't tried him, nor any one else you are likely to mention," he answered with a touch of impatience.

"Haven't you, really ? Now I call that rather a pity ; don't you ?"

"Oh, very likely," he said indifferently, and waited for them to go. The Squire's wife was the first to move, and she pressed his hand warmly and made the unnecessary remark that her
husband

husband would come and read the paper to him as usual in the morning. The Squire had a blatant voice, and thought it necessary to read with a great deal of expression, and always mistook the novelist's affliction for deafness.

"I shall be delighted," said Allan in a spiritless voice.

But after all it was not the Squire who came to read the *Times* to him on the following morning. It was the unknown lady of the night before; and she knocked at his door just as the housekeeper was clearing away the breakfast.

"The Squire has a cold," she explained, with the faintest suggestion of laughter in her voice, "and I said I would come instead. It is so unpleasant to read to any one if you've got a cold, isn't it? It makes so many interruptions."

"It is very unpleasant to be read to by the Squire when the Squire has got a cold," said Allan, boldly. Somehow the reading did not promise to be quite as dull as usual.

"Where shall I begin?" she said, disregarding his remark altogether; "I read atrociously, you know, but I hope you won't mind that."

"How do you expect me to believe it?" he said, and suggested that she should begin with the Foreign News.

She had not under-estimated her powers. She had all the tricks of which a bad reader is capable. She made two or three attempts at every word that baffled her, and said, "Oh, bother!" at the end of each. She forgot to read out any of the explanatory headings, and she rushed through the politics on the Continent as though they all related to one nation whose name she had not mentioned. She frequently read a few lines to herself and then continued aloud further on, while her listener had to supply the context for himself.

"That's the end of the Foreign News," she said presently, to
Allan's

Allan's intense relief. "I think politics are very difficult to understand; don't you?"

"I find them most bewildering," he confessed, and he had to wait patiently a little longer while she read the rest of the news to herself and made many comments on it out aloud; and he was quite willing to believe her when she told him presently that there was absolutely nothing in the paper.

"Never mind about the paper, I've had quite enough," he said; "won't you talk instead?"

"What a good idea," she said; "I'll tell you all the news, shall I? There's going to be a temperance meeting in the schoolroom tomorrow, and I'm going for a walk on Blackcliff Hill this afternoon."

"I always walk on Blackcliff Hill myself in the afternoon," murmured Allan in parenthesis.

"The Squire has got a cold—oh, I told you that," she went on. "And let me see, is there anything else? I know there was a tremendous fuss about something before I got up this morning; somebody took a horse somewhere and broke it somehow or another, its knees or the harness or something, and I came down late to breakfast. That really is all. Did you ever know such a place as this?"

"Oh, but that isn't nearly all," he protested with a smile.

"Why, what else?"

"Well—yourself," he said, and put his leg over the arm of his chair and turned his face in her direction.

"Oh, but that's so dull," she said hastily; "and besides, there isn't anything to tell—there isn't really."

"Yet you have lived," he said slowly, "lived, and perhaps suffered a little as well."

"Well, I suppose I have had my share," she said with the necessary sigh.

"And

“And in all probability loved.”

“Loved! Oh, well, of course, every one has—and besides”——
she interrupted again.

“Very possibly hated,” he went on deliberately.

“We-ell, perhaps, I don't—well.”

“Then let's hear all about it,” he said encouragingly.

It seemed really unkind to refuse any one in so sad a situation.

“But,” she said wavering, “there's such a lot: where shall I begin?”

“I acknowledge that is a difficulty,” he said, weighing the matter carefully, “but perhaps if you were to choose one episode.”

“One episode, yes,” she said, pondering.

“Taken from an interesting period of your life, before you were so old as to——”

“I really do think——” she burst out angrily.

Allan hastened to explain that his estimate of her age, being based entirely upon what he knew of her wit and understanding, and not upon her personal appearance, was most probably exaggerated.

“But what kind of episode?” she pursued reluctantly.

“Oh, well, that I will leave to you,” he said politely; and he found his way to the window, still with his face towards her.

“Before I was married or after?” she asked.

“Well, I should say decidedly after. The probability is that you married very young, so that the episodes, if there really were any, came later on. And I should say that, not very long after either, you may have gone away together to the seaside, where the weather was bad and the days were long, and you began to feel rather bored. And then, let us suppose that your husband was called up to town unexpectedly; and some one else, who was young too, and bored too, staying in the same seaside place——”

“Really,

"Really, Mr. Drew!" cried the other, "one might almost suppose that you knew more about it than I do!"

"One almost might," he agreed, "shall I go on? Let me see, where was I? Oh, the advent of the other young person, who was also bored. He would probably be an artist of some kind, or perhaps dabble in a profession."

"A novelist?" she suggested.

He bowed his head smilingly.

"For the purposes of argument we will call him a novelist. And this young novelist may have met you perhaps, and you may have gone for long walks together."

"All along the cliff," she murmured.

"And talked Art together?"

"All about the novel that wasn't published then," she added.

"And your husband became still more neglectful."

"And the novelist still more persistent," she put in.

"And the situation developed daily and hourly until your husband——"

"Came back by the midday train one Saturday," she said, resting her chin on her hand.

"And the aspiring novelist had to pack up the novel that was not then published and——"

"And he had to go right away, and he never came back," she cried, suddenly starting up and walking over to the other window, where she remained standing with her back to him.

"Yes?" said Allan with a smile, "then it was nothing but an ordinary episode after all."

There was a little pause, which she occupied by throwing the blind-tassel about.

"Mr. Drew, why did you make up all that nonsense?" she said suddenly.

"It

"It was nonsense then?"

"Why did you make it up, and talk as if—as if it really happened—to somebody—once.

"Why?" he said carelessly. "Oh, because I suppose it did really happen to somebody—once. Didn't it?"

The next pause lasted longer.

"I thought you didn't know," she muttered presently.

The blind-tassel was flying wildly through the air. He laughed slightly.

"I didn't. At least, not until you began to read."

"At all events, *you* have not altered much," she retorted, and the blind-tassel came off in her hand.

"Well, I never," said the Squire's wife from the doorway.

"I have knocked three times. And you don't seem to be reading the paper either. You were talking just as though you had known one another all your lives."

"I believe we were," assented the novelist.

"You see," exclaimed his companion elaborately, "we have just discovered that we met on the East Coast once, ever so long ago, soon after I was married. Isn't it odd?"

"In fact, a coincidence," said Allan, to help her out.

The Squire's wife looked as though she did not believe in coincidences much.

"How very strange," she said; "but why in the world didn't you say so last night, Everilde?"

After that, the Squire's wife and Mrs. Witherington did all the talking between them. But Allan managed to get in a word just as they were leaving.

"And what time did you say you would be walking on Black-cliff Hill?" he murmured.

"Ah,"

"Ah," she answered with a laugh. "But I am older now, and Blackcliff Hill is not the East Coast."

"And the novel is published," he said ; and he added to himself as they walked away : "I wonder if her husband is still— Anyhow, I'm not going to find out."

But Everilde Witherington was careful to let him know at their next meeting, which, by the way, did not take place on Blackcliff Hill, that her husband had gone abroad, and that she had come to stay with her great friend, the Squire's wife, to recover from the effects of influenza. After that the conversation flagged a little, and the interview was not such a success as the last one had been.

"You two don't seem to have much to talk about," said the Squire's wife, who was present ; "what's the use of being old friends ?"

"There isn't any use," said the novelist, "all the old subjects are used up, and we are not in touch with the new ones."

"And besides," added Mrs. Witherington, "the fact of your supposing us to be old friends prevents your joining in the conversation, although you are there all the time, don't you see."

"Oh, yes I see, thank you," said the Squire's wife ; "two's company, three's none."

"Oh dear, no, I didn't mean that, really," said her friend ; "and besides, that entirely depends on the other two. Some of the best times I have ever had have been with two other people."

"I should like to ask the two other people about that," said Allan.

About a month later they really did meet one evening on Blackcliff Hill, and this time without the Squire's wife.

Blackcliff Hill was a smooth, round chalk rising, covered with gorse and bramble and springy turf, a broad expanse of green slopes

slopes and hollows without a peak or a suggestion of grandeur or barrenness, a hill like a hundred other hills, with a soft fresh breeze that lingered over it without ruffling its surface.

"How did you know it was me?" she said when he called out to her.

"I always know," he answered in a tone which sounded as though he had not wasted his time during the past month.

"Oh," she said as their hands met, "I came up to see the sunset, you know."

"So did I—at least," he said, and smiled.

"The air is very pleasant up here; you can see three counties—I mean one can—I'm so sorry," she stammered.

"It's a favourite walk of mine," he went on as they strolled through the bracken; "I like the placid conventionality of the place."

"That's just what I don't like," she burst out impatiently; "I would much rather have boulders, and miles of heather, and no haystacks, or cornfields, or chimneys."

"The East Coast for instance?" he suggested, and she subsided into a careful study of the three counties.

"Why do you look at me as though you could see my face?" she asked him presently.

"I like to think I can, for the sake of the old times," he answered lightly.

"Oh, those old times!" she cried; "how fond you are of dragging them up. Why can't you leave them alone?"

"Yes, I suppose it is rather invidious," he said solemnly, "now that they are gone."

"Yes, now that they are gone," she echoed, also solemnly.

He laughed outright.

"What a comedy it all is! Do you remember how we lived

for

for days, with that midday train on Saturday hanging over our heads? And now that there is no one else to prevent us from loving each other——”

“What do you mean?” she said quickly. He laughed again and felt for her hand, and took it between his.

“Mean? Do you suppose I haven’t known it for a whole month, you foolish——”

“Who told you,” she asked, and her thoughts flew to the Squire’s wife.

“Oh, never mind that. Now, please, I want to know why you didn’t tell me you were a widow? Were you afraid of me?”

“What an idea!”

“Then I suppose it was a miserable truce with respectability to enable you to patronise the broken-down novelist without implicating——”

“Allan! How dare you?” she cried, and snatched her hand away. He put his into his pockets, and strolled on.

“Well, you must own it is slightly unaccountable. I thought it was one of your impetuous freaks at first. But you kept it up too long for that. And then I put it down in my vanity to your liking me a little still, and wishing to conceal it. But I was soon dispossessed of that idea. And then finally——”

“How prosy you are,” she grumbled, “you are not half so amusing as you used to be.”

“No, we don’t seem to hit it quite so well as we did then, do we? You see, you were in love with me, and I——”

“You know I never said so once!”

“And we had plenty to talk about. But our conversation is mostly sticky now.”

“There isn’t the novel any more,” she said.

“Nor

"Nor the husband," he rejoined ruthlessly.

They sat down near the top of the hill, and wished for the Squire's wife.

"It's very odd," said the novelist.

"Odd? I call it dull."

"Dull, then, if you like. I wonder who invented the ridiculous idea of two people marrying and living happily ever after. It must have been the first man who wrote for money."

"All the same, I'm rather disappointed," said Mrs. Witherington, gazing steadily at the three counties.

"What about? That you can't fall in love with me now that there is nothing against our marrying?"

"Oh no, not that," she said.

"What then?"

"Oh, well, only that I hoped, just a little you know, that you might still like me enough to—to ask me, so that I could—oh, bother!"

"So that you could have the intense pleasure of refusing me? Sorry I disappointed you."

"We can go on being chums, though, can't we?" she suggested, pulling up handfuls of moss.

"Oh, don't," he groaned, "do be a little more original than that. *You* are not writing for money, are you?"

"Then," she cried desperately, "there *is* nothing left but the sunset; and what's the use of that when you can't see it?"

"Can't I?" he said in a curious tone, "don't I know that it has just got down to the line of fir-trees along the canal, and is streaking across the cornfield, and making the hills on this side look warm?"

He was sheltering his eyes from the sun with his hand as he spoke, and Everilde turned and stared at him suddenly.

"Allan,"

"Allan," she cried, catching at his hand and pulling it down, "Allan, you can—you——"

"Yes," he said with a laugh, squeezing her fingers indifferently because they happened to be in his, "yes. I did try Dr. Middleton after all."

"I never thought you could be blind for long," she muttered, "if it had been any one else, now—but why did you keep it to yourself?"

He laughed heartily as he stretched himself out lazily on the grass and tilted his hat forward.

"Do you really want to know? Because I wanted to have my secret too—that's all. You see, I thought that if I were blind and helpless and all that sort of thing, you might get to care a little, don't you see, and——"

"Then we were both disappointed," she said with a note of triumph in her voice. "I'm rather glad of that."

"Dr. Middleton?" she said presently to the three counties. "Then, if it hadn't been for me——"

But no one finished her sentence, for Allan Drew had suddenly bethought him of a cigarette.