

The Garden of Survival



Algernon Blackwood

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PUBLISHER NOTES:

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Chapter 1

1 IT will surprise and at the same time possibly amuse you to know that I had the instinct to tell what follows to a Priest, and might have done so had not the Man of the World in me whispered that from professional Believers I should get little sympathy, and probably less credence still. For to have my experience disbelieved, or attributed to hallucination, would be intolerable to me. Psychical investigators, I am told, prefer a Medium who takes no cash recompense for his performance, a Healer who gives of his strange powers without reward. There are, however, natural-born priests who yet wear no uniform other than upon their face and heart, but since I know of none I fall back upon yourself, my other half, for in writing this adventure to you I almost feel that I am writing it to myself.

The desire for confession is upon me: this thing must out. It is a story, though an unfinished one. I mention this at once lest, frightened by the thickness of the many pages, you lay them aside against another time, and so perhaps neglect them altogether. A story, however, will invite your interest, and when I add that it is true, I feel that you will bring sympathy to that interest: these together, I hope, may win your attention, and hold it, until you shall have read the final word.

That I should use this form in telling it will offend your literary taste—you who have made your name both as critic and creative writer—for you said once, I remember, that to tell a story in epistolary form is a subterfuge, an attempt to evade the difficult matters of construction and delineation of character. My story, however, is so slight, so subtle, so delicately intimate too, that a letter to some one in closest sympathy with myself seems the only form that offers.

It is, as I said, a confession, but a very dear confession: I burn to tell it honestly, yet know not how. To withhold it from you would be to admit a secretiveness that our relationship has never known—out it must, and to you. I may, perhaps, borrow—who can limit the sharing powers of twin brothers like ourselves?—some of the skill your own work spills so prodigally, crumbs from your writing-table, so to speak; and you will forgive the robbery, if successful, as you will accept lie love behind the confession as your due.

Now, listen, please! For this is the point: that, although my wife is dead these dozen years and more—I have found reunion and I love. Explanation of this must follow as best it may. So, please mark tie point which for the sake of emphasis I venture to repeat: that I know reunion and I love.

With the jealous prerogative of the twin, you objected to that marriage, though I knew that it deprived you of no jot of my affection, owing to the fact that it was prompted by pity only, leaving the soul in me wholly disengaged. Marion, by her steady refusal to accept my honest friendship, by her persistent admiration of me, as also by her loveliness, her youth, her singing, persuaded me somehow finally that I needed her. The cry of the flesh, which her beauty stimulated and her singing increased most strangely, seemed raised into a burning desire that I mistook at the moment for the true desire of the soul. Yet, actually, the soul in me remained aloof, a spectator, and one, moreover, of a distinctly lukewarm kind. It was very curious. On looking back, I can hardly understand it even now; there seemed some special power, some special undiscovered tie between us that led me on and yet deceived me. It was especially evident in her singing, this deep power. She sang, you remember, to her own accompaniment on the harp, and her method, though so simple it seemed almost childish, was at the same time charged with a great melancholy that always moved me most profoundly. The sound of her small, plaintive voice, the sight of her slender fingers that plucked the strings in some delicate fashion native to herself, the tiny foot that pressed the pedal—all these, with her dark searching eyes fixed penetratingly upon my own while she sang of love and love's endearments, combined in a single stroke of very puissant and seductive kind. Passions in me awoke, so deep, so ardent, so imperious, that I conceived them as born of the need of one soul for another. I attributed their power to genuine love. The following reactions, when my soul held up a finger and bade me listen to her still, small warnings, grew less positive and of ever less duration. The frontier between physical and spiritual passion is perilously narrow, perhaps. My judgment, at any rate, became insecure, then floundered hopelessly. The sound of the harp-strings and of Marion's voice could overwhelm its balance instantly.

Mistaking, perhaps, my lukewarm-ness for restraint, she led me at last to the altar you described as one of sacrifice. And your instinct, more piercing than my own, proved only too correct: that which I held for love declared itself as pity only, the soft, affectionate pity of a weakish man in whom the flesh cried loudly, the pity of a man who would be untrue to himself rather than pain so sweet a girl by rejecting the one great offering life placed within her gift. She persuaded me so cunningly that I persuaded myself, yet was not aware I did so until afterwards. I married her because in some manner I felt, but never could explain, that she had need of me.

And, at the wedding, I remember two things vividly: the expression of wondering resignation on your face, and upon hers—chiefly in the eyes and in the odd lines about the mouth—the air of subtle triumph that she wore: that she had captured me for her very own at last, and yet—for