



Dead Violets

DEAD VIOLETS

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If you ever want me, write to me. I'd come to you from the end of the world!" he had said, and she had answered, "I shall always want you, but I shall never write, and you must never come." She was married.

It was in May that they parted; they parted on the day of her confession that she cared for him. The virtue was hers, not his; yet because he loved her truly and realized that she was too good a woman to defy her conscience and be happy, he acquiesced in her decision—refrained from pleading with her, refrained from trying to see her again.

His only indulgence was to send violets to her home in Paris for the ninth of December; the ninth of December was her birthday, and violets she had once told him were her favorite flower. He did not scribble any greeting with them, did not even enclose a card; he was sure that she would know who sent them, and it lightened his pain to feel that she would know. Indeed, to recall himself to her thus mutely was a joy, the only joy that he had experienced since the day of the "good-by "; almost it was as if he were going to her, that moment in the London florist's when he held the flowers that would reach her hands; she did not seem so lost to him for the moment, the separation did not seem so blank.

The next year also he sent violets for the ninth of December. His emotions, it is true, were less vivid this time, but he was glad to show her that he was faithful; besides, the prettiness of the reminder pleased him.

And the third year he sent them chiefly because he felt that she would be disappointed if he appeared to forget.

So it had grown to be his custom to send violets to her for her birthday, though what was once an impulse of devotion was now a falsehood—the weakness of a sentimentalist reluctant to wound a woman and his self-esteem, by admitting that he had exaggerated the importance of his feelings. And each December the woman welcomed the lie with smiles and tears and believed that he loved her

still.

When the lie was five years old he met her again. It was in Bond Street, and he had sent the violets to Paris two or three days before.

“Phil!”

As he turned and saw her he thought how much better looking she used to be; she was young still, no more than thirty, but she had longed for him on every day of the five years, and her tears had blotted some of the girlishness from her face. As he turned and saw her the woman thought how his mouth had twitched when he said, “I’d come to you from the end of the world.” It is among the unacknowledged truths that sentimentality, may create as much ferment as enduring love, and he had suffered even more violently than she, though he hadn’t suffered so long.

“What are you doing here in December? You’re the last person I should have expected to see,” she said.

“I go south to-morrow.”

“Lucky man!”

“And you?”

“We’re living here now.”

“Really? You’ve left Paris? How long?”

“We’ve been here since October; we’re flat hunting.”

“Oh!”

They stood looking in each other’s eyes, neither knowing what to say next. Her heart was thumping terribly and she felt very happy and very frightened. More than once she had been tempted to write to him that her courage had broken down; all resistance seemed to have left her as she stood looking in his eyes again.

“Flats,” she added in a voice of composure, “are so abominably dear in London.”

“Where are you staying?”

“In apartments—Bayswater.”

“Bayswater must be a change from Neuilly? It was a jolly little place you had in Neuilly.”

“It was rather jolly, wasn’t it? My—my husband’s people wished us to come over; they thought they might put him into something over here. Of course, in Paris it was cheap, but there were no prospects.”

“I understand.”

“There’s some talk of a secretaryship if a company is floated.” It was so natural to be telling him everything now they had met. “It would be a very good thing for us.”

“I hope it’ll come off.”

“Yes—well, how are you? I’m always seeing your name—‘One of the novels of the year’ !”

“They aren’t so good as the novels that nobody read.”

“Not quite. Why?”

“I’m turning out what’s wanted now. One has to live.”

“Yes—still, isn’t it a pity to—to—”

“Oh, one gets tired,” he said. “Ideals make lonely dwelling places. Let me take you somewhere and give you some tea.”

“I ought to go to some shops; I’m up West to work.”

“‘Work?’ Spending money?”

“Earning it—I’m doing fashion articles.”

“You? Do you mean it? Well, come and have some tea first.”

It was very early and there were vacant tables in the alcoves. As he sat opposite her, Orlebar thought what a fraud it was that the things one craved for only came to pass when one had grown resigned to doing without them. How he had besought God for some such chance as this—what a spectacle he had made of himself about her during six unforgettable months! And now he was sipping his tea without emotion and observing that her clothes compared unfavorably with the other women's in the room. In that moment Orlebar saw the humiliating truth. But he didn't want to see.

"It's a long time since we had tea together, Lucy."

"Yes," she said.

"Well? What have you got to tell me?"

"I think I told you everything in the street; at least—what have you been doing all the time?"

"Trying to kill it."

"You're working in London now, eh?"

"Yes, I've chambers in the Temple. Rather swagger compared with the little shanty in the Rue Ravignan! How did you come to take up journalism?"

"Some one suggested it—and my twaddle seemed to do. It's pretty sickening. I'm not on any of the chic papers—they wouldn't stand me."

"What's the idea—it doesn't pay very well, does it?"

"Not on my kind of paper; I get a guinea a week, but—Oh, why should I bore you with all that?"

"You don't bore me, Lucy."

"Well, I—I prefer to do it! You don't know everything; his people have never forgiven his marriage—they think marriage has handicapped him so badly, and you may be sure they blame me more than him; it's always the daughter-in-law's fault! We've only their allowance to live on—it isn't pleasant to be kept by people who resent your existence!"

“Poor little woman! No, I didn’t know.”

“Oh, it is not so bad as all that! Still, I’m glad to be making something, even if it’s only a guinea a week; I don’t feel so uncomfortable when I meet them—not such a dead weight. We have to go there to dinner on Sundays, and it’s rather awful; they tell me what a splendid career he would have had if he hadn’t married!”

“Damn ‘em,” said Orlebar.

“I do. Every Sunday afternoon—from the soup to the coffee! Well—” she leaned her elbows on the table and smiled—“have I changed much?”

“No,” he said bravely. “But—but this is brutal hard lines. I didn’t dream that you had things like that to put up with. You always seemed so light-hearted in Paris,”

“I didn’t meet his people in Paris. Besides, things alter in five years.”

“I am so sorry for you, dear.”

“Oh, I dare say it’s my fault! I suppose I don’t do all I ought to make up for what I’ve cost him; it’s difficult to do all you ought when—when”—her voice snapped—“when you sometimes wish to God that you hadn’t done so much!”

“Perhaps you’d have done better to come to me after all,” said Orlebar heavily; he couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“I tried to be a good woman. I thought you’d forget me; *I* wanted to forget *you*! Why didn’t you let me forget you? Why did you send me those flowers every year?”

“Were you vexed with me for sending them?”

“You know I wasn’t vexed.”

“I’m glad. I sent some to Paris the other day.”

“Did you? I wondered if you would. I’ve been rather impatient for my birthdays. What a confession—a woman impatient for her birthdays! I never meant to see you any more, though. I swore wouldn’t!”

“But you wanted to, didn’t you?”

Her cup was neglected now; she leaned back in her chair, her hands clenched in her lap.

“Didn’t you?” he repeated.

“Oh, don’t!” she said in her throat. “I can’t bear it, Phil!”

“What?”

“The life—everything! I’m tired of it all.”

“Chuck it,” he muttered; “Come away with me to-morrow!”

She didn’t speak; she tried to believe that she was struggling. The pause seemed to Orlebar to last a long time, while he sat wishing that he hadn’t said it. The waitress asked if they required anything else and put the check on the table and took her tip. The place was filling and a “ladies’ orchestra” began to twang their mandolins.

“Do you want me?” she said, raising her eyes.

“Do I ‘want’ you?” What else could he reply?

“Very well, then.” She nodded. “I’ll go! Let’s get out of this—do you mind? My head aches.”

He knew dismally that her consent had come too late; that there would be nothing now to compensate him for the scandal—no months, or weeks, or even an hour of rapture. They got up, and he put the half-crown on the desk and followed her into the street.

After they had strolled a few yards in silence he said, as it seemed obligatory, “You’ve made me very happy!”

She answered, “I’ll try to!” He wished that she had said anything else—it was painful.

“We’d better have a cab. Where shall we go—Will you come to the Temple?”

“I think I’d like to go home; you can drive there with me.”

“Can you get away in the morning, or shall I put it off?” he asked in the hansom.

“No, I can get away—he won’t be back till the evening.”

“Back from where?”

“He went down to his people to-day—they’re in Brighton now. What time’s the train?”

“Ten o’clock from Charing Cross; I was going by Folkestone and Boulogne. Are you a bad sailor?”

“No, I like it. We’ll meet at Charing Cross, then?”

“Yes; in the first-class waiting room—if you’re sure it’s not too early for you?”

“It’s all right—is it real, Phil? Half an hour ago we hadn’t seen each other, and now—it’s to be all our lives! Oh, I hope you’ll never be sorry! I wonder?”

“That’s unjust.”

“Is it?” Her eyes reminded him that he ought to kiss her, and he bent his head. He pitied her acutely as he felt her tears on his face—hated himself for lying to her.

“Cheer up, dearest! Remember how we care for each other,” he said.

At the club he ordered a big whiskey and a small soda.

“You’re off to Rome soon, aren’t you?” said a man in the smoking room. “You novelists have all the luck!”

“Yes,” said Orlebar. The man was the editor of a daily paper; it occurred to the novelist that he was about to provide the paper with some surprising “copy,” also that the editorial greeting would be less informal when they met again.

And his books? The sale of his next books would drop in this virtuous country. If she had been “Lady” Somebody the public would have called the case “romantic”—it would have been a big advertisement then—but without the

glamour of a title they would only call it “disgraceful.”

When he woke in the morning Orlebar remembered that there ought to be a half bottle of Pommery in the bath room and he had it in lieu of tea, with some biscuits. The wine lightened his mood a little; it no longer seemed so hopelessly impossible to conceal his regret, and when he strode into the station it was with a very fair show of impatience. But his heart leaped as he saw that she wasn't there. He sat on a couch, glancing alternately at the clock and the doors and praying that she wouldn't come.

She entered just as he was feeling sanguine.

“My darling!” he murmured; “here you are!”

“Am I late?”

“I was beginning to be afraid. But there's time enough—I've got the tickets. Where's your luggage?”

“They've taken it through.”

“We'd better go, then.” In the bustle on the platform he could say little more than, “How pale you are!” and, “Which are your trunks?” Then they were alone and the door had been slammed, and the train moved out.

“Darling!” he said again. “Well?”

“Well?”

“It seems too good to be true.” His tone as lifeless.

“Does it?”

“Doesn't it to you?”

“I think it's true,” she said with a tired smile.

“How pale you are!” he repeated. “Didn't you sleep?”

“Not much. I've been wondering.”

“Wondering? What?”

“Whether I ought to have said ‘No.’ What would you have done if I’d said ‘No,’ Phil? Really?”

“What *can* a man do? I suppose I should have had to put up with it.”

She didn’t reply for a moment. She was gazing before her with a frown.

“Do you think me a bad woman, Phil?”

“I think you’re the best woman I’ve ever known.”

“It looks like it, doesn’t it?”

“The force of circumstances! If you had met me before you met him—”

“But I didn’t. It’s pretty mean of me to spoil his life, isn’t it?”

“I didn’t know that he cared so much about you?”

“Oh”—she hesitated—“we’ve quarreled, like everybody else, but—but he’s very fond of me; of course, it’ll be an awful blow. I can’t forget it. I’ve been thinking of it ever since.”

“It just depends—the thing you’ve got to consider is which way you’ll be happier yourself. If—I don’t know! I suppose there are women who *can’t* go wrong and be happy!”

“I’m thinking of my duty,” she faltered. “You know I love you, don’t you? I want you to know it, to keep remembering it all the time. I love you, I love you, I love you! But—” She waited with her heart in her throat.

“But what?” he asked moodily. “What were you going to say?”

Her eyes closed with the pain.

“Eh?” he said.

“There are his people,” she stammered; “they’ll feel the disgrace so much. I’ve been considering everything—I—I didn’t know what a wrench it would be—”

“You’ll get over it.”

“I’m not sure. Perhaps I shall always—do you think I’ve—made a mistake?” Again she waited breathlessly. If he would only seize her in his arms! If he would only cry, “Let them all go to the devil, and remember *me!*”

“If you feel like that,” he said feebly, “of course, I hardly—I hardly know what I can say to you.”

“You can’t *think* of anything to say?” she pleaded. “There’s nothing—nothing I’m overlooking?”

“There’s time; one gets over anything in time,” he said incautiously.

“Oh, my God, I was mad!” she moaned.

She turned to the window, her face as white as a dead woman’s. The terror was confirmed that had stolen on her in the cab; that had haunted her throughout the night, confirmed by his tones, his looks, by every answer he had made to her halting falsehoods—he had learned to do without her; she had given herself unsought! It was only her love for him that restrained her—she would not reproach him by deed or word; he shouldn’t be burdened by the knowledge of what he had made her suffer.

“Well,” he said, “it’s not too late.”

“No,” she muttered; “I can’t go!”

His pulses jumped; for an instant he couldn’t trust his voice.

“You must do as you like; I don’t want to take you against your will. If you wish it you can go back from Folkestone: I suppose—if he is away—there’d be no harm done, would there?”

“You’re not angry with me? You won’t mind too much?”

“Don’t worry about me—I want *you* to be happy. To tell you the truth, I think you’re right—you’re not the woman to kick over the traces; you’d be too cut up about it. Go back and make the best of a bad business—it’ll be easier for you to bear than the other, anyhow! We’ll see about a train for you as soon as we get

in.”

At ♦ Folkestone Harbour they ascertained that there would be an express to Charing Cross at two o’clock, and he paced the platform with her till it was time to say “good-by.” Exhilaration had given him an appetite, but she answered that she wasn’t hungry, so as he had missed his boat he decided to drive to a hotel on the Leas and have an elaborate luncheon when she had gone. His glances at the playbills on the walls showed him that *San Toy* was at the Pleasure Gardens, and he foresaw himself cheerfully among the audience in the evening. He was feeling, on a sudden, twenty years younger, and hard as he strove to acquire a manner of tender gravity she discerned the improvement in his spirits every time he spoke.

Her train arrived in town at a few minutes to four, and she re-entered the lodging house some hours earlier than her husband. The fire had gone out, and she had to wait, shivering, till it was lighted before she could burn the note she had left on the mantelpiece for him. A little box addressed to her had been delivered during her absence. When the servant left her at last she dared to touch it, and fell to sobbing as if her heart would burst. It contained the violets Orlebar had sent in token of his love.

The box had been redirected from Paris. Owing to the delay the violets, now that they had reached her, were quite dead.