

The Storyteller

THE MAN FROM AUSTRALIA

'He depresses me—honestly he does,' said Mr. Smith; 'makes me feel down in the dumps—and it's my first holiday in ten years! 'Tain't fair!'

Margaret Vibart smiled.

'Don't notice him,' she said.

Mr. Smith went on carving the chicken. He felt quite aggrieved, and he showed it in his expression.

They were out on the Lake of Killarney in the hotel boat—ten or twelve of Cook's tourists—and this seemed to introduce them to each other—Mr. Smith thought so, at any rate, for he made friends in his genial way with every one. He was the most sociable of men, therefore it gave him positive annoyance to have one of the party sitting remote from the others, his back toward them, his face grave and emotionless. He paid no attention to any one. Gloomy, depressed, moody, he sat, and Mr. Smith, who felt that this was particularly his own expedition, resented the attitude. He himself was in a perpetual state of exclamation. He seemed to regard the scenery as belonging to him personally, and his high spirits were contagious.

'He is from Chicago,' said Mrs. Vibart to her daughter, 'and has not had a vacation in ten years.' He owns a tannery. No wonder he enjoys this now—after a tannery.'

And again Margaret Vibart smiled.

'No wonder!' she echoed. 'He is most obliging and pleasant—but if he would only let the man from Australia alone. There are enough Americans here to make him happy.'

Mr. Smith did not intend to intrude his rollicking mood and his jests upon them, but Margaret was worn out after a year's hard teaching, and sometimes they jarred upon her. She felt a touch of sympathy for the man from Australia, who hardly answered, save by a brief word, when called upon for raptures.

The lake was so still and so sunshine-haunted, the mountains were so rich in verdure, so embowered in green, the shadows were so lovely in the ravines! And then the purple heather and the wealth of ferns on every rock! Margaret had fancied the heather would be over, and it was purple and luxuriant still. Autumn tarried long in Killarney, as if loth to depart. Her lips were stained still with the blackberries, which hung in great ebony-hued clusters on their trailing branches by the roadside, and she had a great tangled bouquet of tawny leaves, and holly and ferns, and heather in her lap. Such holly! She had never seen such glorious red berries in all her life. And when one was drinking in health and beauty, anxious to steep one's soul in it and lay by a store for the long workaday winter, she did not greatly desire to talk about it. No, she felt much sympathy for the grave man who said nothing. Why might not one's appreciation be taken for granted?

Mr. Smith, the kindest little man possible, amused her mother, presently he was telling her all about the tannery, and his workpeople, and the six children at home, with a simple delight in her interest and attention, which was, after all, rather attractive.

'Mother finds every one interesting,' Margaret thought; 'her heart could take in the whole world. And the way that man is confiding in her! I wonder if that other man has a history?'

'My missus, she only let me go if I'd promise that,' the old man was saying. 'You take care of cold, Stephen, and you don't forget that old bones can't do what young ones can.' How she does fuss over me—my missus! But, bless your heart, ma'am, we like it! Isn't that so, sir? I reckon if you have a missus in Australia—'

He paused then, and his hearty smile faded.

The man from Australia had turned his back suddenly, and Margaret caught sight of his face. Her quick instinct made her look away at once. She had no right—no one had any right—to see that shrinking look of horror. What had Mr. Smith said? Yes, certainly there was a story here.

They landed at Ross Castle in the afternoon, and the shadows were growing longer then, and her mother was a little tired. Margaret and she got into the car awaiting them outside the castle, and they saw the rest of the party ascend the brake, the silent gray man mounting on the box; and he escaped their memory till later in the evening, when the tanner joined them in the big hotel drawing-room, where Mrs. Vibart was half asleep.

Seeing this, Mr. Smith sat down by Margaret.

'I met the gentleman from Australia—Pennroyal is his name,' he began in a low voice. 'I—I—had a bit

of a chat with him. He has lost his missus, poor chap!—lost her just before he came here. We were standing in the dusk there in the cathedral, and he told me. He was down in Sydney on business when the news came. He had left her in the bush; and—she—had been murdered by the blacks. He just took out a ticket and sailed next day. He said he'd have gone mad if he had stayed—stark, staring mad! And on board he had a bad fever. He hasn't anyone else in the wide world—never had.'

Margaret was listening in a kind of horror, and before she thought the words escaped her:

'Oh, I saw—I saw his face in the boat!'

'I know'—and the old man's honest face crimsoned—'I know! I begged his pardon for that. He said it didn't matter at all. It only gave him a bit of a shiver.'

And then Mrs. Vibart roused, and they went off to bed.

But Margaret could not get the story out of her mind, nor the man's shrinking, stricken look.

They were all at Muckross Abbey next day, Pennyroyal walking at their side, with his usual bent head and absent expression, and he stood where directed, looked where directed, and tipped the driver and gave the children coppers, like a man in a walking dream. He even bought photographs in the abbey, apparently because the others were doing so, and very much as if it were all part of the day's work, for he left them lying on the table later, and Margaret lifted them to give them back to him. The party separated after a little, to wander around in the ruin and look for shamrock, but Margaret was making a little sketch of The O'Donoghue's tomb, and she was seated on the base of the broken pillar when she became conscious that Pennyroyal's absent gaze was fixed upon her, and that he was standing by the side of the tomb.

She raised her eyes with such a depth of gentle pity, half-reverential for his sorrow, that the man started. Since that awful day when he read the letter which told him that no woman's face had seemed to reach his vision. They were all dream faces, fantasies—passing before his gaze like silhouettes on a white background.

She looked at him with such pity that something seemed to start and strain in his heart for utterance, though he only said in his dull way:

'You are sketching?'

'Yes; I want to carry away a little memento to America. Look how those ferns are spreading all over that tomb!'

He looked at them absently.

'Things grow well here.'

'Wonderfully.'

There was a pause then, and he said slowly:

'Folks like to be buried here, I suppose. Some folks leave orders that they should be carried across the seas, so as to be in the old place. Do you think it would matter?'

Something in his eyes made her wonder what he meant.

'I should not mind,' Margaret said. 'After all, what does it matter where one leaves the garment one has done with? If one does what is right, the soul is happy. I have sometimes thought if they knew—I do not know if they do—that it must vex the happy spirits of those who are gone to see us grieve for them, "as those that have no hope"! She spoke from the depths of her fervent Catholic heart.

Pennyroyal listened, and he suddenly took a step nearer, as if startled.

'You see,' he said abruptly, 'she used to say—my missus—that we'd come home together—we were both of us Irish born—and lie together, when we died, in the old churchyard. I've wondered if I ought to go back and find her grave and bring her home. Seems like I'd go mad to see that place! What do you think about it? I think she'd a fancy—she'd like to be near me still—when we were dead.'

'I think she would not like you to do anything that would hurt you,' the girl's gentle voice said.

He looked startled, and roused again.

'Seems almost as if you had known her,' he said: 'she always talked like that—kind of low, too, like you! You mustn't think she was like me; she wasn't a bit. There never was anyone like my missus, never! She was all I had in the world. I felt like kissing the ground she trod on, Miss, that day Father Byrnes married us—and I never got over the feeling. I'd never like her to have done a hand's turn—and I'd scarcely let the wind touch her—and—and—when I was away—they killed her!'

His head sank again. Margaret felt as if words were swords to a story like this, and yet he was so desolate.