

The Secret

By Algernon Blackwood

I saw him walking down the floor of the A.B.C. shop where I was lunching. He was gazing about for a vacant seat with that vague stare of puzzled distress he always wore when engaged in practical affairs. Then he saw me and nodded. I pointed to the seat opposite; he sat down. There was a crumb in his brown beard, I noticed. There had been one a year ago, when I saw him last.

“What a long time since we met,” I said, genuinely glad to see him. He was a most lovable fellow, though his vagueness was often perplexing to his friends.

“Yes—er—h’mmm—let me see—”

“Just about a year,” I said.

He looked at me with an expression as though he did not see me. He was delving in his mind for dates and proofs. His fierce eyebrows looked exactly as though they were false—stuck on with paste—and I imagined how puzzled he would be if one of them suddenly dropped off into his soup. The eyes beneath, however, were soft and beaming; the whole face was tender, kind, gentle, and when he smiled he looked thirty instead of fifty.

“A year, is it?” he remarked, and then turned from me to the girl who was waiting to take his order. This ordering was a terrible affair. I marvelled at the patience of that never-to-be-tipped waitress in the dirty black dress. He looked with confusion from me to her, from her to the complicated bill of fare, and from this last to me again.

“Oh, have a cup of coffee and a bit of that lunch-cake,” I said with desperation. He stared at me for a second, one eyebrow moving, the other still as the grave. I felt an irresistible desire to laugh.

All right,” he murmured to the girl, “coffee and a bit of that lunch-cake.” She went off wearily. “And a pat of butter,” he whispered after her, but looking at the wrong waitress. “And a portion of that strawberry jam,” he added, looking at another waitress.

Then he turned to talk with me.

“Oh no,” he said, looking over his shoulder at the crowd of girls by the counter; “not the jam. I forgot I’d ordered that lunch-cake.”

Again he switched round in his chair—he always perched on the edge like a bird—and made a great show of plunging into a long-deferred chat with me. I knew what would come. He was always writing books and sending them out among publishers and forgetting where they were at the moment.

“And how are *you*?” he asked. I told him.

“Writing anything these days?” I ventured boldly.

The eyebrows danced. “Well, the fact is, I’ve only just finished a book.”

“Sent it anywhere?”

“It’s gone off, yes. Let me see—it’s gone to—er——” The coffee and lunch-cake arrived without the pat of butter, but with two lots of strawberry jam. “I won’t have jam, thank you. And will you bring a pat of butter?” he muttered to the girl. Then, turning to me again—“Oh, I really forget for the moment. It’s a good story, I think.” His novels were, as a fact, extraordinarily good, which was the strange part of it all.

“It’s about a woman, you see, who—” he proceeded to tell me the story in outline. Once he got beyond the confused openings of talk the man became interesting, but it took so long, and was so

difficult to follow, that I remembered former experiences and cut him short with a lucky inspiration.

“Don’t spoil it for me by telling it. I shan’t enjoy it when it comes out.”

He laughed, and both eyebrows dropped and hid his eyes. He busied himself with the cake and butter. A second crumb went to join the first. I thought of balls in golf bunkers, and laughed outright. For a time the conversation flagged. I became aware of a certain air of mystery about him. He was full of something besides the novel—something he wanted to talk about but had probably forgotten “for the moment.” I got the impression he was casting about in the upper confusion of his mind for the cue.

“You’re writing something else now?” I ventured.

The question hit the bull’s-eye. Both eyebrows shot up, as though they would vanish next minute on wires and fly up into the wings. The cake in his hand would follow; and last of all he himself would go. The children’s pantomime came vividly before me. Surely he was a made-up figure on his way to rehearsal.

“I am,” he said; “but it’s a *great* secret. I’ve got a *magnificent* idea!

“I promise not to tell. I’m safe as the grave. Tell me.”

He fixed his kindly, beaming eyes on my face and smiled charmingly.

“It’s a play,” he murmured, and then paused for effect, hunting about on his plate for cake, where cake there was none.

“Another piece of that lunch-cake, please,” he said in a sudden loud voice, addressed to the waitresses at large. “It came to me the other day in the London Library—er—very fine idea—”

“Something really original?”

“Well, I think so, perhaps.” The cake came with a clatter of plates, but he pushed it aside as though he had forgotten about it, and leaned forward across the table. “I’ll tell you. Of course you won’t say anything. I don’t want the idea to get about. There’s money in a good play—and people do steal so, don’t they?”

I made a gesture, as much as to say, “Do I look like a man who would repeat?” and he plunged into it with enthusiasm.

Oh! The story of that play! And those dancing eyebrows! And the bits of the plot he forgot and went back for! And the awful, wild confusion of names and scenes and curtains! And the way his voice rose and fell like a sound carried to and fro by a gusty wind! And the feeling that something was coming which would make it all clear—but which never came!

“The woman, you see,”—all his stories began that way,—“is one of those modern women who . . . and when she dies she tells on her death-bed how she knew all the time that Anna—”

“That’s the heroine, I think?” I asked keenly, after ten minutes’ exposition, hoping to Heaven my guess was right.

“No, no, she’s the widow, don’t you remember, of the clergyman who went over to the Church of Rome to avoid marrying her sister—in the first act—or didn’t I mention that?”

“You mentioned it, I think, but the explanation—”

“Oh, well, you see, the Anglican clergyman—he’s Anglican in the first act—always suspected that Miriam had not died by her own hand, but had been poisoned. In fact, he finds the incriminating letter in the gas-pipe, and recognises the handwriting—”

“Oh, *he* finds the letter?”

“Rather. *He* finds the letter, don’t you see? and compares it with the others, and makes up his mind who wrote it, and goes straight to Colonel Middleton with his discovery.”

“So Middleton, of course, refuses to believe—”

“Refuses to believe that the second wife—oh, I forgot to mention that the clergyman had married again in his own Church; married a woman who turns out to be Anna’s—no, I mean Miriam’s—half-sister, who had been educated abroad in a convent,—refuses to believe, you see, that *his* wife had anything to do with it. Then Middleton has a splendid scene. He and the clergyman have the stage to themselves. Wyndham’s the man for Middleton, of course. Well, he declares that he has the proof—proof that must convince everybody, and just as he waves it in the air in comes Miriam, who is walking in her sleep, from her sick-bed. They listen. She is talking in her sleep. By Jove, man, don’t you see it? She is talking about the crime! She practically confesses it before their very eyes.”

“Splendid!”

“And she never wakes up—I mean, not in that scene. She goes back to bed and has no idea next day what she has said and done.”

“And the clergyman’s honour is saved?” I hazarded, amazed at my rashness.

“No. Anna is saved. You see, I forgot to tell you that in the second act Miriam’s brother, Sir John, had—”

The waitress brought the little paper checks. Let’s go outside and finish. It’s getting frightfully stuffy here,” I suggested desperately, picking up the bills.

We walked out together, he still talking against time with the most terrible confusion of names and acts and scenes imaginable. He bumped into everybody who came in his way. His beard was full of crumbs. His eyebrows danced with excitement—I knew then positively they were false—and his voice ran up and down the scale like a buzz-saw at work on a tough board.

By Jove, old man, that is a play!”

He turned to me with absolute happiness in his face.

“But for Heaven’s sake, don’t let out a word of it. I must have a copyright performance first before it’s really safe.”

“Not a word, I promise.”

“It’s a dead secret—till I’ve finished it, I mean—then I’ll come and tell you the *dénouement*. The last curtain is simply magnificent. You see, Middleton never hears—”

“I won’t tell a living soul,” I cried, running to catch a bus. “It’s a secret—yours and mine!”

And the omnibus carried me away Westwards.

Meanwhile the play remains to this day a “dead secret,” known only to the man who thinks he told it, and to the other man who knows he heard it told.