

Two in One

By Algernon Blackwood

Some idle talker, playing with half-truths, had once told him that he was too self-centred to fall into love—out of himself; he was unwilling to lose himself in another; and that was the reason he had never married. But Le Maitre was not really more of an egoist than is necessary to make a useful man. A too selfless person is ever ineffective. The suggestion, nevertheless, had remained to distress, for he was no great philosopher—merely a writer of successful tales—tales of wild Nature chiefly; the “human interest” (a publisher’s term) was weak; the great divine enigma of an undeveloped soul—certainly of a lover’s or a woman’s soul—had never claimed his attention enough, perhaps. He was somewhat too much detached from human life. Nature had laid so powerful a spell upon his heart. . . .

“I hope she won’t be late,” ran the practical thought across his mind as he waited that early Sunday morning in the Great Central Station and reflected that it was the cleanest, brightest, and most airy terminus of all London. He had promised her the whole day out—a promise somewhat long neglected. He was not conscious of doing an unselfish act, yet on the whole, probably, he would rather—or just as soon—have been alone.

The air was fragrant, and the sunshine blazed in soft white patches on the line. The maddening loveliness of an exceptional spring danced everywhere into his heart. Yes, he rather wished he were going off into the fields and woods alone, instead of with her. Only—she was really a dear person, more, far more now, than secretary and typist; more, even, than the devoted girl who had nursed him through that illness. A friend she was; the years of their working together had made her that; and she was wise and gentle. Oh, yes; it would be delightful to have her with him. How she would enjoy the long sunny day!

Then he saw her coming towards him through the station. In a patch of sunshine she came, as though the light produced her—came suddenly from the middle of a group of men in flannels carrying golf-sticks. And he smiled his welcome a little paternally, trying to kill the selfish thought that he would rather have been alone. Soft things fluttered about her. The big hat as becoming. She was dressed in brown, he believed.

He bought a Sunday paper. “I must buy one too,” she laughed. She chose one with pictures, chose it at random rather. He had never heard its name even. And in a first-class carriage alone—he meant to do it really well—they raced through a world of sunshine and brilliant fields to Amersham. She was very happy. She tried every seat in turn; the blazing sheets of yellow—such a spring for buttercups there had never been—drew her from side to side. She put her head out, and nearly lost her big hat, and that soft fluttering thing she wore streamed behind her like the colour of escaping flowers. She opened both windows. The very carriage held the perfume of may that floated over the whole country-side.

He was very nice to her, but read his paper—though always ready with a smile and answer when she asked for them. She teased and laughed and chattered. The luncheon packages engaged her serious attention. Never for a moment was she still, trying every corner in turn, putting her feet up, and bouncing to enjoy the softness of the first-class cushions. “You’ll be sitting in the rack next,” he suggested. But her head was out of the window again and she did not hear him. She was radiant as a child. His paper interested him—book reviews or something. “I’ve asked you that three times, you know, already,” he heard her laughing opposite. And with a touch of

shame he tossed the paper through the window. "There! I'd quite forgotten her again!" he thought, with a touch of shame. "I must pull myself together." For it was true. He had for the moment—more than once—forgotten her existence, just as though he really were alone.

Together they strolled down through the beech wood towards Amersham, he for ever dropping the luncheon packages, which she picked up again and tried to stuff into his pockets. For she refused to carry anything at all. "It's *my* day out, not yours, remember! I do no work to-day!" And he caught her happiness, pausing to watch her while she picked flowers and leaves and all the rest, and disentangling without the least impatience that soft fluttering thing she wore when it caught in thorns, and even talking with her about this wild spring glory as though she were just the companion that he needed out of all the world. He no longer felt quite so conscious of her objective presence as at first. In the train, for instance, he had felt so vividly aware that she was there. Alternately he had forgotten and remembered her presence. Now it was better. They were more together, as it were. "I wish I were alone," he thought once more as the beauty of the spring called to him tumultuously and he longed to lie and dream it all, unhampered by another's presence. Then, even while thinking it, he realised that he was—alone. It was curious.

This happened even in their first wood when they went downhill into Amersham. As they left it and passed again into the open it came. And on its heels, as he watched her moving here and there, light-footed as a child or nymph, there came this other instinctive thought—"I wish I were ten years younger than I am!"—the first time in all his life, probably, that such a thought had ever bothered him. Apparently he said it aloud, laughingly, as he watched her dancing movements. For she turned and ran up to his side quickly, her little face quite grave beneath the big hat's rim. "You are!" That answer struck him as rather wonderful. Who was she after all . . .

And in Amersham they hired from the Griffin a rickety old cart, drawn by a still more rickety horse, to drive them to Penn's Woods. She, with her own money, bought stone-bottle ginger-beer—two bottles. It made her day complete to have those bottles, though unless they had driven she would have done without them. The street was deserted, drenched in blazing sunshine. Rooks were cawing in the elms behind the church. Not a soul was about as they crawled away from the houses and passed upwards between hedges smothered in cow-parsley over the hill. She had kept her picture-paper. It lay on her lap all the way. She never opened it or turned a single page; but she held it in her lap. They drove in silence. The old man on the box was like a faded, weather-beaten farmer dressed in somebody else's cast-off Sunday coat. He flicked the horse with a tattered whip. Sometimes he grunted. Plover rose from the fields, cuckoos called, butterflies danced sideways past the carriage, eyeing them . . . and, as they passed through Penn Street, Le Maitre started suddenly and said something. For, again, he had quite forgotten she was there. "What a selfish beast I am! Why can't I forget myself and my own feelings, and look after her and make her feel amused and happy? It's *her* day out, not mine!" This, somehow, was the way he put it to himself, just as any ordinary man would have put it. But, when he turned to look at her, he received a shock. Here was something new and unexpected. With a thud it dropped down into his mind—crash!

For at the sound of his voice she looked up confused and startled into his face. She had forgotten him! For the first time in all the years together, years of work, of semi-official attention to his least desire, yet of personal devotion as well, because she respected him and thought him wonderful—she had forgotten he was there. She had forgotten his existence beside her as a separate person. She, too, had been—alone.

It was here, perhaps, he first realised this singular thing that set this day apart from every other day that he had ever known. In reality, of course, it had come far sooner—begun with the

exquisite spring dawn before either of them was awake, had tentatively fluttered about his soul even while he stood waiting for her in the station, come softly nearer all the way in the train, dropped threads of its golden web about him, especially in that first beech wood, then moved with its swifter yet unhurried rush—until, here, now, in this startling moment, he realised it fully. Thus steal those changes o’er the sky, perhaps, that the day itself knows at sunrise, but that unobservant folk do not notice till the sun bursts out with fuller explanation, and they say, “The weather’s changed; how delightful! how unexpected!” Le Maitre had never been observant very—of people.

And then in this deep, lonely valley, too full of sunshine to hold anything else, it seemed, they stopped where the beech woods trooped to the edge of the white road. No wind was here; it was still and silent; the leaves glittered, motionless. They entered the thick trees together, she carrying the ginger-beer bottles *and* that picture-paper. He noticed that: the way she held it, almost clutched it, still unopened. Her face, he saw, was pale. Or was it merely the contrast of the shade? The trees were very big and wonderful. No birds sang, the network of dazzling sunshine-patches in the gloom bewildered a little.

At first they did not talk at all, and then in hushed voices. But it was only when they were some way into the wood, and she had put down the bottles—though not the paper—to pick a flower or spray of leaves, that he traced the singular secret thrill to its source and understood why he had felt—no, not uneasy, but so strangely moved. For he had asked the sleepy driver of the way, and how they might best reach Beaconsfield across these Penn Woods, and the old man’s mumbled answer took no note of—her:

“It’s a bit rough, maybe, on t’other side, stony like and steep, but that ain’t nothing for a gentleman—when he’s alone . . . !”

The words disturbed him with a sense of darkness, yet of wonder. As though the old man had not noticed her; almost as though he had seen only one person—himself.

They lunched among heather and bracken just beside a pool of sunshine. In front lay a copse of pines, with little beeches in between. The roof was thick just there, the stillness haunting. All the country-side, it seemed, this Sunday noon, had gone to sleep, he and she alone left out of the deep, soft dream. He watched those pines, mothering the slim young beeches, the brilliant fresh green of whose lower branches, he thought, were like little platforms of level sunlight amid the general gloom—patches that had left the ground to escape by the upper air and had then been caught.

“Look,” he heard, “they make one think of laughter crept in unawares among a lot of solemn monks—or of children lost among grave elder beings whose ways are dull and sombre!” It was his own thought continued . . . yet it was she, lying there beside him, who had said it. . . .

And all that wonderful afternoon she had this curious way of picking the thoughts out of his mind and putting them into words for him. “Look,” she said again later, “you can always tell whether the wind loves a tree or not by the way it blows the branches. If it loves them, it tries to draw them out to go away with it. The others it merely shakes carelessly as it passes!” It was the very thought in his own mind, too. Indeed, he had been on the point of saying it, but had desisted, feeling she would not understand—with the half wish—though far less strong than before—that he were alone to enjoy it all in his own indulgent way. Then, even more swiftly, came that other strange sensation that he was alone all the time; more—that he was for the first time in his life most wonderfully complete and happy, all sense of isolation gone.

He turned quickly the instant she had said it. But not quickly enough. By the look in her great grey eyes, by the expression on the face where the discarded hat no longer hid it, he read the

same amazing enigma he had half divined before. She, too, was—alone. She had forgotten him again—forgotten his presence—radiant and happy without him, enjoying herself in her own way. She had merely uttered her delightful thought aloud, as if speaking to herself!

How the afternoon, with its long sunny hours, passed so quickly away, he never understood, nor how they made their way eventually to Beaconsfield through other woods and over other meadows. He remembers only that the whole time he kept forgetting that she was with him, and then suddenly remembering it again. And once on the grass, when they rested to drink the cold tea from his rather musty flask, he lit his pipe, and after a bit he—dozed. He actually slept; for ten minutes at her side, yes, he slept. He heard her laughing at him, but the laughter was faint and very far away; it might just as well have been the wind in the cow-parsley that said, “If you sleep, I shall change you—change you while you sleep!” And for some minutes after he woke again, it hardly seemed queer to him that he did not see her, for when he noticed her coming towards him from the hedgerow, her arms full of flowers and things, he only thought, “Oh, there she is”—as though her absence, or his own absence in sleep, were not quite the common absences of the world.

And he remembered that on the walk to the village her shoe hurt her, and he offered to carry her, and that then she took her shoe off and ran along the grass beside the lane the whole way. But it was at the inn where they had their supper that the oddest thing of all occurred, for the deaf and rather stupid servant girl would insist on laying the table on the lawn for—one.

“Oh, expectin’ some one, are yer?” she said at last. “Is that it?” and so brought plates and knives for two. The girl never once looked at his companion—almost as though she did not see her and seemed unaware of her presence. Le Maitre began to feel that he was dreaming. This was a dream-country, where the people had curious sight. He remembered the driver. . . .

In the dusk they made their way to the station. They spoke no word. He kept losing sight of her. Once or twice he forgot who he was. But the whole amazing thing blazed into him most strongly, showing how it had seized upon his mind, when he stood before the ticket-window and hesitated—for a second—how many tickets he should buy. He stammered at length for two first-class, but he was absurdly flustered for a second. It had actually occurred to him that they needed only one ticket. . . .

And suddenly in the train he understood—and his heart came up in his throat. They were alone. He turned to her where she lay in the corner, feet up, weary, crumpled among the leaves and flowers she had gathered. Like a hedgerow flower she looked, tired by the sunshine and the wind. In one hand was the picture-Papers still unopened and unread, symbol of everyday reality. She was dozing certainly, if not actually asleep. So he woke her with a touch, calling her name aloud.

There were no words at first. He looked at her, coming up very close to do so, and she looked back at him—straight into his eyes—just as she did at home when they were working and he was explaining something important. And then her own eyes dropped, and a deep blush spread over all her face.

“I wasn’t asleep—really,” she said, as he took her at last into his arms; “I was wondering—when—you’d find out—”

“Come to myself, you mean?” he asked tremblingly.

“Well,” she hesitated, as soon as she got breath, “that I *am* yourself—and that you are me. Of course, we’re really only one. I knew it years—oh, years and years ago”