

The Blue Ribbon

Aubrey Wyllie had spent most of his holidays in Suffolk. He found the air there more bracing for him than at the South Coast, and as by now he had made many friends among the locals, he felt as if it were home from home to him.

Yet as he opened the door of the same little cottage he rented year after year, he felt that somehow this year was going to be different. He had booked the cottage for September and half October, but although only three weeks had passed, he was already feeling slightly alone and in need of a little company.

It was a damp day with a suspicion of sea mist in the air. He put on his heavy anorak and his walking boots to walk to a village further along the coast to get some provisions in case the weather turned rough as it promised to do by the look of the skies.

It was in this further village that he had seen the GIRL. He liked girls, but in all his thirty-four years he had not felt seriously inclined toward any particular one. Now this GIRL bothered him. He had seen her on several occasions walking around the village. She was not pretty, but once when their eyes had met his heart had jumped. Her eyes were very blue, so that when the sun caught them they shone and glittered. She wore clothes of a decade ago, yet they were good clothes.

After he had walked about two miles, it began to rain, softly at first. Then, as the wind began to blow from the sea, it became quite heavy. He decided to carry on for the next half mile, even though a mist was beginning to form. This thickened so much that he decided to turn off to the left to make a detour round the lanes, to see if the mist was less heavy inland. After a short while he wished he had never started out, for the route was becoming increasingly difficult to fathom out. He stood still for a moment to light his pipe.

"This is no good," he said to himself. "I had better knock on some door to find shelter for a while."

But where to find a door? There was nothing to be seen. Even the hedgerows were dim shadows now. He walked on slowly, then suddenly to his right, he saw a light. He walked towards it, and came to what he thought was a gate post, took one step forward, then slipped with both feet into a shallow ditch of water. He swore roundly, climbed out, then found the gate. He squelched up the garden path, found the bell on the door and pressed it twice.

For some time there was no answer, although he could hear movement and voices coming from inside the house. After a while the door was opened by a fair haired young woman. To his surprise it was opened by the same young woman who had disturbed his thoughts so much lately. She seemed to recognise him, for half a smile came to her lips, but this then disappeared as a man's voice called her from inside the house.

"Who is that at the door, Glenda.?"

Glenda looked at Aubrey inquiringly.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"I was wondering if I could shelter for a while, just until the mist clears a little, so that I can get to the village."

She seemed very nervous and timid, and looked over her shoulder quickly as the man called out again.

"Who is it?" he demanded in an irritable voice.

"I don't think we can help you," she whispered, "My husband does not like strangers in the house. There is another house a little further along the lane. They will help you."

Then turning her head she called back into the house.

"Someone wants to take shelter from the mist and rain for a while. I have already told

him that it is not convenient, and to go on to the Brennon's place."

A man's face appeared round a corner. He had large features surrounded by a shock of grizzled, grey hair.

"I don't really want no one coming in here. If he does come in he will have to stay in the other room by himself. You need not light a fire; it not all that cold."

Aubrey called out a "Thank you" and stepped in out of the steadily pouring rain. The girl, for she was not much more, opened a door just inside the hallway and motioned him to go inside. He slipped off his wet shoes holding them in his hand, not quite knowing what to do with them. She took them from him, saying as she did so,

"I will dry these for you, although I can't dry any thing else for you. I will try to get you something hot to drink. I'll ask Charles."

She took the boots from him and went quietly from the room, giving him a shy smile as she went. He was left in what appeared to be a sparsely furnished old fashioned room. A large mahogany table took up much of the room. There were four dining chairs and a glass front case holding Victorian figurines, Chinese and Japanese porcelain. There were small carved wooden figures from the West Indies. He thought as he examined them that the owner must be a well, travelled person. He wandered around the room to keep himself warm. He went to the window, but could see nothing except thin shadows of very tall trees.

He must have been in the room for nearly two hours and wishing he had never set foot inside the place. He was about to ask for his boots so that he could be on his way, chancing getting to the village, when the door opened and the girl came in carrying his boots in her hands. He took them from her and put them on. They were warm and fairly dry. He looked up at her and was about to tell her that he would be on his way when she spoke.

"My husband has agreed that the mist will be around for some time yet, so asks you to have a light lunch with us. That is, if you would care to do so."

Her eyes were pleading.

"Thank you very much. I shall be very pleased to lunch with you." he said, watching her face as he spoke. He followed her into the hall and passed from there into a sort of kitchen-cum-living room. This room seemed to be a complete replica of a one-roomed log cabin from the wildest out-back of Australia, in the nineteenth century. The floor was covered and cluttered with books. The wall was hung with rabbit skins. The stove was a round iron cylindrical shaped thing with a five inch flue pipe going up through a hole in the ceiling. The man was busy plucking the feathers from a chicken, catching the feathers on to old newspapers spread around the floor. He looked up as they came into the room, and after eyeing Aubrey up and down, motioned him to sit down on the other side of the table, saying as he did so,

"We do not welcome strangers here. It is a great inconvenience to me. I would rather you were on your way as soon as you have had your lunch, but my dear little wife fancies you fancy her."

Tears slid silently down Glenda's face. She closed her eyes to try to stop them, but they fell like rain. She sat down on a chair by the window and looked into the garden. She gave a little moan and after a while became quite distraught weeping as if her heart would break.

"Shall I tell you why she married me? To save her father from bankruptcy. She has actually cost me around £10,000 initially and would cost a great deal more if I did not keep a tight hold on the household budget. She is always wanting to gad about the village buying new clothes. That is why I bought this particular house well off the beaten track. She does not know when she is well off. Neighbours are forever running in and out if they are too near. They bring in tales in and take tales out. We do go to the village once a month to get stores and food for the livestock. She going to have a child, which is something I do not want. We shall have to wait and see what can be done about it."

He stood up, banging the now plucked chicken down on the table and told Glenda to clear up the mess and feathers and get lunch on the table. She started to gather the old newspapers holding the feathers, her face white, her hands trembling. Aubrey walked to the other side of the table and told her she was not in a fit state to do it. The man gave a bellow of rage and running round the table he pushed Glenda on one side saying as he did so,

"You do as you are told."

He lunged at Aubrey who ducked his head in time to avoid the blow which would have felled him to the ground.

"Get out of here." the man roared, "What I do in my own house is no concern of yours. Glenda is my wife and that is how she is staying. I want no busy-body young jack-a-napes telling me what to do. Glenda, get those feathers up and outside. Now!"

Aubrey put a restraining hand on the girls shoulder and felt the blue ribbon with which she had tied back her hair. The bow had come undone and the ends were hanging down touching her back. She moved from him, running past the man, into the fields at the back of the house. As she went past, the man made a grab at her hair pulling the ribbon off as she passed him. He lost his balance and fell across the table, his hand falling on to the handle of a pointed kitchen knife which he took hold of, and springing up, he went to attack Aubrey, who could sense the terrific strength of the other man and knew he was no match against him. He seized a steel which the other man used for sharpening knives and, as the man lunged at him with the knife, Aubrey hit out with it, catching the man on the side of the head so that he went down with a crash amongst the papers and feathers with blood from a large gash in his head staining the white feathers crimson.

Aubrey shook his head to clear it and was appalled to see what he had done. He dropped the steel. It fell across the mans hand, the fingers still holding the blue ribbon he had snatched from Glenda's hair. Aubrey picked up the ribbon and fled through the back door into the fields with a hope of finding her. He searched the outside buildings, he looked across the fields through the mist. He called her name as he stumbled about.

"Glenda! Glenda! Where are you? I am trying to find you. Answer me, please answer me!"

He ran around to the front of the house, out of the gate, and along the lane, scarcely knowing what he was doing, just calling her name. Suddenly he fell as a great weight seemed to descend on him bearing him to the ground. He felt a blinding pain in his head, then knew no more.

When he came to, he was in a hospital bed. He heard one of the nurses saying,

"Poor fellow! He ran right into that old brick wall by the old derelict house - the one that has no roof on. It must have fallen on to him when he walked into it. That house has not been used for forty years. He must have sheltered there from the rain and mist. People say it is haunted by the man who used to keep his wife virtually a prisoner there, until one day she drowned herself in the sea. He was found with his head cracked open. As no one ever found out who did it, the police suppose it must have been a tramp who lost his way and his temper. It has been a complete mystery."

Aubrey heard all this through his dull headache. It can't be, he thought, I saw them! I did it! He sat up in the bed and shouted,

"I didn't do it, did I? I didn't do it! You can't kill ghosts, can you?"

"Now, Mr Wyllie, don't worry yourself. You have had a nasty accident, but you will soon be alright again. There is nothing for you to worry about at all."

He sank back in to the pillows trying to remember what had happened. It must have been a dream, a bad dream! He felt something soft clutched in his right hand. He brought his hand above the bed-clothes.

In his hand he was holding a length of blue satin ribbon.