

The Sporting Chance

The Lesson a Man Learned from a Woman: By Margaret Sullon Briscoe



SUNK deep in the arbor-seat under the roses, hid by them from the girl standing in the doorway of the old rose-bower, he sat watching her.

She had appeared suddenly, seeming to alight, like a winged creature, on the upper step of the shaded opening, from there turning to look out on the world of flowers and the sunset colors in the hot sky. The wind—only now and then awakening, whispering in and out of the arbor, swayed the blossoms; the heavy, disturbed flowers were swinging off their rich perfumes on the warmed air.

The girl stretched out her hand to draw toward her a great, overblown, pink rose, nodding on its long stem. As she looked down into their heart of the flower she spoke aloud: "If I were a bee—I'd curl deep into you! I wouldn't just smell roses. How good, oh, how good it is to be alive!"

"Would you like to live forever?" asked Royal from the arbor.

"Do I need explanation?" she said. Her tone embarrassed him. He had no will to affront her.

"What I meant," he amended quickly, "was only that you seemed so naïve, experienced. One doesn't usually find that in very young women. I suppose seeing all that a nurse must watch—the suffering, life, death—"

"She interrupted him, laughing at him.

"It seems to me that you think a great deal of death."

"Do you mean I think of death a great deal, or that I think a great deal of death?"

"Both, perhaps."

"Well—dead is rather serious, isn't it?"

"She laughed softly: "Oh, I don't know about that. I have seen so many born," she added.

If there had been a shrug of the shoulders, even a light lifting of the eyebrows, it would have been altogether different; he could not have borne it; but that soft laughter—it had no levity, no mocking in it, no hardness. Her clear eyes met his. A while they smiled their lips were serious.

"It's the 'dust to dust' we shrink from, I think," he spoke impulsively: "the earth, the rain, the soil."

"Perhaps," she answered. "But, then one can be rained on above the sod, you know. It's such a quiet, safe place for some of us. Look at that humming-bird! There, right beside you in that yellow nasturtium yonder. Oh, what a day! What a night!"

She glanced down at her white cuffs, touched the narrow white band at her throat, smoothed the blue cotton over her knees, and said, "I've forgotten I was a nurse," she said. "I threw off my apron and cap before I ran out for a change, a breath of air. I have a hard case to nurse there in the hotel. She may bring for me any moment. I am listening for her bell."

She paused, waiting, her face lifted toward one of the upper hotel windows. There was no signal recalling her and she relaxed again, settling back languidly upon the bench, as if frankly grateful for the diversion afforded her. She was here he heard her, starting at him.

"Mine is Royal," he responded as practically.

He spoke quickly. "Let me tell you a story. You said I seem to think a great deal of death. In the last few weeks it's been brought home to me—deeply."

She turned and looked at him. "Yes," she said softly.

At something in her voice he went on more easily: "A man—one I have known all my life—has passed through an experience, a crisis. It's easy for us, sitting here, alive, in the sunshine, talking it over academically. You've seen your patient's face—the inevitable. I've been—these weeks, close with my friend and seen him—but I suppose neither of us can really know what it means—no small we ourselves."

"No," she said as softly. "No."

Her perfect agreement seemed to free him yet more.

"Do you care to hear a sad story? Mine is sadder than yours: Your patient was not in the prime of life—my friend is. The worst of it is he has others depending on him, his mother, sisters. There is also a brother in his junior year of a college, where he ought to stay. He is fitting himself by special training for learning the business the older brother has been developing."

Then came "his bolt" from the blue. The trouble is subtle, incurable. The doctors give the older man three, four, five years perhaps, certainly no more, if he stays on where he is working. They have packed him off, the most unhappy man you ever saw. It's one of those last-chance quests, a prescribed climate. He has no interests there—nothing to build up, anything worth his doing—not in the time he has left. They tell him he may linger there, with great care, for some years, perhaps.

"And it means, you see, while he sits about—waiting—his small brother is going half-prepared into the business they all are largely dependent upon. It's a pretty tough proposition." He looked up to meet the blue eyes—waiting.

"But I thought you said the boy was in his junior year. That means only two years more at college. That would make it come out right—wouldn't it?"

"Right?"

"I thought you said the doctors gave your friend three, four, even five years, perhaps."

"I did say that."

"Well..." But perhaps I haven't understood she broke off, dropping like a perched bird from the bench to the arbor floor. "Isn't that my signal, my bell?" A little harkening uplift of the hand, the head, then, as the clear tinkle of a bell sounded in the distance, a flash of a smile to him over her lips, over the whole vivid face, and she had almost gone.

It was the doctor who stopped her in the doorway. He caught her arm to save her from falling as she brushed against him on the arbor steps, where she had not seen him entering.

"Hello!" he said good-temperedly. It was plain that he liked her, that something more than a mere business relation was between them: attachment, confidence.

"I was out looking for you. I wanted to see you before you go back to the patient. I've just left her. What's your hurry?—This isn't the last day of the world. If it were, hurrying's no way to be spending it. Can't you ever walk?"

She paused, laughing, then glanced up again, anxiously, as she had said been watching. "She's ringing for me," she explained.

"Let her ring," said the doctor.

Royal recognized him. He remembered now that he had seen him about the hotel, even talked with him; found him bluff, pleasing, and, yes, unmistakably clever; identified him as a physician and thought no more about him.

He did not mean to startle her, yet was almost startled himself when, with no token of womanish nervousness, with not so much as a turn of the poised body toward this unexpected questioning from among the foliage, she instantly answered: "I expect to live forever."

Her voice was natural, and when she turned it was quite at her leisure.

"Royal rose," "But I didn't mean that," he said, smiling.

"I meant—live here forever—here, where it's nice."

She looked up at him and laughed. Understanding his challenge she quizzically refused it. "He drew nearer to her, irresistibly. How charming she was! It seemed to him that he had never met—nor was he meeting her—another woman like her, one so wholly free of self-consciousness, without convention. A kind of frank loveliness seemed her efficient armor. He could not account for her. Her poised manner, not that of a woman of society, while essentially that of a woman of the world, puzzled him. Her willingness to drop thus into chat with a passing stranger—then he gave it all up and simply enjoyed the mere sight of her as she stood there looking straight at him. What eyes she had! Eyes like her voice, soft, deep—and they were blue, he discovered, with something of the mind-reader in their expression, or the heart-reader perhaps."

Royal had called the arbor his, for the reason that no one else, none in the hotel, at least, seemed to know that any such bower of lilias existed. It had been the heart of an old garden. The homestead to which it belonged was swallowed up in the grandeur of the summer hotel which had absorbed the smaller adjacent estate, but neglected, lovely still in its disordered luxuriance, here lay the forgotten garden, the rose-arbor its tangled centre.

In this retreat, day following day, escaping from the noisy hotel porches, Royal had spent long, quiet hours; resting, watching the bees, the humming-birds, the butterflies, the wonderful sunsets framed in the brier-twisted entrance. And now, into them, was abruptly added this new variant, a human interest.

"Won't you come in?" he said. "So far as this refuge belongs to any one I suppose it belongs to me. This is the best view."

He proffered her a section of the long board seat that ran about the trellis; and, with no demur, her steady hand drew back the branches curtaining the doorway. As she sat there he made a sudden discovery. The blue cotton gown that spread daintily on each side of his guest was oddly familiar. The foliage no longer screened her, and he recognized what one more observant of such matters would have identified at a glance. Though minus both its cap and its apron the girl was wearing an unmistakable nurse's uniform.

They sat together, talking to each other as old friends might, often with long, comfortable, comforting silences. The sun sank lower; the birds, twittering, sought shelter in the vines still the signaling bell was silent, still the two in the arbor talked on or were silent—as their moods bade.

"My patient?" Oh, they vary," said the girl on the bench. "Some—it's like any other work—seem quite unbearable. Then again—there are others you know you have no right to be so near to as you have to come—you are not worthy. They balance that way. My patient here has her own doctor with her. The case is hard because—we all know the end can't be—what she wants."

She gazed off dreamily into the garden and added, "It's strange, isn't it? Not that the shadow of death, so near, always dignifies. Some are so loth, so afraid—pitifully afraid."

She dropped into a grave musing which Royal did not offer to break. When she turned back to him presently her hands were lightly clasped, her face alight, as if at some happily contrasting memory.

"I wish you—everybody—could have been near my last patient. I wish I could make you see her. Perhaps I can't. Can you?"

"Can you?" he asked, looking at her. She was a Jewess, but not dark, no, very, very fair—dress, face, hair all snow-white, the only color her eyes—and those blue, bright china-blue. Can you see her? There was no hope for her, either, but you never saw such waiting, such fearlessness, such dignity. The worst of it was she couldn't eat what might have made it easier for her—nothing would have saved her. Her faith, you see. Never any blessed meat, never any shellfish in that house!

One day the doctor brought, at a little white bowl with him—you have met my doctor here haven't you? He's the one I nurse most for, a great, burly, clever—oh, such a clever doctor. . . . No? Well, you may meet him yet—he walked up close to the little lady's chair. It was clam breath he had brought. He told her it had been made for her in his own kitchen.

"In all the years I have taken care of you," he said, "I have never before asked you to break one of your laws. Then he told her he wanted her to drink the broth for his sake, because as her physician he bade her. She hadn't stood in months. We used to carry her from the bed to her chair. She rose right up and stood on the floor. I can never, never while I live forget how she looked—all white, her face the whitest of all, and those bright, blue eyes. . . . And here I kept the law seventy-five years, seventy-five years with fasting and prayer, to break it now?—to prolong my days a week, an hour? Shall I change now? No, welcome death!"

The girl paused, her voice failing.

The two, doctor and nurse, walked slowly toward the hotel together, but at the first turn of the path parted; the physician wandering back to the arbor, where, without ceremony, he entered and sat down, as if relishing the peculiar quiet of the place. He looked up at Royal presently, half laughing and shook his head.

"There are some patients that take it out of you!" he said. He glanced back again into the garden. "There goes my star nurse. That's the pluckiest woman in three nations—the best in any. I haven't another nurse who wouldn't have left this case of mine. She'll stand by—to the end."

"She is—" said Royal slowly—"I only saw her half an hour ago; but she is the most remarkable young woman I ever met."

"Oh, easily," said the doctor. "She doesn't take to strangers, as a rule. What was she talking to you about?"

"Of death," said Royal quietly.

The doctor's face clouded; he sat silent.

"She's had the patience of Job with this case," he said presently. "It may have got on her nerves. He looked troubled."

"A fight against death night and day in that room up there. It's hard to call it a peevish fight, but—there's no hope, not a ray, just fencin' off the end." He paused again reflectively, then looked at Royal with that same quiet air of frankly speaking his thoughts aloud that his nurse had shown.

"Physicians," he said, "don't have to judge when the fight's properly over, thank mercy! The courage of a fight for life, the cowardice in simply holding off death—that's a nice distinction! Well, the patient has to make it—we don't."

His eyes again followed the blue-gowned figure, now vanishing through the hotel doorway.

"The nut is in it," he mused doubtfully. "If she's been harping on death—to a stranger."

Royal spoke with a visible effort. "Our talking came about naturally. She showed no distress, on the contrary."

Royal's face fell. The circumstance explained so much, too much, because the pleasant mystery of manner, that air of combined gentleness and experience she would have said wide experience of life had she been older—was accounted for normally. She glanced up at him observantly, then laughed. "Didn't you see I was a trained nurse?" she said.

Yes, undoubtedly, she was a mind-reader.

"Some people dialize nurses," she volunteered.

"No," he answered quickly. "It wasn't that. I was disappointed, but that was because I resented your being so—so explained to me. You must know you aren't quite like—everybody."

She lifted her head quickly; and if he had resented the sense of mystery dissolved he had his compensation, in that—there was no mistaking it—he saw a sudden withdrawal flash in her eyes, as if, for the instant, she feared, not him, but his intrusion upon some sanctuary she guarded.

"Was she right?" asked Royal. His voice was low, tuned to what he saw the girl was feeling. She looked up at him, frankly shaking the tears from her lashes.

"I don't know," she answered. "I only know—it was beautiful. That's what the doctor said when he came blundering out of the room. He looked so foolish, the poor man, carrying away his little porringer. 'Isn't she beautiful!' he said. Perhaps you can't see why she moved us; you may have had to watch her to understand. Never a complaint, so good, so unselfish, she broke your heart! She died—just as she had always lived—a true Jewess."

The girl looked out of the rose-framed doorway at the setting sun. When her lips moved the words dropped from them so softly that Royal had to bend nearer to hear. He was aware that she was not conscious of speaking, and he knew that she was not quoting her Jewish patient, for he recognized the phrase—from a Christian prayer:

"Suffer me not in my last hour from any fear of death to fall from Thee."

"A fight against death night and day in that room up there. It's hard to call it a peevish fight, but—there's no hope, not a ray, just fencin' off the end." He paused again reflectively, then looked at Royal with that same quiet air of frankly speaking his thoughts aloud that his nurse had shown.

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(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 10)

The doctor's face cleared. "I guess she can be trusted," he said. "That's a gallant life!" he added suddenly. "Do you know, at any moment, now, as we sit here watching her walk along that path, pass in that doorway—her own end might come? She's known it ever since it threatened, and she's never altered—from what you see, not a hair on her head. It's a miracle at his companion's face to read its expression. "No, it's not shocking," he said. He spoke roughly, almost with asperity, as one who has been unexpectedly moved to a confidence and already regrets the accident. "What a happy. This is no breach of faith, you understand. Every one knows. It can't be concealed. She has secrets. I expect her to go in any one of them; some day in the operating room, perhaps. I use her—on all my worst cases. She's still the very best nurse I can get."

As he glanced up at the face of his silent companion some added compunction seemed to compel him further. "She came to my office one day and asked me to examine her. Is it what I think? No, I could never advise her. I want to know. That's my right." So it was. I had to warn her that it would shorten her life if she kept at her work. She sat thinking it over. How long do you give me? I weakly told her, honestly. Do you know, she got up from her chair—I hoped I had frightened her—for all the world as if I had named the hour of day, and she found it much later than she had thought. I know you must keep me busy," she said, "if it is, as short as that—there's a lot to be done first." That's the amount of fear we've had to work on. "Careful! I haven't time to be. Die! How can I die? I'll show you I can't," she said. "I'll die—not what she'll die. I shall live forever, somewhere—live hard, too; the way she lives here." She said an odd thing to me once. She's hard to answer, often. "It's this way, Royal. I know I might get up this earth a few years longer—but what? I'm not losing those years. I'm crowding them all right into these. You know I am." She is, she goes lightly. She's ready to step out any time. And then the hardest it's making; she has lived much longer than I dreamed she could when I first examined her. Perhaps she's been right.

"Yes, before, of course." Royal moistened his lips before he went on. "His voice was steady, but the doctor glanced up, sharply, at him, then looked away again. "You know there is no hope? You have had—several opinions?"

"Bushels. I've dragged her from specialist to specialist. There's no room for doubt, humanly speaking. They all say the same. You see she takes this ground against us—it's unanswerable, too. If she has the nerve to do it she claims she has the moral right to live her life, take the sporting chance—if you choose to call it so—the sporting chance with the ninety-nine against her, that we are all wrong. There's that percentage of doubt, of course, in any human diagnosis. Once I told her I wouldn't protest again if she could promise me she'd make a clever die of it; we've talked all kinds of ways to her. I told her she'd lunge it with a weary illness—all the trouble in the world for all of us. That's the way with most people who'd rather die than be careful. I'll die with my looks on, Doctor," she said. She will, too.

"He rose as he spoke. "Meanime," he said, "you saw her. I'm not sure she isn't the happiest woman I know. She'll live, she'll die fearlessly. What more can we do? "The natural life," cried Royal suddenly. "Love, home, husband, children."

"Ah!" The doctor lifted his hand with a quick, curious, questioning gesture that spoke. "She has risen above all that, above everything. Right or wrong," he stated, "she's made her choice. She goes out to meet her enemy. She walks up to the guillotine. When the end does come she will say, 'Where are your torturers?' If at the test we make as leave a mistake of it, my friend—she's a frail girl, we two lusty men—we shall have done very well."

Left alone in the arbor, Royal sat looking out once more through the rose-bowered door, toward the sunset clouds that wrapped the red ball of the sun sinking slowly into the western sky-line.

He rose as if to draw nearer to the spectacle and stood in the trellis entrance. His eyes still on the courted ball of fire, he walked slowly through the garden, stooping now and then to identify more closely some half-hidden flower caught in the wild tangle of grass, but always his gaze returning to that glory of departing glory in the brilliant west.

As he stepped into the hotel office, crossing the floor to the desk of the telegraph operator, the level rays of light darting in through the window so dazzled him that he took, half blindly, the message blanks the operator offered and wrote by feeling.

As he handed back the slip of paper across the desk his eyes turned again to the open window; the setting sun. The sound of his own name called toward him. As he moved abruptly his eyes met, reflected in the mirror set behind the desk, his own eyes, a view caught before he knew consciously that it was himself he looked at.

What he saw was not the eyes he had last met in his mirror—miserable, restless eyes—but those of the girl on the bench in the rose-arbor, made masculine by physical, healthy, deep, steadfast eyes, in the face of one unflinchingly at peace.

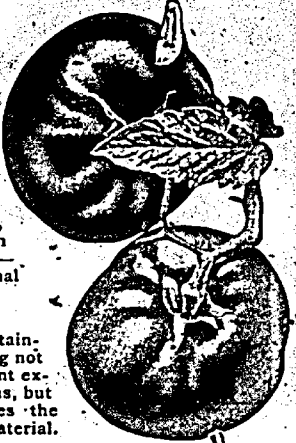
The operator was reading the telegram aloud, haltingly. It was addressed to a distant college town and to another Royal:

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