

X

SHARPER THAN A FERRET'S TOOTH

"My dear Philippa," said Miss Shute gloomily, "I have about as much chance of spending next winter in Florence as I have of spending it in the moon. I despair of ever getting Bernard married. I look upon him as hopeless."

"I don't agree with you at all," replied Philippa, "don't you remember how demented he was about Sally Knox? And when we all thought he was on the verge of suicide, we discovered that he was deep in a flirtation with that American girl. It seems to me he's ready to be devoted to any one who takes him in hand. He has none of that deadly helpless fidelity about him."

"I ought never to have allowed him to take up gardening," said Miss Shute, despondently pursuing her own line of thought, "it only promotes intimacies with dowagers."

"Yes, and it makes men elderly, and contented, and stay-at-home," agreed Philippa; "it's one of the worst signs! But I can easily make Sybil Hervey think she's a gardener. She's a

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thoroughly nice, coercible girl. Alice has always been so particular about her girls. Of course with their money they've been run after a good deal, but they're not in the least spoilt."

"I don't think," I murmured privately to Maria, who was trying to hypnotise me into letting her crawl on to the sofa beside me, "that we'll borrow half-a-crown to get drunk with her."

Maria wagged her tail in servile acquiescence.

"Nonsense!" said my wife largely.

A month from the date of this conversation, Sybil Hervey, my wife's pretty, young, and well-dowered niece, was staying beneath our roof. I had not changed my mind about the half-crown, though Maria, perfidious as ever, feigned for her the impassioned affection that had so often imposed upon the guileless guest within my gates.

"Why, this dog has taken the most extraordinary fancy to me!" Sybil Hervey (who was really a very amiable girl) would say, and Maria, with a furtive eye upon her owners, would softly draw the guest's third piece of cake into the brown velvet bag that she called her mouth.

This was all very well from Maria's point of view, but a friendship with Maria had not been the object of Miss Hervey's importation. I evade, by main strength, the quotation from Burns proper to this state of affairs, and proceed

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to say that the matrimonial scheme laid by my wife and Miss Shute was not prospering. Sybil Hervey, the coercible, the thoroughly nice, shied persistently at the instructive pages of Robinson's "English Flower Garden," and stuck in her toes and refused point blank to weed seedlings for her Aunt Philippa. Nor was a comprehensive garden party at Clountiss attended with any success; far otherwise. Miss Shute unfortunately thought it incumbent on her to trawl in deep waters, and to invite even the McRory family to her entertainment, with the result that her brother, Bernard—I quote my wife verbatim—made a ridiculous spectacle of himself by walking about all the afternoon with a fluffy-haired, certainly-rather-pretty, little abomination, a creature who was staying with the McRorys. Worse even than this, Sybil had disappointed, if not disgraced, her backers, by vanishing from the ken of un-gentle men with Mr. De Lacy McRory; known to his friends as "Curly."

I have before now dealt, superficially, and quite inadequately, with the McRorys. It may even be permitted to me to recall again the generic description of each young male McRory. "A bit of a lad, but nothing at all to the next youngest." Since that time the family had worn its way, unequally and in patches, into the tolerance of the

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neighbourhood. It was said, apologetically, that the daughters danced, and played tennis and golf so well, and the sons did the same and were such excellent shots, and that Mrs. McRory bought, uncomplainingly, all that was offered to her at bazaars, and could always be counted on for a whole row of seats at local concerts. As for old McRory, people said that he was certainly rather awful, but that he was better than his family in that he knew that he was awful, and kept out of the way. As a matter of history, there were not many functions where a McRory of some kind, in accordance with its special accomplishment, did not find, at all events, standing room; fewer still where they did not form a valued topic of conversation.

Curly McRory was, perhaps, the pioneer of his family in their advance to cross what has been usefully called "the boulder-y line." He played all games well, and he was indisputably good-looking, he knew how to be discreetly silent; he also, apparently, knew how to talk to Sybil what time her accredited chaperon, oblivious of her position, played two engrossing sets of tennis.

After this fiasco came a period of stagnation, during which Mr. De Lacy McRory honoured us with his first visit to Shroelane, bicycling over to see me, on business connected with the golf club;

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in my regretted absence he asked for Mrs. Yeates, and stayed for tea. Following upon this Sybil took to saying, "I will," in what she believed to be a brogue, instead of "yes," and was detected in fruitless search for the McRorys of Temple Braney in the pages of Burke's Irish Landed Gentry.

It was at this unsatisfactory juncture that Mrs. Flurry Knox entered into the affair with an invitation to us to spend three days at Aussolas Castle, one of which was to be devoted to the destruction of a pack of grouse, fabled by John Kane, the keeper, to frequent a mountain back of Aussolas: the Shutes were also to be of the party. I seemed to detect in the arrangement a hand more diplomatic than that of Providence, but I said nothing.

The Flurry Knoxes were, for the moment, in residence at Aussolas, while old Mrs. Knox made her annual pilgrimage to Buxton. They were sent there to keep the servants from fighting, and because John Kane had said that there was no such enemies to pigs as servants on board wages. (A dark saying, bearing indirectly on the plenshing of pig-buckets.)

Between servants and pigs, as indeed in most affairs of life, little Mrs. Flurry held the scales of justice with a remarkably steady hand, and under



FLURRY AND I PUT IN A BLAZING SEPTEMBER DAY ON
THE MOUNTAIN

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her régime one could at all events be reasonably sure of having one's boots cleaned, and of getting a hot bath in the morning. We went to Aussolas, and Flurry and Bernard Shute and I put in a blazing September day on the mountain, wading knee deep in matted heather and furze, in pursuit of the mythical grouse, and brought home two hares and a headache (the latter being my contribution to the bag). The ladies met us with tea; Sybil, in Harris tweed and admirable boots, looked, I must admit, uncommonly smart. Even Flurry was impressed, and it was palpable to the most superficial observer that Bernard was at length beginning, like a baby, to "take notice." After tea he and she moved away in sweet accord to wash teacups in a bog-hole, from whence their prattle came prosperously to the ears of the three diplomatists, seated, like the witches in Macbeth, upon the heath, and, like them, arranging futures for other people. Bearing in mind that one of the witches had (in a previous incarnation as Miss Sally Knox) held Bernard in her thrall, and still retained him in a platonic sphere of influence, any person of experience would have said that the odds were greatly against Mr. Shute.

The hot bath that was the *fine fleur* of Mrs. Flurry's régime at Aussolas failed conspicuously next morning. It was the precursor of a general

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slump. When, at a liberal 9.30, I arrived in the dining-room, of neither host, (hostess, nor breakfast was there any sign. The host, it appeared, had gone to a fair; having waited for a hungry half-hour we were coming to the conclusion that the hostess had gone with him, when the door opened and Mrs. Flurry came swiftly into the room. Her face was as a book, where men might read strange matters; it was also of a hue that suggested the ardent climate of the kitchen; in her hand she carried a toast-rack, and following hard on her heels came three maids, also heavily flushed, bearing various foods, and all, apparently, on the verge of tears. This cortège having retired, Mrs. Flurry proceeded to explain. The butler, Johnny, a dingy young man, once Mrs. Knox's bathchair-attendant, had departed at 8 A.M., accompanied by Michael the pantry boy, to dig a grave for a cousin. To those acquainted with Aussolas there was nothing remarkable in this, but Sybil Hervey's china-blue eyes opened wide, and I heard her ask Bernard in a low voice if he thought it was anything agrarian. The annoyance of the cook at the defection of the butler and pantry boy was so acute that she had retired to her room and refused to send in breakfast.

"That was no more than I should have expected from the servants here," said Mrs. Flurry

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vindictively, "but what was just a little too much was finding the yard-boy cramming the toast into the toast-rack with his fingers."

At this my wife's niece uttered the loud yell which all young women with any pretension to smartness have by them for use on emergencies, and exclaimed—

"Oh, *don't!*"

"You needn't be frightened," said Mrs. Flurry, giving Miss Hervey the eighth part of a glance of her greeny-grey eyes; "I made this stuff myself, and you may all think yourselves lucky to get anything," she went on, "as one of the herd of incapables downstairs said, 'to get as much milk as'd do the tea itself, that was the stratagem'!"

Hard on the heels of the quotation there came a rushing sound in the hall without, a furious grappling with the door-handle, and the cook herself, or rather the Tragic Muse in person, burst into the room. Her tawny hair hung loose about her head; her yellow-brown eyes blazed in an ashen and extremely handsome face; she shook a pair of freckled fists at the universe. I cannot pretend to do more than indicate the drift of her denunciation. Brunhilda, ascending the funeral pyre, with full orchestral accompaniment, could not more fully and deafeningly have held her audience, and the theme might

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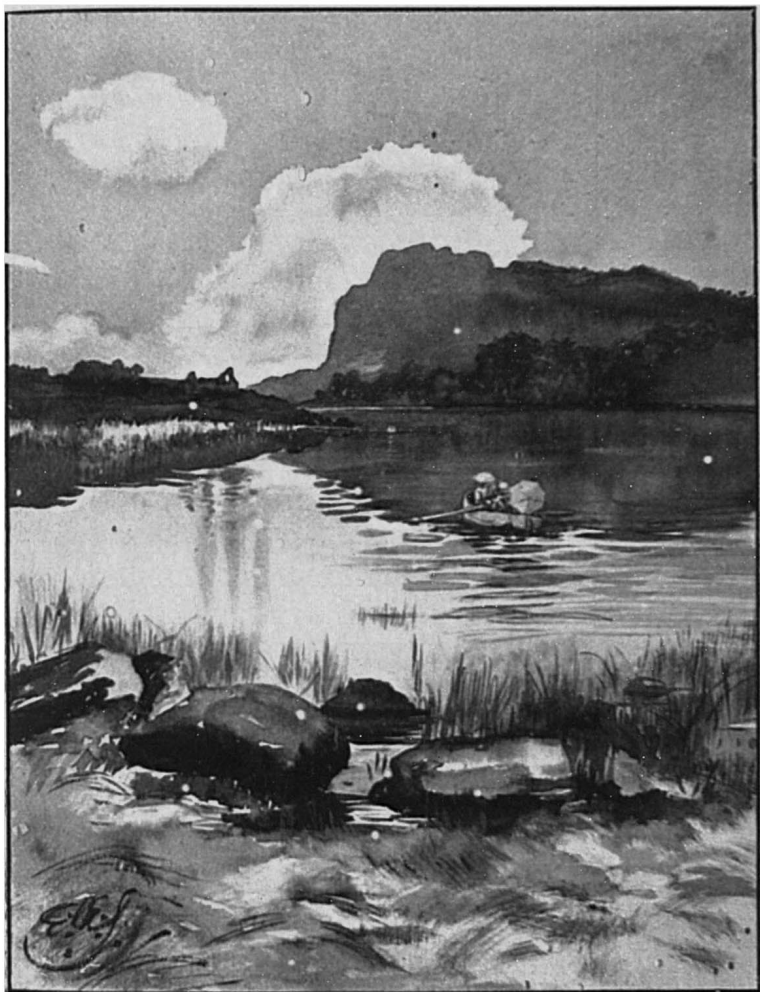
have been taken out of the darkest corner of any of the Sagas.

The burying-ground of her clan was—so she had been informed by a swift runner—even now being broken into by the butler and the pantry boy, and the graves of her ancestors were being thrown open to the Four Winds of the World, to make room for the Scuff of the Country (whatever that might mean). Here followed the most capable and comprehensive cursings of the butler and the pantry boy that it has ever been my lot to admire, delivered at lightning speed, and with gestures worthy of the highest traditions of classic drama, the whole ending with the statement that she was on her way to the graveyard now to drink their blood.

“I trust you will, Kate,” cordially responded Mrs. Flurry, “don’t wait a moment!”

The Tragic Muse, startled into an instant of silence, stared wildly at Mrs. Flurry, seemed to scent afar off the possibility that she was not being taken seriously, and whirled from the room, a Vampire on the warpath.

“I meant every word I said to her!” said Sally, looking round upon us defiantly, “I was very near offering her your motor, Mr. Shute! The sooner she kills Johnny and Michael the better pleased I shall be! And I may tell you



BRANEY'S LAKE

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all," she added, "that we shall have no luncheon to-day, and most probably no dinner!"

"Oh, that's all right!" said Philippa, seeing her chance, and hammering in her wedge with all speed, "now there's nothing for it but sandwiches and a picnic!"

The lake at Aussolas was one of a winding chain of three, connected by narrow channels cut through the bog for the passage of boats that carried turf to the lake-side dwellers. The end one of these, known as Braney's Lake, was a recognised place for picnics; a ruined oratory on a wooded point supplying the pretext, and a reliable spring well completing the equipment. The weather was of the variety specially associated in my mind with Philippa's picnics, brilliantly fine, with a falling glass, and 12 o'clock saw us shoving out from the Aussolas turf quay, through the reeds and the rocks.

We were a party of six, in two boats; diplomacy, whose I know not, had so disposed matters that Bernard Shute and Sybil Hervey were despatched together in a dapper punt, and I, realising to the full the insignificance of my position as a married man; found myself tugging at a tough and ponderous oar, in a species of barge, known to history as "The Yellow Boat-that-was-painted-black." My wife and Mrs.

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Flurry took turns in assisting my labours by paddling with a scull in the bow, while Miss Shute languidly pulled the wrong string at intervals, in the stern. Why, I grumbled contentiously, should, as it were, fish be made of Bernard and flesh be made of me (which was a highly figurative way of describing a performance that would take a stone off my weight ere all was done). Why, I repeated, should not Bernard put his broad back into it in the heavy boat with me, and leave the punt for the ladies? My wife tore herself from *sotto voce* gabblings with Sally in the bow to tell me that I was thoroughly unsympathetic, what time she dealt me an unintentional but none the less disabling blow in the spine, in her effort to fall again into stroke. Mrs. Flurry, in order to take turns at the oar with Philippa, had seated herself on the luncheon basket in the bow, thereby sinking the old tub by the head, and, as we afterwards found, causing her to leak in the sun-dried upper seams. To us travelled the voice of Bernard, lightly propelling his skiff over the ruffled and sparkling blue water.

“He’s telling her about all the alterations he’s going to make at Clountiss!” hissed Sally down the back of Philippa’s neck.

“Almost actionable!” responded my wife, and

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in her enthusiasm her oar again took me heavily between the shoulder blades.

We laboured out of the Aussolas lake, and poled down the narrow channel into the middle lake, where shallows, and a heavy summer's growth of reeds, did not facilitate our advance. The day began to cloud over; as we wobbled out of the second channel into Braney's lake the sun went in, a sharp shower began to whip the water, and simultaneously Miss Shute announced that her feet were wet, and that she thought the boat must be leaking. I then perceived that the water was up to the bottom boards, and was coming in faster than I could have wished. A baler was required, and I proceeded with confidence to search for the rusty mustard tin, or cracked jam-crock, that fills that office. There was nothing to be found.

"There are plenty of cups in the luncheon basket," said Sally, tranquilly; "Flurry once had to bale this old boat out with one of his grandmother's galoshes."

Philippa and I began to row with some vigour, while Sally wrestled with the fastening of the luncheon basket in the bow. The lid opened with a jerk and a crack. There was one long and speechless moment, and then Sally said in a very gentle voice:

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“They’ve sent the washing-basket, with all the clean clothes!”

Of the general bearings of this catastrophe there was no time to think; its most pressing feature was the fact that there were no cups with which to bale the boat. I looked over my shoulder and saw Bernard dragging the punt ashore under the ruined oratory, a quarter of a mile away; there was nothing for it but to turn and make for the shore on our right at the best pace attainable. Sally and Philippa double-banked the bow oar, and the old boat, leaking harder at each moment, wallowed on towards a landing stage that suddenly became visible amid the reeds—the bottom boards were by this time awash, and Miss Shute’s complexion and that of her holland dress matched to a shade.

“Could you throw the washing overboard?” I suggested over my shoulder, labouring the while at my massy oar.

“My—new—nightgowns!” panted Mrs. Flurry, “never!”

Just then big rocks began to show yellow in the depths, the next moment the boat scraped over one, and, almost immediately afterwards, settled down quietly and with dignity in some three feet of brown water and mud.

Only those who have tried to get out of a sub-

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merged boat, can form any idea of what then befell. Our feet and legs turned to lead, the water to glue, all that was floatable in the boat rose to the surface, and lay about there impeding our every movement. We had foundered in sight of port and were not half-a-dozen yards from the landing stage, but to drag myself and three women, all up to our waists in water, and the ladies hopelessly handicapped by their petticoats, over the gunwale of a sunken boat, and to flounder ashore with them in mud, over unsteady rocks, and through the ever-hampering reeds, was infinitely more difficult and exhausting than it may seem.

Clasping a slimy post to my bosom with one arm, I was in the act of shoving Miss Shute up on to the landing stage, when I heard the unmistakable Dublin light tenor voice of a McRory hail me, announcing that he was coming to our rescue. More distant shouts, and the rapid creaking of hard-pulled oars told that Bernard and Sybil were also speeding to our aid. The three diplomates, dripping on the end of the pier, looked at each other bodefully, and Philippa murmured :

“The worst has happened!”

After that the worst continued to happen, and at a pace that overbore all resistance. Mr. De

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Lacy McRory, tall and beautiful, in lily-white flannels, took the lead into his own hands and played his game faultlessly. Philippa was the object of his chief solicitude, Sally and Miss Shute had their share of a manly tenderness that resolutely ignored the degrading absurdity of their appearance; his father's house, and all that was therein was laid at our feet. Captive and helpless, we slopped and squelched beside him through the shrubberies of Temple Braney House, with the shower, now matured into a heavy down-pour, completing our saturation, too spiritless to resent the heavy pleasantries of Bernard, the giggling condolences of Sybil.

We have never been able to decide at which moment the knife of humiliation cut deepest, whether it was when we stood and dripped on the steps, while Curly McRory summoned in trumpet tones his women-kind, or when, still dripping, we stood in the hall and were presented to Mrs. McRory and a troop of young men and maidens, vociferous in sympathy and hospitality; or when, having progressed like water carts through the house, we found ourselves installed, like the Plague of Frogs, in the bedchambers of the McRorys, face to face with the supreme embarrassment of either going to bed, or of arraying ourselves in the all too gorgeous garments that

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were flung before us with a generous *abandon* worthy of Sir Walter Raleigh.

I chose the latter course; and, in process of time, found myself immaculately clothed in what is, I believe, known to tailors as "a Lounge Suit," though not for untold gold would I have lounged, or by any carelessness endangered the perfection of the creases of its dark grey trousers.

The luncheon gong sounded, and, like the leading gentleman in any drawing-room drama, I put forth from my dressing-room, and at the head of the stairs met my wife and Miss Shute. They were, if possible, grander than I, and looked as if they were going to a wedding.

"We had the choice of about eighty silk blouses," breathed Philippa, gathering up a long and silken train, "Sally has to wear Madame's clothes, nothing else were short enough. We're in for it, you know," she added, "a luncheon is inevitable, and goodness knows when we can get away, especially if this rain lasts—" her voice broke hysterically; I turned and saw Mrs. Flurry shuffling towards us in velvet slippers, holding up with both hands a flowing purple brocade skirt. I pointed repressively downwards; to where, in the window seat of the hall below, were visible the crisped golden curls of Mr. De Lacy McRory, and the shining rolls and undulations of Miss

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Sybil Hervey's *chevelure*. Their heads were in close proximity, and their voices were low and confidential.

"This must be put a stop to!" said Philippa, rustling swiftly downstairs.

We all moved processionally in to lunch, arm in arm with the McRorys. To Philippa had fallen old McRory, who was the best of the party (in being so awful that he knew he was awful). He maintained an unbroken silence throughout the meal, but whistled jigs secretly through his teeth, a method of keeping up his courage of which I believe he was quite unconscious. Of the brilliance of the part that I played with Mrs. McRory it would ill become me to speak; what is more worthy of record is the rapid and Upass-like growth of intimacy between Curly McRory and my wife's niece. She had probably never before encountered a young man so anxious to be agreeable, so skilled in achieving that end. The fact that he was Irish accounted, no doubt, in her eyes, for all that was unusual in his voice and manners, and his long eyelashes did the rest. Sybil grew momentarily pinker and prettier as the long, extraordinary meal marched on.

Of its component parts I can only remember that there was a soup tureen full of custard, a mountainous dish of trifle, in whose veins ran

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honey, instead of jam, and to whose enlivenment a bottle at least of whisky had been dedicated; certainly, at one period, Philippa had on one side of her plate a cup of soup, and on the other a cup of tea. Cecilia Shute was perhaps the member of our party who took it all hardest. Pale and implacable, attired in a brilliant blue garment that was an outrage alike to her convictions and her complexion, she sat between two young McRorys, who understood no more of her language than she did of theirs, and was obliged to view with the frigid tranquillity boasted of by Doctor Johnson, the spectacle of her brother devoting himself enthusiastically to that McRory cousin whom Philippa had described as a fluffy-haired abomination. Everything, in fact, was occurring that was least desired by the ladies of my party, with the single exception of my niece by marriage; and the glowing satisfaction of the McRory family was not hid from us, and did not ameliorate the position.

When luncheon was at length brought to a close nothing could well have been blacker than the outlook. The rain, and the splendour of our borrowed plumes, put a return by boat out of the question. It was a good seven miles round by road, and the McRory family, fleet and tireless bicyclists, had but one horse, which was

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lame. A telegram to Aussolas had been despatched an hour ago, but as Mrs. Flurry was gloomily certain that every servant there had gone to the funeral, the time of our release was unknown.

I do not now distinctly remember what occurred immediately after lunch, but I know there came a period when I found myself alone in the hall, turning over the pages of a dreary comic paper, uncertain what to do, but determined on one point, that neither principalities nor powers should force me into the drawing-room, where sat the three unhappy women of my party, being entertained within an inch of their lives by Mrs. McRory. Sybil and Bernard and their boon companions had betaken themselves to that distant and dilapidated wing of the house in which I had once unearthed Tomsy Flood, there to play squash racquets in one of the empty rooms. I was consequently enacting the part laid down for me by my lounge suit; I was lounging, as a gentleman should, without for an instant disturbing the creases of my trousers.

At times I was aware of the silent and respectful surveillance of Mr. McRory in the inner hall, but I thought it best for us both to feign unconsciousness of his presence. Through a swing door that, true to its definition, swung wheezily

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to the cabbage-laden draughts from the lower regions, I could hear the tide of battle rolling through the disused wing. The squash racquets seemed to be of a most pervading character; the thunder of rushing feet, blent with the long, progressive shriek of an express train, would at intervals approach almost to the swing door, but I remained unmolested. I had entered upon my second cigarette, and a period of comparative peace, when I heard a stealing foot, and found at my elbow a female McRory of about twelve as years go, but dowered with the accumulated experience of six elder sisters.

"Did Pinkie and Mr. Shute come in this way to hide?" she began, looking at me as if "Pinkie," whoever she might be, was in my pocket. "We're playing hide'n-go-seek, and we can't find them."

I said I knew nothing of them.

The McRory child looked at me with supernal intelligence from under the wing of dark hair that was tied over one ear.

"They're not playing fair anyhow, and there's Curly and Miss Hervey that wouldn't play at all!" She eyed me again. "He took her out to show her the ferrets and they never came back. I was watching them; she said one of the ferrets bit her finger, and Curly kissed it!"

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"I suppose you mean he kissed the ferret," I said repressively, while I thought of Alice Hervey, mother of Sybil, and trembled.

"Ah, go on! what a fool you're letting on to be!" replied the McRory child, with elegant sarcasm. She swung round on her heel and sped away again upon the trail, cannoning against old McRory in the back hall.

"I tell you, that's the lady!" soliloquised old McRory, from the deep of the back hall. I gathered that he was referring to the social capacity of his youngest daughter and thought he was probably right.

It was at this moment that deliverance broke like a sunburst upon us; I saw through the windows of the hall a dogcart and an outside car whirl past the door and onwards to the yard. The former was driven by Flurry Knox, the car by Michael the Aussolas pantry boy, apparently none the worse for his encounter with the vampire cook. I snatched an umbrella, and, regardless of the lounge suit, followed with all speed the golden path of the sunburst.

Flurry, clad in glistening yellow oilskins, met me in the yard, wearing an expression of ill-concealed exultation worthy of Job's comforters at their brightest.

"D'ye know who opened your wire?" he began,

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regarding me with an all observant eye from under his sou-wester, while the rain drops ran down his nose. "I can tell you there's the Old Gentleman to pay at Aussolas—or the old lady, and that's worse! That's a nice suit—you ought to buy that from Curly."

"Who opened my telegram?" I said. I was not at all amused.

"When she got there, the cupboard was bare," returned Flurry. "Not a servant in the house, not a bit in the larder! If it wasn't that by the mercy of providence I found the picnic basket that you bright boys had left after you, she'd have torn the house down!"

"I suppose you mean that your grandmother has come back," I said stonily.

"She fought with her unfortunate devil of a doctor at Buxton," said Flurry, permitting himself a grin of remembrance, "he told her she was too old to eat late dinner, and she told him she wasn't going to be a slave to her stomach or to him either, and she'd eat her dinner when she pleased, and she landed in at Aussolas by the mid-day train without a word."

"What did she say when she opened my telegram?" I faltered.

"She said 'Thank God I'm not a fool!'" replied her grandson.

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The proposition was unanswerable, and I took it, so to speak, lying down.

"Here!" said Flurry, summoning the pantry boy. "These horses must go in out of the rain. I'll look over there for some place I can put them."

"I see Michael got back from the funeral," I said, following Flurry across the wide and wet expanse of the yard, "I suppose the cook killed Johnny?"

"Ah, not at all," said Flurry, "anyway, my grandmother had the two of them up unpacking her trunks when I left. Here, this place looks like a stable——"

He opened a door, in front of which a cascade from a broken water-shoot was splashing noisily. The potent smell of ferrets greeted us.

Seated on the ferrets' box were Mr. De Lacy McRory, and Sybil, daughter of Alice Hervey. Apparently she had again been bitten by the ferret, but this time the bite was not on her finger.