

The Voice in the Dark

good idea to let yourself get hypnotized by anything, in the first place?"

"Why not?" he relished the chance of leading her on.

"Isn't that just letting your mind go flabby?"

"Do your muscles get flabby if you let them relax once in a while?"

"But that isn't a parallel."

"I thought it was."

"I don't see it. When your mind's hypnotized, it isn't relaxed; it's just loaned to somebody else. All this does to me is to make me remember things I want to. Nice things. And then my mind is relaxed. But it's still mine."

"It makes me forget," said Dilworth. "But I can recommend the place to you for almost anything you want to use it for."

"Of course," she said, "I do think it's a good thing to put your mind out on the line sometimes and let the wind get at it." She stood up, and Dilworth with her.

"Am I driving you away?" he asked, awkwardly.

"O, not at all. I've been here nearly an hour."

"Let me help you up the bank, then."

She had tried it herself, and slipped back, laughing. "It is harder going up than coming down, isn't it?"

Dilworth clambered to the summit, and reached down for her hand. This was something else about her to approve. It was soft and strong, and the fingers had individuality. He brought her, still laughing, up to the edge of the moor. Her laugh intrigued him; and he struggled again to peer through the night, and to discover her.

There was only one path to take, and it wasn't wide enough for two. Dilworth, with something of the spirit of a frontiersman in his veins, broke trail. Twenty times he glanced back over his shoulder, and once he volunteered a remark to the effect that mosquitoes love sea-sedge; apart from that, they were equally uncommunicative. Dilworth was embarrassed to realize that without a request on his own part, or an invitation on hers, he had assumed the function of guide and escort and he kept silent for fear that she would put him down as an opportunist. Besides, it's difficult to talk to a stranger who walks steadily ten feet behind.

When the path merged with the main thoroughfare of the village, he glanced over his shoulder for the twenty-first time. He stopped short, and faced about. The girl was nowhere. Bewildered, and a little resentful, he went back a few rods along the path. There was no one in sight. Increasingly baffled and annoyed, he continued a few rods further, and paused at a junction which he had never noticed until now. It was made by what the automobile road maps would call a reverse fork; by another pathway, leading off to the right through a grove of pines. Dilworth followed it and came out, at the opposite side of the grove, upon an unsuspected road, leading in the direction of the great hotel near by.

He wasn't offended that she had chosen to elude him here, or that she had gone without farewell, for he liked recessive women. But he was disappointed not to have seen her face; and he was especially disappointed not to have heard her voice once more.

Dilworth's day was one of consistent variation from the popular schedule. He went down to the sea, not at 10:30 in the morning with a multitude, but at 7:30 with only the herring gulls for company. He breakfasted on the veranda outside his bedroom window, while the other occupants of his boarding house were drowsily responding to the rising bell. By 9:30, when the rest of the world was picking its barefoot way down to the water, Dilworth was riding a horse over sandy wood roads; and in the afternoon,

when it was fashionable to play golf or tennis, Dilworth sailed his rented sloop without a crew. Then, after dinner, when all normal folk were coursing towards the hotel, or already active in dancing or bridge or conversation, Dilworth put a heavy pipe in his pocket and went out stolidly over the moors for refuge.

At the edge of the bank he stopped to look before he leaped. For the last few minutes he had been conscious of a very definite desire, and of a very definite conviction that it wasn't going to be filled. It was too much to expect, and he had said so to himself, over and over again. Even so, he wasn't prepared for all the disillusionment which came to him as he saw his rock untenanted. His philosophy was worth nothing at the test. Cheated, disgruntled, he climbed down the bank instead of jumping down. And he remained for fully a quarter hour without smoking, which was a rare thing for Dilworth. But he went for the same period without brooding, and this was also good for him.

The memory of her voice captivated him. Out of it he built up a picture of her as she ought to be. The picture spoke to him, not in words, but in notes, inflections. Then he fancied that he heard her say: "Good evening," and his senses absorbed her beautiful contralto as greedily as a blotter takes up ink. "Good evening." Without seeing her, he could still long to hear her, even if she said nothing more significant than that, and repeated it endlessly.

At length, uneasy without a cause, and ready to jeer at himself for his notions, he turned his head. A small figure was darkly silhouetted against the sky, and as he stared, incredulous, the figure said, in the voice which affected him like music—like real, honest, old-fashioned music, with melody in it—it said: "Good evening! That's the third and last time!"

Dilworth was at the bank. "I . . . I was—I didn't know you were there! Coming down?"

"If you don't think I'd spoil your séance, it's your province—you said."

"Here—can you reach my hand?"

For reply, she came sliding almost into his arms.

"I thought you'd be gone by this time," she said demurely, shaking out her cape.

Dilworth was crushed. "Did you? I can remedy the trouble if you say so."

She shook her head. "That's not altogether necessary. Only you mustn't think I came here expecting to find you. I didn't."

With meticulous care, Dilworth brushed at least a thimbleful of sand off the rock for her. "You're very conservative. Personally, I don't see why we can't divide the view. There's enough for both of us. There isn't such a lot this week, anyway."

"It might be thought a little indiscreet, though."

"Indiscretion's one of the few luxuries I can afford," said Dilworth grimly. "But, if you don't feel comfortable about it, far be it from me to be a dog in the manger."

For the labor he had expended on the rock, she gave him a little nod of thanks.

"O, I'm positive it's all right for me to be here with you, but I'm not so sure you ought to be here with me."

Dilworth was puzzled. "What's the difference?"

"Why, you've told me so much about yourself that I haven't anything to worry about."

"I?"

"Of course. Maybe you didn't mean to, but you did. Only perhaps you aren't so sure about me."

He laughed constrainedly. "I'd been thinking the same thing, only the other way 'round. It occurred to me last night what a lot our eyesight has to do with our opinions about things we can't see. And vice versa. So I guess it's all right for both of us."

"I've often wondered," she said, "if a blind man imagines that everything in the world is beautiful to look at and a deaf man imagines that everything's beautiful to hear."

"Why, they probably do. I suppose they must."

"Because I never met anybody before exactly like this, and yet it seems to me I know

a great deal more about you than if we'd sat in a room somewhere, and talked." She broke off; then added hastily: "I wasn't trying to make a parallel between the blind man and us—it would have been as far-fetched as yours last night."

"I know. But do you suppose people would really understand each other better if they met the way we have?"

She deliberated on this, while Dilworth smoked peacefully.

"They might not be so self-conscious. And they might talk a little more sincerely. So often, people talk just to produce an effect."

"And it's no fun if you can't see it?"

"Probably. Did I come just in time to spoil your hypnosis tonight?"

Dilworth reddened, and was glad of the shadows. "I was following some of your methods instead of mine. Remembering things. Nice things."

"That's better. Last night, you really shocked me. I shouldn't have imagined you're old enough to be a cynic."

Dilworth straightened. "I'm plenty old enough to have a reason to be."

"Silly. You're hardly out of college—you're about 24?"

"I was a major of infantry," he said, rather stiffly.

"Twenty-five, then?"

"Twenty-six," said Dilworth. "Only I warn you not to ask questions unless you're willing to answer some."

"I'm two years younger," she said quickly, "and I guess that balances the account, doesn't it? I'm not asking you to make confidences, or anything like that, but why on earth should you be cynical? Why should anybody?"

"Have I said that I am?"

"You've hinted that you don't mind having me think so. O, I don't want you to go into details—I'm just interested in how you defend yourself."

"Defend myself?"

"Surely," she said. "That's all cynicism amounts to, isn't it? Defending yourself against what you think has made you that way?"

Dilworth fumbled for a justification which would convince her. "I've stopped believing in luck."

"You mean you've stopped believing in good luck, don't you?"

"Why—yes."

"That is, you don't admit that anybody ever has it?"

"O, yes, I do. I mean that I don't."

"Well—what is it you'd call luck, if you had to define it?"

Dilworth sniffed loudly. "It's what makes life almighty sour if you don't have any."

"Not 26," she said. "Seventeen."

The tonal quality of her voice stung him and swayed him at the same time. In the darkness, his mood was undermined and weakened. And he didn't care to be lectured by a girl, a stranger, who hadn't seen the raw life that he had. Involuntarily, he provided the defense she had mentioned.

"Suppose," he said, "you'd been an ordinary human being—a man—without any particular marks to make or mar you, one way or the other. And suppose you'd been in an infantry regiment overseas. And suppose a bullet came along and left a scar on your face that people would notice as far as they can see—a big, one, a horrible one—and women were shocked when they saw it. And most people sort of shuddered. And you couldn't talk to anybody without feeling that they were thinking about it, and pitying you—and a lot of them avoid you—and a lot of them sympathize with you about the damned thing. Suppose you had that to think about?"

He knew that she had leaned ever so slightly towards him. "Is that why you've been coming out here alone?"

"I can't go anywhere else," he said. "I've tried hanging around where people are—I can't stand it."

"Haven't you any business?"

"Only to get over this thing, and the tail end of a shell shock." He turned on her roughly. "There! Now you've got the whole story. If you try to say any Sunday school lessons, I'll get up and leave. Last night and tonight have been the only times in eight months I've been with anybody else

and felt safe. All you know is what I've just told you. You can't see for yourself. Thank the Lord, you can't! I'm here because it's good air and all that sort of rot, and it's no worse than anywhere else, and I'm living in the smallest dump I could find. But it's no joke—not for a holy minute. Don't think so. Luck!"

There was a long silence, during which he assimilated, gratefully, the things which, if she had spoken them, would have torn him with irritation.

"You aren't a real cynic then, after all," she said. "Only temporary."

"So?"

"All you need is to live a little longer."

"I'm trying to," he said, dryly.

This was the starting point of the very mild lecture that he had feared, but Dilworth heard it through with becoming forbearance. And when he discovered that the end of the lecture meant the end of the interview, he would gladly have agreed to any arraignment at all, no matter how severe, if she would only keep on talking to him.

"But won't you please? You mustn't be alarmed, or annoyed or anything—but if you'd only please—what I mean to say, of course—"

She gave him the impression of utter frankness.

"You wish I'd walk out here sometimes? Is that it?"

Dilworth drew a long breath. "That's it. I can't begin to tell you what a treat it is. I explained about myself because—well, I thought it was better. If you could—just once in a while—You see, it's a part of my regular routine. I'm here every evening."

"I can't promise," she said. "I mustn't promise, but—"

"You're at the hotel, aren't you? Won't you please tell me your name?"

She gave it willingly.

"Miss Dunham. Alice Dunham."

"I'm Henry Dilworth. But can't I hope you'll be kind?"

"I'll certainly try to be kind," she said, and kindness itself was in her inflection.

"You weren't last night. You ran away from me." He was seized by an unwelcome suspicion. "It wasn't because you had seen me somewhere? Was it? It wasn't because you didn't want to go into the village with me? Not that I'd blame you, but—"

He wasn't positive whether she stamped her foot or not, but he thought she did.

"If you talk like that, I won't ever come here again! You ought to know better. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

The reproof, and the expression of it, made Dilworth abject. "I am. Truly I am. It was—I couldn't help it. I'm sorry. I ought to know you wouldn't be like that."

From the top of the bank, she forgave him, and put a new injunction on him. "You mustn't walk back with me this time. I don't want you to. I want you to stay here. It's quite all right, Mr. Dilworth. I want you to do something to please me. Stay here for half an hour. Sit down there and think. Don't dream; think. And if you'll promise—"

"Will you promise, too?"

"I can't. But I'll—I'll try to come."

"Then I swear I'll make it thirty-five minutes by my watch," said Dilworth, and her laugh was as much reward as he had any right to expect, or to deserve.

She had arrived at the dim rendezvous before him, and his heart sang as he greeted her. His increase of animation was pronounced, and he had also acquired sufficient confidence to offer to shake hands with her.

"I've been thinking about you all day," he said, as he walked around her to take his customary place in the shadows. "I've been looking at every girl I've passed, to see if I could recognize you."

"And did you?"

"I think I did. Have you got a sweater with a sort of geranium color? And were you down on the hotel dock about 3:30?"

"That's telling," she said, and her laugh was incendiary to him. "But were you riding a big chestnut horse at 9 o'clock out towards the golf club? I know you were. I saw you. I was indoors, and I had sun glasses on, but I know I saw you."

"Yes," he said, subdued. "I was riding. Where were you?"