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Baum Henry Kipling Doyle Willis
Leslie Dumas Flaubert Nietzsche Turgenev Balzac
Stockton Vatsyayana Crane
Burroughs Verne
Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Busch
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Uncle Max

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Imprint

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UNCLE MAX

CHAPTER I

OUT OF THE MIST

It appears to me, looking back over a past experience, that certain days in one's life stand out prominently as landmarks, when we arrive at some finger-post pointing out the road that we should follow.

We come out of some deep, ruddy lane, where the hedgerows obscure the prospect, and where the footsteps of some unknown passenger have left tracks in the moist red clay. The confused tracery of green leaves overhead seems to weave fanciful patterns against the dim blue of the sky; the very air is low-pitched and oppressive. All at once we find ourselves in an open space; the free winds of heaven are blowing over us; there are four roads meeting; the finger-post points silently, 'This way to such a place'; we can take our choice, counting the mile-stones rather wearily as we pass them. The road may be a little tedious, the stones may hurt our feet; but if it be the right road it will bring us to our destination.

In looking back it always seems to me as though I came to a fresh landmark in my experience that November afternoon when I saw Uncle Max standing in the twilight, waiting for me.

There had been the waste of a great trouble in my young life, — sorrow, confusion, then utter chaos. I had struggled on somehow after my twin brother's death, trying to fight against despair with all my youthful vitality; creating new duties for myself, throwing out fresh feelers everywhere; now and then crying out in my undisciplined way that the task was too hard for me; that I loathed my life; that it was impossible to live any longer without love and appreciation and sympathy; that so uncongenial an atmosphere could be no home to me; that the world was an utter negation and a mockery.

That was before I went to the hospital, at the time when my trouble was fresh and I was breaking my heart with the longing to see Charlie's face again. Most people who have lived long in the world,

and have parted with their beloved, know what that sort of hopeless ache means.

My work was over at the hospital, and I had come home again, – to rest, so they said, but in reality to work out plans for my future life, in a sort of sullen silence, that seemed to shut me out from all sympathy.

It had wrapped me in a sort of mantle of reserve all the afternoon, during which I had been driving with Aunt Philippa and Sara. The air would do me good. I was moped, hipped, with all that dreary hospital work, so they said. It would distract and amuse me to watch Sara making her purchases. Reluctance, silent opposition, only whetted their charitable mood.

'Don't be disagreeable, Ursula. You might as well help me choose my new mantle,' Sara had said, quite pleasantly, and I had given in with a bad grace.

Another time I might have been amused by Aunt Philippa's majestic deportment and Sara's brisk importance, her girlish airs and graces; but I was too sad at heart to indulge in my usual satire. Everything seemed stupid and tiresome; the hum of voices wearied me; the showroom at Marshall and Snelgrove's seemed a confused Babel, – everywhere strange voices, a hubbub of sound, tall figures in black passing and repassing, strange faces reflected in endless pier-glasses, – faces of puckered anxiety repeating themselves in ludicrous *vrai-semblance*.

I saw our own little group reproduced in one. There was Aunt Philippa, tall and portly, with her well-preserved beauty, a little full-blown perhaps, but still 'marvellously' good-looking for her age, if she could only have not been so conscious of the fact.

Then, Sara, standing there slim and straight, with the furred mantle just slipping over her smooth shoulders, radiant with good health, good looks, perfectly contented with herself and the whole world, as it behooves a handsome, high-spirited young woman to be with her surroundings, looking bright, unconcerned, good-humoured, in spite of her mother's fussy criticisms: Aunt Philippa was always a little fussy about dress.

Between the two I could just catch a glimpse of myself,—a tall girl, dressed very plainly in black, with a dark complexion, large, anxious-looking eyes, that seemed appealing for relief from all this dulness,—a shadowy sort of image of discontent and protest in the background, hovering behind Aunt Philippa's velvet mantle and Sara's slim supple figure.

'Well, Ursula,' said Sara, still good-humouredly, 'will you not give us your opinion? Does this dolman suit me, or would you prefer a long jacket trimmed with skunk?'

I remember I decided in favour of the jacket, only Aunt Philippa interposed, a little contemptuously, —

'What does Ursula know about the present fashion? She has spent the last year in the wards of St. Thomas's, my dear,' dropping her voice, and taking up her gold-rimmed eye-glasses to inspect me more critically,—a mere habit, for I had reason to know Aunt Philippa was not the least near-sighted. 'I cannot see any occasion for you to dress so dowdily, with three hundred a year to spend absolutely on yourself; for of course poor Charlie's little share has come to you. You could surely make yourself presentable, especially as you know we are going to Hyde Park Mansions to see Lesbia.'

This was too much for my equanimity. 'What does it matter? I am not coming with you, Aunt Philippa,' I retorted, somewhat vexed at this personality; but Sara overheard us, and strove to pour oil on the troubled waters.

'Leave Ursula alone, mother: she looks tolerably well this afternoon; only mourning never suits a dark complexion—' But I did not wait to hear any more. I wandered about the place disconsolately, pretending to examine things with passing curiosity, but my eyes were throbbing and my heart beating angrily at Sara's thoughtless speech. A sudden remembrance seemed to steal before me vividly: Charlie's pale face, with its sad, sweet smile, haunted me. 'Courage, Ursula; it will be over soon.' Those were his last words, poor boy, and he was looking at me and not at Lesbia as he spoke. I always wondered what he meant by them. Was it his long pain, which he had borne so patiently, that would soon be over? or was it that cruel parting to which he alluded? or did he strive to comfort me at the last with the assurance—alas! for our mortal nature, so sadly true—

that pain cannot last for ever, that even faithful sorrow is short-lived and comforts itself in time, that I was young enough to outlive more than one trouble, and that I might take courage from this thought?

I looked down at the black dress, such as I had worn nearly two years for him, and raged as I remembered Sara's flippant words. 'My darling, I would wear mourning for you all my life gladly,' I said, with an inward sob that was more anger than sorrow, 'if I thought you would care for me to do it. Oh, what a world this is, Charlie! surely vanity and vexation of spirit!'

I did not mean to be cross with Sara, but my thoughts had taken a gloomy turn, and I could not recover my spirits: indeed, as we drove down Bond Street, where Sara had some glittering little toy to purchase, I reiterated my intention of not calling at Hyde Park Mansions.

'I do not want any tea,' I said wearily, 'and I would rather go home. Give my love to Lesbia; I will see her another day.'

'Lesbia will be hurt,' remonstrated Sara. 'What a little misanthrope you are, Ursula! St. Thomas's has injured you socially; you have become a hermit-crab all at once, and it is such nonsense at your age.'

'Oh, let me be, Sara!' I pleaded; 'I am tired, and Lesbia always chatters so; and Mrs. Fullerton is worse. Besides, did you not tell me she was coming to dine with us this evening?'

'Yes, to be sure; but she wanted us to meet the Percy Glyns. Mirrel and Winifred Glyn are to be there this afternoon. Never mind, Lesbia will understand when I say you are in one of your ridiculous moods.' And Sara hummed a little tune gaily, as though she meant no offence by her words and was disposed to let me go my own way.

'The carriage can take you home, Ursula; we can walk those few yards,' observed Aunt Philippa, as she descended leisurely, and Sara tripped after her, still humming. But I took no notice of her words: I had had enough dulness and decorum to last me for some time, and the Black Prince and his consort Bay might find their way to their own stables without depositing me at the front door of the house at Hyde Park Gate. I told Clarence so, to his great astonish-

ment, and walked across the road in an opposite direction to home, as though my feet were winged with quicksilver.

For the Park in that dim November light seemed to allure me; there was a red glow of sunset in the distance; a faint, climbing mist between the trees; the gas-lamps were twinkling everywhere. I could hear the ringing of some church bell; there was space, freedom for thought, a vague, uncertain prospect, out of which figures were looming curiously,—a delightful sense that I was sinning against conventionality and Aunt Philippa.

'Halloo, Ursula!' exclaimed a voice in great astonishment; and there, out of the mist, was a kind face looking at me,—a face with a brown beard, and dark eyes with a touch of amusement in them; and the eyes and the beard and the bright, welcoming smile belonged to Uncle Max.

As I caught at his outstretched hand with a half-stifled exclamation of delight, a policeman turned round and looked at us with an air of interest. No doubt he thought the tall brown-bearded clergyman in the shabby coat—it was one of Uncle Max's peculiarities to wear a shabby coat occasionally—was the sweetheart of the young lady in black. Uncle Max—I am afraid I oftener called him Max—was only a few years older than myself, and had occupied the position of an elder brother to me.

He was my poor mother's only brother, and had been dearly loved by her,—not as I had loved Charlie, perhaps; but they had been much to each other, and he had always seemed nearer to me than Aunt Philippa, who was my father's sister; perhaps because there was nothing in common between us, and I had always been devoted to Uncle Max.

'Well, Ursula,' he said, pretending to look grave, but evidently far too pleased to see me to give me a very severe lecture, 'what is the meaning of this? Does Mrs. Garston allow young ladies under her charge to stroll about Hyde Park in the twilight? or have you stolen a march on her, naughty little she-bear?'

I drew my hand away with an offended air: when Uncle Max wished to tease or punish me he always reminded me that the name of Ursula signified she-bear, and would sometimes call me 'the little

black growler'; and at such times it was provoking to think that Sara signified princess. I have always wondered how far and how strongly our baptismal names influence us. Of course he would not let me walk beside him in that dignified manner: the next instant I heard his clear hearty laugh, and then I laughed too.

'What an absurd child you are! I was thinking over your letter as I walked along. It did not bring me to London, certainly; I had business of my own; but, all the same, I have walked across the Park this evening to talk to you about this extraordinary scheme.'

But I would not let him go on. He was about to cross the road, so I took his arm and turned him back. And there was the gray mist creeping up between the trees, and the lamps glimmering in the distance, and the faint pink glow had not yet died away.

'It is so quiet here,' I pleaded, 'and I could not get you alone for a moment if we went in. Uncle Brian will be there, and Jill, and we could not say a word. Aunt Philippa and Sara have gone to see Lesbia. I have been driving with them all the afternoon. Sara has been shopping, and how bored I was!'

'You uncivilised little heathen!' Then, very gravely, 'Well, how is poor Lesbia?'

'Do not waste your pity on her,' I returned impatiently. 'She is as well and cheerful as possible. Even Sara says so. She is not breaking her heart about Charlie. She has left off mourning, and is as gay as ever.'

'You are always hard on Lesbia,' he returned gently. 'She is young, my dear, you forget that, and a pretty girl, and very much admired. It always seems to me she was very fond of the poor fellow.'

'She was good to him in his illness, but she never cared for Charlie as he did for her. He worshipped the very ground she walked on. He thought her perfection. Uncle Max, it was pitiful to hear him sometimes. He would tell me how sweet and unselfish she was, and all the time I knew she was but an ordinary, commonplace girl. If he had lived to marry her he would have been disappointed in her. He was so large-hearted, and Lesbia has such little aims.'

'So you always say, Ursula. But you women are so severe in your judgment of each other. I doubt myself if the girl lives whom you would have considered good enough for Charlie. Yes, yes, my dear,'—as I uttered a dissenting protest to this,—'he was a fine fellow, and his was a most lovable character; but it was his last illness that ripened him.'

'He was always perfect in my eyes,' I returned, in a choked voice.

'That was because you loved him; and no doubt Lesbia possessed the same ideal goodness for him. Love throws its own glamour,' he went on, and his voice was unusually grave; 'it does not believe in commonplace mediocrity; it lifts up its idol to some fanciful pedestal, where the poor thing feels very uncomfortable and out of its element, and then persists in falling down and worshipping it. We humans are very droll, Ursula: we will create our own divinities.'

'Lesbia would have disappointed him,' I persisted obstinately; but I might as well have talked to the wind. Uncle Max could not find it in his heart to be hard to a pretty girl.

'That is open to doubt, my dear. Lesbia is amiable and charming, and I daresay she would have made a nice little wife. Poor Charlie hated clever women, and in that respect she would have suited him.'

After this I knew it was no good in trying to change his opinion. Uncle Max held his own views with remarkable tenacity; he had old-fashioned notions with respect to women, rather singular in so young a man,—for he was only thirty; he preferred to believe in their goodness, in spite of any amount of demonstration to the contrary; it vexed him to be reminded of the shortcomings of his friends; by nature he was an optimist, and had a large amount of faith in people's good intentions. 'He meant well, poor fellow, in spite of his failures,' was a speech I have heard more than once from his lips. He was always ready to condone a fault or heal a breach; indeed, his sweet nature found it difficult to bear a grudge against any one; he was only hard to himself, and on no one else did he strive to impose so heavy a yoke. I was only silent for a minute, and then I turned the conversation into another channel.

'But my letter, Uncle Max!'

'Ah, true, your letter; but I have not forgotten it. How old are you, Ursula? I always forget.'

'Five-and-twenty this month.'

'To be sure; I ought to have remembered. And you have three hundred a year of your own.'

I nodded.

'And your present home is distasteful to you?' in an inquiring tone.

'It is no home to me,' I returned passionately. 'Oh, Uncle Max, how can one call it home after the dear old rectory, where we were so happy, father, and mother, and Charlie—and—'

'Yes, I know, poor child; and you have had heavy troubles. It cannot be like the old home, I am well aware of that, Ursula; but your aunt is a good woman. I have always found her strictly just. She was your father's only sister: when she offered you a home she promised to treat you with every indulgence, as though you were her own daughter.'

'Aunt Philippa means to be kind,' I said, struggling to repress my tears,—tears always troubled Uncle Max: 'she is kind in her way, and so is Sara. I have every comfort, every luxury; they want me to be gay and enjoy myself, to lead their life; but it only makes me miserable; they do not understand me; they see I do not think with them, and then they laugh at me and call me morbid. No one really wants me but poor Jill: I am so fond of Jill.'

'Why cannot you lead their life, Ursula?'

'Because it is not life at all,' was my resolute answer: 'to me it is the most wearisome existence possible. Listen to me, Uncle Max. Do you think I could possibly spend my days as Sara does,—writing a few notes, doing a little fancy-work, shopping and paying visits, and dancing half the night? Do you think you could transform such a poor little Cinderella into a fairy princess, like Sara or Lesbia? No; the drudgery of such a life would kill me with *ennui* and discontent.'

'It is not the life I would choose for you, certainly,' he said, pulling his beard in some perplexity: 'it is far too worldly to suit my taste; if Charlie had lived you would have made your home with him. He

often talked to me about that, poor fellow. I thought a year or two at Hyde Park Gate would do you no harm, and might be wholesome training; but it has proved a failure, I see that.'

'They would be happier without me,' I went on, more quietly, for he was evidently coming round to my view of the case. 'Aunt Philippa does not mean to be unkind, but she often lets me see that I am in the way, that she is not proud of me. She would have taken more interest in me if I had been handsome, like Sara; but a plain, dowdy niece is not to her taste. No, let me finish, Uncle Max,—for he wanted to interrupt me here. 'They made a great fuss about my training at the hospital last year, but I am sure they did not miss me; Sara spoke yesterday as though she thought I was going back to St. Thomas's, and Aunt Philippa made no objection. I heard her tell Mrs. Fullerton once "that really Ursula was so strong-minded and different from other girls that she was prepared for anything, even for her being a female doctor."' "

'Well, my dear, you are certainly rather peculiar, you know.'

'Oh, Uncle Max,' I said mournfully, 'are you going to misunderstand me too? Providence has deprived me of my parents and my only brother: is it strong-minded or peculiar to be so lonely and sad at heart that gaiety only jars on me? Can I forget my mother's teaching when she said, "Ursula, if you live for the world you will be miserable. Try to do your duty and benefit your fellow-creatures, and happiness must follow"?' "

'Yes, poor Emmie, she was a good woman: you might do worse than take after her.'

'She would not approve of the life I am leading at Hyde Park Gate,' I went on. 'She and Aunt Philippa never cared for each other. I often think that if she had known she would not have liked me to be there. Sundays are wretched. We go to church?—yes, because it is respectable to do so; but there is a sort of reunion every Sunday evening.'

'I wish I could offer you a home, Ursula; but—' here Uncle Max hesitated.

'That would not do at all,' I returned promptly. 'Your bachelor home would not do for me; besides, you might marry—of course

you will,' but he flushed rather uncomfortably at that, and said, 'Pshaw! what nonsense!' We had paused under a lamp-post, and I could see him plainly: perhaps he knew this, for he hurried me on, this time in the direction of home.

'I am five-and-twenty,' I continued, trying to collect the salient points of my argument. 'I am indebted to none for my maintenance; I am free, and my own mistress; I neglect no duty by refusing to live under Uncle Brian's roof; no one wants me; I contribute to no one's happiness.'

'Except to Jill's,' observed Uncle Max.

'Jill! but she is only a child, barely sixteen, and Sara is becoming jealous of my influence. I shall only breed dissension in the household if I remain. Uncle Max, you are a good man,—a clergyman; you cannot conscientiously tell me that I am not free to lead my own life, to choose my own work in the world.'

'Perhaps not,' he replied, in a hesitating voice. 'But the scheme is a peculiar one. You wish me to find respectable lodgings in my parish, where you will be independent and free from supervision, and to place your superfluous health and strength—you are a muscular Christian, Ursula—at the service of my sick poor, and for this post you have previously trained yourself.'

'I think it will be a good sort of life,' I returned carelessly, but how my heart was beating! 'I like it so much, and I should like to be near you, Uncle Max, and work under you as my vicar. I have thought about this for years. Charlie and I often talked of it. I was to live with him and Lesbia and devote my time to this work. He thought it such a nice idea to go and nurse poor people in their homes. And he promised that he would come and sing to them. But now I must carry out my plan alone, for Charlie cannot help me now.' And as I thought of the sympathy that had never failed me my voice quivered and I could say no more.

'I wish we were all in heaven,' growled Uncle Max,—but his tone was a little husky,—'for this world is a most uncomfortable place for good people, or people with a craze. I think Charlie is well out of it.'

'Under which category do you mean to place me?' I asked, trying to laugh.

'My dear, there is a craze in most women. They have such an obstinate faith in their own good intentions. If they find half a dozen fools to believe in them, they will start a crusade to found a new Utopia. Women are the most meddlesome things in creation: they never let well alone. Their pretty little fingers are in every human pie. That is why we get so much unwholesome crust and so little meat, and, of course, our digestion is ruined.'

'Uncle Max —' But he would not be serious any longer.

'Ursula, I utterly refuse to inhale any more of this mist. I think a comfortable arm-chair by the fire would be far more conducive to comfort. You have given me plenty of food for thought, and I mean to sleep on it. Now, not another word. I am going to ring the bell.' And Uncle Max was as good as his word.

