

The
Devil's Garden
By
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THE DEVIL'S GARDEN

The Devil playeth in a man's mind like a wanton child in a garden, bringing his filth to choke each open path, uprooting the tender plants, and trampling the buds that should have blown for the Master.

I

The village postmaster stood staring at an official envelope that had just been shaken out of a mailbag upon the sorting-table. It was addressed to himself; and for a few moments his heart beat quicker, with sharp, clean percussions, as if it were trying to imitate the sounds made by the two clerks as they plied their stampers on the blocks. Perhaps this envelope contained his fate.

Soon the stamping was finished; the sorting went on steadily and methodically; before long the letters and parcels were neatly arranged in compartments near the postmen's bags. The first delivery of the day was ready to go forth to the awakening world.

"All through, Mr. Dale."

The postmaster struck a bell, and glanced at the clock. Five fifty-six. Up to time, as usual.

"Now then, my lads, off with you."

The postmen had come into the sorting-room, and were packing their bags and slinging their parcels.

"Sharp's the word."

Picking up his unopened letter, the postmaster went through the public office, stood on the outer threshold, and looked up and down the street.

To his left the ground sloped downward through a narrowing perspective of house-fronts and roof cornices to faint white mist, in which one could see some cattle moving vaguely, and beyond which, if one knew that it was there, one might just discern a wide space of common land stretching away boldly until the dark barrier of woods stopped it short. To his right the ground lay level, with the road enlarging itself to a dusty bay in front of the Roebuck Inn, turning by the churchyard wall, forking between two gardened houses of gentlefolk, and losing itself suddenly in the same white mist that closed the other vista. Over the veiling whiteness, over the red roofs, and high above the church tower, the sky of a glorious July morning rose unstained to measureless arches of blue.

As always in this early hour of the day, the postmaster thought of his own importance. The village seemed still half asleep—blinds down wherever he looked—lazy, money-greedy tradesmen not yet alive to their selfish enterprises—only the poor laborers of the soil already at work; and nevertheless here was he, William Dale, up and about, carrying on the continuous business of the state.

But how long would he be permitted to feel like this? Could it be possible that the end of his importance was near at hand?

On Her Majesty's Service! He opened the envelope, unfolded the folio sheet of paper that it contained, began to read—and immediately all the blood in his body seemed to rush to his head.

"I am to inform you that you are temporarily suspended." And in the pompous language of headquarters he was further informed that the person appointed to take over control would arrive at Rodchurch Road Station by the eleven o'clock train; that he himself was to come to London on the morrow, and immediately call at the G.P.O.; where, on the afternoon of that day or the morning of a subsequent day, he would be given an opportunity of stating his case in person, "agreeable to his request."

Why had they suspended him? Surely it would have been more usual if they had allowed him to leave the office in charge of his chief clerk, or if they had given charge of it to a competent person from Rodhaven, and not sent a traveler from London? The traveling inspector is the bird of evil presage: he hovers over the houses of doomed men.

William Dale ran his hand round the collarless neck of his shirt, and felt the perspiration that had suddenly moistened his skin.

He was a big man of thirty-five; a type of the strong-limbed, quick-witted peasant, who is by nature active as a squirrel and industrious as a beaver; and who, if once fired with ambition, soon learns to direct all his energies to a chosen end, and infallibly wins his way from the cart-tracks and the muck-wagons to office stools and black coats. Not yet dressed for the day, in his loose serge jacket and unbraced trousers, he looked what was termed locally "a rum customer if you had to tackle un." His dark hair bristled stiffly, his short mustache wanted a lot of combing, a russet stubble covered

chin and neck; but the broad forehead and blue eyes gave a suggestion of power and intelligence to an aspect that might otherwise have seemed simply forbidding.

"Good marnin', sir."

One of the helpers at the Roebuck stables had come slouching past.

"Good mornin', Samuel."

It was still music to the ears of the postmaster when people addressed him as "Sir." Especially if, like that fellow, they had known him as a boy. But he thought now that perhaps many who spoke to him thus deferentially in truth desired his downfall.

Quite possible. One never knows. He himself wished them well, in his heart was fond of them all, and craved their regard; although he was too proud to be always seeking it, or even going half-way to meet it.

And he thought, tolerantly, that you can not have everything in this world. Your successful man is rarely a popular man. He had had the success in full measure—if it pleased them, let the envious ones go on envying him his elevated station, his domestic comfort, and his pretty wife.

As he thought of his wife all his reflections grew tender. She was probably still fast asleep; and when, presently, he went up-stairs to the private part of the house, he was careful not to disturb her.

His official clothes lay waiting for him on a chair in the kitchen. They had been brushed and folded by Mary, the servant, who sprang to attention at the appearance of her master, brought him shaving-water, arranged the square of looking-glass conveniently, assisted with the white collar and black tie, and generally proved herself an efficient valet.

She ventured to ask a question when Mr. Dale was about to leave the kitchen.

"Any news, sir?"

"News!" Mr. Dale echoed the word sternly. "What news should there be—anyway, what news that concerns *you*?"

"I beg pardon, sir." Buxom, red-cheeked Mary lowered her eyes, and by voice and attitude expressed the confusion proper to a subordinate who has taken a liberty in addressing a superior. "I'm sorry, sir. But I on'y ast."

"All right," said Dale, less sternly. "You just attend to your own job, my girl."

He went down into the office, and did not come up again until an hour and a half later, when breakfast was ready and waiting. He stood near the window for a few moments, meditatively looking about him. The sunlight made the metal cover of the hot dish shine like beautifully polished silver; it flashed on the rims of white tea-cups, and, playing some prismatic trick with the glass sugar basin, sent a stream of rainbow tints across the two rolls and the two boiled eggs. An appetizing meal—and as comfortable, yes, as luxurious a room as any one could ask for. Through the open door and across the landing, he had a peep into the other room. In that room there were books, a piano, a sofa, hand-painted pictures in gold frames—the things that you expect to see only in the homes of gentlemen.

"Sorry I'm late, Will."

"Don't mention it, Mavis."

Mrs. Dale had come through the doorway, and his whole face brightened, softened, grew more comely. Yes, he thought, a home fit for a gentleman, and a wife fit for a king.

"Any news?"

"They've told me to go up and see them to-morrow;" and he moved to the table. "Come on. I'm sharp-set."

"Did they write in a satisfactory way?"

"Oh, yes. Sit down, my dear, and give me my tea."

He had said that he felt hungry, but he ate without appetite. The roll was crisp and warm, the bacon had been cooked to a turn, the tea was neither too strong nor too weak; and yet nothing tasted quite right.

"Will," said his wife, toward the end of the meal, "I can see you aren't really satisfied with their answer. Do tell me;" and she stretched her hand across the table with a gesture that expressed prettily enough both appeal and sympathy.

She was a naturally graceful woman, tall and slim, with reddish brown hair, dark eyebrows, and a white skin; and she carried her thirty-two years so easily that, though the searching sunlight bore full upon her, she looked almost a young girl.

Dale took her hand, squeezed it, and then, with an affectation of carelessness, laughed jovially. "They've appointed a deputy to take charge here during my absence."

"Oh, Will!" Mrs. Dale's dark eyebrows rose, and her brown eyes grew round and big; in a moment all the faint glow of color had left her pale cheeks, and her intonation expressed alarm and regret.

"It riled me a bit at first," said Dale firmly. "However, it's no consequence—really."

"But, Will, that means—" She hesitated, and her lips trembled before she uttered the dreadful word—"That means—suspended!"

"Yes—*pro tem*. Don't fret yourself, Mav. I tell you it's all right."

"But, Will, this does change the look of things. This is serious—*now*." And once more she hesitated. "Will, let me write again to Mr. Barradine."

"No," said Dale, with great determination.

"May I get Auntie to write to him? She said she knows for sure he'd help us."

"Well, he said so himself, didn't he?"

"Yes. Anything in his power!"

Dale reflected for a moment, and when he spoke again his tone was less firm.

"In his power! Of course Mr. Barradine is a powerful gentleman. That stands to reason; but all the same—Let's have a look at his letter."

"I haven't got his letter, Will."

"Haven't got his letter? What did you do with it?"

"I tore it up."

"Tore it up!" Dale stared at his wife in surprise, and spoke rather irritably. "What did you do that for?"

"You seemed angry at my taking on myself to write to him without permission—so I didn't wish the letter lying about to remind you of what I'd done."

"You acted foolish in destroying document'ry evidence," said Dale, sternly and warmly. But then immediately he stifled his irritation. "Don't you see, lassie, I'd 'a' liked to know the precise way he worded it. I'm practised to all the turns of the best sort o' correspondence, and I'd 'a' known in a twinkling whether he meant anything or nothing."

"He said he'd be glad to do what was in his power. Really he said no more."

"Very good. We'll leave it at that. He has done more than enough for us already, and I don't hold with bothering gentlemen in and out of season. Besides, this is a bit in which I don't want his help, nor nobody else's. This is between me and *them*."

He pushed away his uneaten food, stood up, and squared his big shoulders.

"Yes, but, Will dear—you, you won't be hasty when you get before them."

Dale frowned, then laughed. "Mav, trust your old boy, and don't fret." He came round the table, and laid his hand on his wife's shoulder. "My sweetheart, I'm sorry, for your sake, that this little upset should have occurred. But don't you fret. I'm coming out on top. Maybe, this is like touch-and-go. I don't say it isn't. But I know my vaarlue—and I mean to let them know it, if they don't know it already. Look at my record! Who's goin' to pick a hole in it?"

"No, but—"

"There's times when a man's got to show pluck—to stan' to's guns, and assert hisself for what he's worth. And that's what I'm going to do in the General Post Office of all England." As he said

this the blood showed redly, and every line of his face deepened and hardened. "You keep a stout heart. This isn't going to shake William Dale off of his perch."

"No?" And she looked up at him with widely-opened eyes.

"No." He gave her shoulder a final pat, and laughed noisily. "No, it'll set me firmer on the road to promotion than what I've ever been. When I get back here again, I shall be like the monkey—best part up the palm-tree, and nothing dangerous between him and the nuts."

All that day Dale was busy installing the deputy.

"You find us fairly in order," he said, with a pride that did not pretend to conceal itself. "Nothing you wouldn't call shipshape?"

"Apple-pie order," said Mr. Ridgett. "Absolutely O.K."

Mr. Ridgett was a small sandy man of fifty, who obviously wished to make himself as agreeable as might be possible in rather difficult circumstances. During the afternoon he listened with an air of interested attention while Dale told him at considerable length the series of events that had led up to this crisis.

"For your proper understanding," said the postmaster, "I'll ask you once more to cast your eye over the position of the instruments;" and he marched Mr. Ridgett from the sorting-room to the public office, and showed him the gross error that had been committed in placing the whole telegraphic apparatus right at the front, close to the window, merely screened from the public eye and the public ear by glass partition-work, instead of placing it all at the back, out of everybody's way. "I told them it was wrong from the first—when they were refitting the office, at the time of the extensions. My experience at Portsmouth had taught me the danger."

It seemed that one evening, about three weeks ago, a certain soldier on leave had been lounging against the counter, close to the glass screen. On the other side of the screen the apparatus was clicking merrily while Miss Yorke, the telegraph clerk, despatched a message. And all at once the soldier, who was well versed in the code, began to recite the message aloud. The postmaster peremptorily ordered him to stand away from the counter. An altercation

ensued, and the soldier became so impudent that the postmaster threatened to put him outside the door. "Oh," said the soldier, "it'd take a many such as you to put me out."

"Did he say so? Really now!" And Mr. Ridgett looked at Dale critically. "I take it he was a heavyweight, eh?"

"He gave me my work," said Dale; "and I was all three minutes at it. But *out* he went."

"Really now!" and Mr. Ridgett smiled.

"I had stopped Miss Yorke from operating. And I started her again within four minutes. That was the time, and no more, the message was delayed. That was the time it took me to renew the service with the confidence and secrecy provided by Her Majesty's Regulations. And I ask you, how else could I have acted? Was I to allow a telegram consigned to my care to be blabbed out word for word to all the world?"

"Were there many people in the office just then?"

"Two. But that makes no difference. If it had been only one—or half a one—it couldn't be permitted."

"And was the message itself of a particularly private or important nature?"

"Not as it happens. But the principle was the same."

"Just so."

As it appeared from Dale's narration, the soldier was at first willing to accept his licking in a sportsmanlike spirit, was indeed quite ready to admit that he had been the offending party; but injudicious friends—secret enemies of Dale perhaps—had egged him on to take out a summons for assault. When, however, Dale appeared before the magistrates, the soldier had changed his mind again—he did not appear, he allowed the charge to fall to the ground. And there the matter might have ended, ought to have ended, but for the fact that the local Member of Parliament suddenly made a ridiculous fuss—said it was a monstrous and intolerable state of affairs that soldiers of the Queen should be knocked about by her civil servants—wrote letters to other Members of Parliament, to Government secretaries, to newspapers. Then the excitement that had been smoldering burst

forth with explosive force, shaking the village, the county, the universe.

Dale, at handly grips with his superior officers, stood firm, declined to budge an inch from his position; he was right, and nothing would ever make him say he was wrong.

"Ah, well," said Mr. Ridgett, "if that's the way you looked at it. But I don't quite follow how it got lifted out of their hands at Rodhaven, and brought before *us*."

"I demanded it," said Dale proudly. "I wasn't going to be messed about any further by a pack of funky old women—for that's what they are, at Rodhaven. And I wasn't going to have it hushed over—nor write any such letter as they asked."

"Oh, they suggested—"

"They suggested," said Dale, swelling with indignation, "that I should write regret that I had perhaps acted indiscreet but only through over-zeal."

"Oh! And you didn't see your way to—"

"Not *me*. Take a black mark, and let my record go. No, thank you. I sent up my formal request to be heard at headquarters. I appealed to Cæsar."

Mr. Ridgett smiled good-naturedly. "Why, you're quite a classical scholar, Mr. Dale. You have your Latin quotations all pat."

"I'm a self-educated man," said Dale. "I begun at the bottom, and I've been trying to improve myself all the way to where I've risen to."

Once or twice he sought tentatively to obtain from Mr. Ridgett the moral support that even the strongest people derive from being assured that they are entirely in the right. But Mr. Ridgett, who had been sympathetic from the moment of his arrival, and who throughout the hours had been becoming more and more friendly, did not entirely respond to these hinted invitations.

"If you tell me to speak frankly," he said at last, "I should have a doubt that you've made this one false step. You haven't kept everything in proportion."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, I mean it strikes me—quite unbiased, you know—that you've let Number One overshadow the situation. You've drawn it all too personal to yourself."

"I don't see that," said Dale, forcibly, almost hotly. "It's the principle I stand for—pretty near as much as for myself."

"Ah, yes, just so," said Mr. Ridgett. "And now I'm going to ask you to help me find a bedroom somewhere handy, and put me up to knowing where I'd best get my meals;" and he laughed cheerfully. "Don't think I'm *establishing* myself—but one may as well be comfortable, if one can. And I do give you this tip. You're in for what we used to call the devil's dance up there. Cæsar is a slow mover. I mean, it won't be 'Step this way, Mr. Dale. Walk in this minute.' They'll keep you on the dance. I should take all you're likely to want for a week—at the least."

Dale made arrangements for the future comfort of the visitor, and hospitably insisted that he should take his first substantial meal upstairs.

"It's served at seven sharp," said Dale; "and we make it a meat tea; but you aren't restricted to non-alcolic bev'rages."

"Oh, tea is more than good enough for me, thank you."

"Mavis," said Dale, introducing his guest, "this is Mr. Ridgett, who is so kind as to honor us without ceremony." And, as if to demonstrate the absence of ceremony, he put his arm round his wife's waist and kissed her.

Mr. Ridgett smiled, and opened conversation in a very pleasant easy fashion.

"From the look of things," he said facetiously, "I hazard the guess that you two aren't long home from the honeymoon."

"You're off the line there," said Dale. "We're quite an old Darby and Joan."

"Really!" And Mr. Ridgett's smile, as he regarded Mrs. Dale, expressed admiration and surprise. "Appearances are deceitful. And how long may you have been running in double harness?"

"Eleven years," said Dale.

"Never! Any children?"

"No," said Mrs. Dale.

"No," said her husband. "We haven't been blessed that way—not as yet."

"I note the addition. Not as yet! Very neatly put." Mr. Ridgett laughed, and bowed gallantly to Mrs. Dale. "Plenty of time for any amount of blessings."

Then they all sat down to the table.

During the course of the meal, and again when it was over, they spoke of the business that lay before Dale on the morrow.

"I've ventured to tell your husband that perhaps he has been taking it all too seriously."

"Oh, has he? I'm so glad to hear you say it." And Mavis Dale, with her elbows on the table, leaned forward and watched the deputy's face intently.

"Too much of the personal equation."

"Yes?"

"What I say is, little accidents happen to all of us—but they blow over."

Mavis Dale drew in her breath, and her eyebrows contracted. "Mr. Ridgett! The way you say that, shows you really think it's serious for him."

"Oh, I don't in the least read it up as ruin and all the rest of it. It's just a check. In Mr. Dale's place, I should be philosophical. I should say, 'This is going to put me back a bit, but nothing else.'"

Dale shrugged his shoulders and snorted. Mrs. Dale's eyebrows had drawn so close together that they almost touched; her eyes appeared darker, smaller, more opaque. Mr. Ridgett continued talking in a tone of light facetiousness that seemed to cover a certain deprecating earnestness.

"Yes, that would be *my* point of view—quite general, philosophical. I should say to myself, 'Old chap, if you're in for a jolly good

wigging, why, just take it. If you're to be offered a little humble pie to eat—well, eat it."

"I won't," cried Dale, loudly; and he struck the table with his clenched fist. "I'm not goin' to crawl on my belly any more. I've done it in my time, when perhaps I felt myself wrong. But I won't do it now when I'm right—no, so help me, God, I won't."

It was as if all restraints had been burst by the notion of such injustice.

"Ah, well," said Ridgett, looking uncomfortable, "then I must withdraw the suggestion."

Mavis Dale was trembling. Her husband's noisy outburst seemed to have shaken her nerves; the downward lines formed themselves at the corners of her mouth; and her eyelids fluttered as if she were on the verge of tears. "Will," she murmured, "you—you ought to listen, if it's good advice. Mr. Ridgett knows the ropes—he, he has experience—and he means you well."

"Indeed I do," said Ridgett cordially.

"And I thank you for it, sir," said Dale. "And now—" He mastered his emotions and was calm and polite again, as became a host. "Now, what about two or three whiffs?"

"If madam permits."

"Mav don't mind. She's smoke-dried."

All three remained sitting at the table. The two men smoked their pipes reflectively, and spoke only at intervals, while Mavis sank into the motionless silence of a deep reverie. The golden sunlight came no more into the room; bright colors of oleograph pictures, hearth-rug, and window-curtains imperceptibly faded; the whole world seemed to be growing quiet and cool and gray. The sounds of voices and the rumble of passing wheels rose so drowsily from the street that they did not disturb one's sense of peace.

All at once Mavis roused herself, or rather, seemed to be roused involuntarily by some inward sensation—perhaps an ugly and unexpected turn that her thoughts had suddenly taken. She gave a little shiver, looked across the table at the visitor as if surprised at his presence, and then began to talk to him volubly.