



*TOLD IN A
FRENCH GARDEN
August 1914*

MILDRED ALDRICH

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AUGUST, 1914

BY

Mildred Aldrich



TO

F. E. C.

**a prince of comrades and a royal
friend, whose quaint humor
gladdened the days of my early
struggle, and whose unfailing
faith inspired me in later days
to turn a smiling face to Fate**

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TOLD IN A FRENCH GARDEN

INTRODUCTION

HOW WE CAME INTO THE GARDEN

It was by a strange irony of Fate that we found ourselves reunited for a summer's outing, in a French garden, in July, 1914.

With the exception of the Youngster, we had hardly met since the days of our youth.

We were a party of unattached people, six men, two women, your humble servant, and the Youngster, who was an outsider.

With the exception of the latter, we had all gone to school or college or dancing class together, and kept up a sort of superficial acquaintance ever since—that sort of relation in which people know [4] something of one another's opinions and absolutely nothing of one another's real lives.

There was the Doctor, who had studied long in Germany, and become an authority on mental diseases, developed a distaste for therapeutics, and a passion for research and the laboratory. There was the Lawyer, who knew international law as he knew his Greek alphabet, and hated a court room. There was the Violinist, who was known the world over in musical sets,—everywhere, except in the concert room. There was the Journalist, who had travelled into almost as many queer places as Richard Burton, seen more wars, and followed more callings. There was the Sculptor, the fame of whose greater father had almost paralyzed a pair of good modeller's hands. There was the Critic, whose friends believed that in him the world had lost a great romancer, but whom a combination of hunger and laziness, and a proneness to think that nothing not genius was worth while, had condemned to be a mere breadwinner, but a breadwinner who squeezed a lot out of life, and who fervently believed that in his next incarnation he would really be "it." Then there was "Me," and of the other [5] two women—one was a Trained

Nurse, and the other a Divorcée, and—well, none of us really knew just what she had become, but we knew that she was very rich, and very handsome, and had a leaning toward some sort of new religion. As for the Youngster—he was the son of an old chum of the Doctor—his ward, in fact—and his hobby was flying.

Our reunion, after so many years, was a rather pretty story.

In the summer of 1913, the Doctor and the Divorcée, who had lost sight of one another for twenty years, met by chance in Paris. Her ex-husband had been a college friend of the Doctor. They saw a great deal of one another in the lazy way that people who really love France, and are done sightseeing, can do.

One day it occurred to them to take a day's trip into the country, as unattached people now and then can do. They might have gone out in a car—but they chose the railroad, with a walk at the end—on the principle that no one can know and love a country who does not press its earth beneath his feet,—the Doctor would probably have said, "lay his head upon its bosom." By an accident—they [6] missed a train—they found themselves at sunset of a beautiful day in a small village, and with no possible way of getting back to Paris that night unless they chose to walk fifteen miles to the nearest railway junction. After a long day's tramp that seemed too much of a good thing.

So they looked about to find a shelter for the night. The village—it was only a hamlet—had no hotel, no café, even. Finally an old peasant said that old Mother Servin—a widow—living a mile up the road—had a big house, lived alone, and could take them in,—if she wanted to,—he could not say that she would.

It seemed to them worth trying, so they started off in high spirits to tramp another mile, deciding that, if worse became worst—well—the night was warm—they could sleep by the roadside under the stars.

It was near the hour when it should have been dark—but in France at that season one can almost read out of doors until nine—when they found the place. With some delay the gate in the stone wall was opened, and they were face to face with the old widow.

It was a long argument, but the Doctor had a winning way, and at the end they [7] were taken in, — more, they were fed in the big clean kitchen, and then each was sheltered in a huge room, with cement floor, scrupulously clean, with the quaint old furniture and the queer appointments of a French farmhouse.

The next morning, when the Doctor threw open the heavy wooden shutters to his window, he gave a whistle of delight to find himself looking out into what seemed to be a French Paradise — and better than that he had never asked.

It was a wilderness. Way off in the distance he got glimpses of broken walls with all kinds of green things creeping and climbing, and hanging on for life. Inside the walls there was a riot of flowers — hollyhocks and giroflées, dahlias and phlox, poppies and huge daisies, and roses everywhere, even climbing old tree trunks, and sprawling all over the garden front of the rambling house. The edges of the paths had green borders that told of Corbeil d'Argent in Midwinter, and violets in early spring. He leaned out and looked along the house. It was just a jumble of all sorts of buildings which had evidently been added at different times. It seemed to be on half a dozen elevations, and no [8] two windows were of the same size, while here and there an outside staircase led up into a loft.

Once he had taken it in he dressed like a flash — he could not get out into that garden quickly enough, to pray the Widow to serve coffee under a huge tree in the centre of the garden, about the trunk of which a rude table had been built, and it was there that the Divorcée found him when she came out, simply glowing with enthusiasm — the house, the garden, the Widow, the day — everything was perfect.

While they were taking their coffee, poured from the earthen jug, in the thick old Rouen cups, the Divorcée said:

"How I'd love to own a place like this. No one would ever dream of building such a house. It has taken centuries of accumulated needs to expand it into being. If one tried to do the thing all at once it would look too on-purpose. This place looks like a happy combination of circumstances which could not help itself."

"Well, why not? It might be possible to have just this. Let's ask the Widow."

So, when they were sitting over their cigarettes, and the old woman was clearing the table, the Doctor looked her over, and considered the road of approach.

She was a rugged old woman, well on toward eighty, with a bronzed, weather-worn face, abundant coarse gray hair, a heavy shapeless figure, but a firm bearing, in spite of her rounded back. As far as they could see, they were alone on the place with her. The Doctor decided to jump right into the subject.

"Mother," he said, "I suppose you don't want to sell this place?"

The old woman eyed him a moment with her sharp dark eyes.

"But, yes, *Monsieur*," she replied. "I should like it very well, only it is not possible. No one would be willing to pay my price. Oh, no, no one. No, indeed."

"Well," said the Doctor, "how do you know that? What is the price?—Is it permitted to ask?"

The old woman hesitated,—started to speak—changed her mind, and turned away, muttering. "Oh, no, *Monsieur*,—it is not worth the trouble—no one will ever pay my price."

The Doctor jumped up, laughing, ran after her, took her by the arm, and led her back to the table. [10]

"Now, come, come, Mother," he remarked, "let us hear the price at any rate. I am so curious."

"Well," said the Widow, "it is like this. I would like to get for it what my brother paid for it, when he bought it at the death of my father—it was to settle with the rest of the heirs—we were eight then. They are all dead but me. But no, no one will ever pay that price, so I may as well let it go to my niece. She is the last. She doesn't need it. She has land enough. The cultivator has a hard time these days. It is as much as I can do to make the old place feed me and pay the taxes, and I am getting old. But no one will ever pay the price, and what will my brother think of me when the *bon Dieu* calls me, if I sell it for less than he paid? As for that, I don't know what he'll say to me for selling it at all. But I am getting old to live here

alone—all alone. But no one will ever pay the price. So I may as well die here, and then my brother can't blame me. But it is lonely now, and I am growing too old. Besides, I don't suppose *you* want to buy it. What would a gentleman do with this?"

[11]

"Well," said the Doctor, "I don't really know what a *gentleman would* do with it," and he added, under his breath, in English, "but I know mighty well what this fellow *could* do with it, if he could get it," and he lighted a fresh cigarette.

The keen old eyes had watched his face.

"I don't suppose *you* want to buy it?" she persisted.

"Well," responded the Doctor, "how can a poor man like me say, if you don't care to name your price, and unless that price is within reason?"

After some minutes of hesitation the old woman drew a deep breath. "Well," she said, with the determination of one who expected to be scoffed at, "I won't take a *sou* less than my brother paid."

"Come on, Mother," said the Doctor, "what *did* your brother pay? No nonsense, you know."

"Well, if you must know—it was FIVE THOUSAND FRANCS, and I can't and won't sell it for less. There, now!"

There was a long silence.

The Doctor and his companion avoided one another's eyes. After a while, he said in an undertone, in English: "By Jove, I'm going to buy it."

"No, no," remonstrated his companion, [12] her eyes gazing down the garden vista to where the wistaria and clematis and flaming trumpet flower flaunted on the old wall. "I am going to have it—I thought of it first. I want it."

"So do I," laughed the Doctor. "Never wanted anything more in all my life."

"For how long," she asked, "would a rover like you want this?"

"Rover yourself! And you? Besides what difference does it make how *long* I want it—since I want it *now*? I want to give a party—haven't given a party since—since Class Day."

The Divorcée sighed. Still gazing down the garden she said quietly: "How well I remember—ninety-two!"

Then there was another silence before she turned to him suddenly: "See here—all this is very irregular—so, that being the case—why shouldn't we buy it together? We know each other. Neither of us will ever stay here long. One summer apiece will satisfy us, though it is lovely. Be a sport. We'll draw lots as to who is to have the first party."

The Doctor waved the old woman away. Her keen eyes watched too sharply. [13] Then, with their elbows on the table, they had a long and heated argument. Probably there were more things touched on than the garden. Who knows? At the end of it the Divorcée walked away down that garden vista, and the old woman was called and the Doctor took her at her word. And out of that arrangement emerged the scheme which resulted in our finding ourselves, a year later, within the old walls of that French garden.

Of course a year's work had been done on the interior, and Doctor and Divorcée had scoured the department for old furniture. Water had been brought a great distance, a garage had been built with servants' quarters over it—there were no servants in the house,—but the look of the place, we were assured, had not been changed, and both Doctor and Divorcée declared that they had had the year of their lives. Well, if they had, the place showed it.

But, as Fate would have it, the second night we sat down to dinner in that garden, news had come of the assassination of Franz Ferdinand-Charles-Louis Joseph-Marie d'Autriche-Este, whom the tragic death of Prince Rudolphe, almost exactly [14] twenty-four years and six months earlier to a day, had made Crown Prince of Austria-Hungary—and the tone of our gathering was changed. From that day the party threatened to become a little Bedlam, and the garden a rostrum.

In the earlier days it did not make so much difference. The talk was good. We were a travelled group, and what with reminiscences