

The Garden of Fate

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married, and my disappointment now that you ain't going to be; but no one but God can rule hearts, and sometimes I think He's too busy to look after all of them.

"Dick, she told me these things lying there in my arms after she'd sobbed herself quiet and the little gates that have been built up between all her womanhood and me had been opened so's she could talk the way she did fifteen years ago. She told me because she wanted my advice just as she did in them other years. Charlie loves you more than any other living thing; but in one way, and that's like a great big brother that used to tote her around on his shoulders, used to he p her up onto her pony, used to punch any other kid's head that was rude to her, and used to cuddle her when she was tired. She wants to keep you that way, and she loves you so much that she would never tell you for fear it would break your heart.

"I'm trying to spare her trouble, boy, even if it's almost as hard for me to say these things as it would be for her. I'm doing it because neither you nor I want to ever see her cry from sorrow or loneliness, and that's what life would be if you married her when she didn't love you the way husbands and wives must love each other. One must be sure. It's unsurety that makes divorce courts, the only businesses in the world that never fluctuate and always have a little more to do than they can attend to. It's being sure that makes one man worth more than the whole world to one woman, or one woman worth more than life itself to one man. I've learned this lesson better than most men. It's the thing which has made my birthdays blazes on a trail, the passing of each being just a lap farther toward the place the woman I love is waiting.

"There's another thing I've learned, that somehow or another I haven't made entire y good. I can't understand how; but it's so, because I think Charlie has met somebody that has taught her the inside of her own heart, and yet she didn't tell me that it was so, or, if so, who it was. Maybe she will some day, and then you and I must find out if he's good enough for her. I asked her if she had met such a man, and she didn't answer; but I knew by the way she held her face against mine it was so. I asked her who it was, and she shook her head. I asked her if he'd ever said anything to her and she said no, and she wasn't sure even that he loved her enough to have ever said anything.

"I thought at first I wouldn't write to you, but would wait and tell you when you came back. Then when I thought it all over I couldn't bear to see you coming home with your eyes glad to take our Charlie into your arms without knowing that old conditions were upset and can't be mended. I'm making it plain so you can do as you think best, either write and tell her you know all about it and that she's free, or wait till you can talk to her.

"This is the longest letter I ever wrote, Dick, and I've done it because I think so much of you and of her and because it's a mixup that's got to be straightened out. How it'll end, the Lord only knows!

"Been hearing whispers around Fez that the pretender's army is coming this way. Hope you and the Kaid don't get into trouble with them, because we want you both to come back. Reckon by this time you've learned to think a heap of him. Took me a long time to scratch through his shell and find out that inside of his stiff English ways he's all man. Give him my best.

"Yours sorrowfully,
"ROBERT MARSHALL."

BEFORE Dick could finish reading it, the Englishman had returned; but in the overpowering rush of conflicting emotions Whitney was unaware of his presence. He stepped backward as though dazed by a terrific blow, until, colliding with the rail of his cot, he sank down on it, staring absently at the sand beneath his feet. Now that relinquishment had been thrust upon him, he wondered whether or not Charlotte, his playmate, his foster sister, his sweetheart, was more to him than he had thought, and in a turmoil of mind reread the letter.

He was free! No tie of honor bound him! But despite the Consul's kindly words he felt as though he was cast out of the Marshall family, which for so many years had claimed him, and which he had claimed as his own.

Again staring at the floor, but looking into dim past distances, another picture was visualized to grow clear and distinct,—the Garden of Fate, a moonlit pergola, Margaret Clarke's face and a vague something of yearning in her eyes, when she had turned to him for that final goodbye. The very warmth and softness of her breath, the odor of her hair, mingled with the less delicate

perfume of budding magnolias and the wafted scent of oriental perfumes from neighboring terraces! The soft splash of waters, dropping like rain in fountain basins, the call of night birds, and the softened sounds of ancient Fez mingling with a tender voice that had betrayed itself in the words, "I should sorrow to know that the world no longer held the most loyal gentleman I have ever known!"

He was free! Free to go to her, when this gage of strength was over, and ask her what she meant! To ask her if she could be his own! Charlotte would be, as she had always been, his sister.

He lifted himself to his feet, threw back his head, and breathed the night air deeply into his lungs. He was like one from whose shoulders a load had been lifted and the way opened for easy travel.

HE was aroused to a consciousness of his surroundings by a sight of the Kaid's distressed and inquiring face. It all came back to him,—the night, the tent, the conflicting armies, the barbaric land, and the little English adventurer, who now, more than ever, had become his friend. It was as if trivial things past and gone, a look from this same little Englishman, an adoration of eye, a tenderness of speech, an unflinching courtesy, and a marked delicacy of manner all bestowed upon his foster sister, recurred to him in a palpable summary of explanatory truth.

He towered above the table, resting his weight on the knuckles of both hands and thrusting his head forward toward his companion. "You!" he said. "You are the man!"

The Kaid, as if accused of something unmerited or suddenly confronted by a friend gone mad, leaped to his feet so abruptly that his camp stool was thrown backward beneath his cot.

"? Good Heavens, Dick—er—Captain Whitney—what do you mean?" He had drawn himself to an involuntary attitude of physical defense as if anticipating an attack from the stalwart American, who was staring at him with wide eyes and close shut lips.

Quite slowly Whitney held the letter toward him and said, "Read!"

THE Englishman took it unhesitatingly and, leaning over the table where the candlelight shone strong, slowly absorbed the homely words of the old cattleman. Masked as he was in habitual restraint, his face broke into softened lines, and when he looked up his eyes were glad, yet sorrowful.

"Whitney," he faltered, "God knows I wish I were 'the man'! If I knew that was true, all this out there," and he waved his hand in an all embracing gesture toward the outer armies of the night, "would be as nothing!" His fingers swept up to a fearless, trembling gesture. "Only God and she knows whether I am; but this I say to you who had the envied place, that if I were, neither King nor Sultan could take her from me!"

The bulldog defiance in his conclusion was almost like a challenge, and the American, reading the hot love flaming through his eyes, knew that he had told the truth, and understood to the last sentiment why Charlotte had chosen him as her "god of heart's desire."

The adventurer drew back, as if anticipating a blow from the hand which was swiftly stretched across the table toward his own. He was bewildered, dazed, and dumb in this unexpected manifestation of friendship. For an instant he backed off until his feet came in contact with the fallen campstool, and then he halted with head thrust forward and frowning brows endeavoring to interpret the American's attitude. Little by little he relaxed as the unwavering hand, open and congratulatory, steadily reached out.

"You mean—" he said.

"That if I could have my wish, that wish which is closest to my heart, I could ask nothing more than this!"

There was sincerity in the voice. There was sincerity in the eyes. There was sincerity in the open hand, still outheld to meet his own. Almost as if doubting that any man in such circumstances could honestly wish him so great a happiness, he stepped forward, his feet dragging in the sand, and, with one last look to reassure himself, clasped the proffered palm.

For an instant they stood dumb, and then, as if the contact of flesh against flesh had brought with it understanding, walked around to the end of the table and stood more closely together.

"I—well, somehow, I can't talk about it now. I'm afraid—afraid you wouldn't understand," the American stammered; "but,

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