A Girl and Her Father

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Abstract

THAT AFTERNOON we walked inland from the camp on the coast at Ghajn Tuffeïha. North of us through the terraced valley we could see the other side of the island...
looking at her like that. Those eyes again . . . deep, penetrating, questioning.

“Well, how about a sandwich?” He reached into the paper and pulled out a flattened, dripping sandwich. He handed it to her and their hands touched, and the eyes smiled a little . . . kind, tender. And the mouth was smiling with the eyes. Sue wished she didn’t feel quite so weak and funny.

He reached over and touched her wrist, and the eyes weren’t smiling. “O.K., funnyface, let’s not play cat and mouse anymore. Sure, it’s kind of scary, but I knew you’d come around one of these days. I was just beginning to wonder how long it would take.”

The tears seemed to rise from the bottom of her stomach, and she found her head buried in his shoulder. “Don’t look at me that way, Dave. There isn’t anything wrong. I’m just a little mixed up, that’s all.”

Dave smoothed her rumpled hair. “That’s O. K., Susie,” he said, and his eyes crinkled into a smile, “that little brother of yours just took you by surprise.”


A Girl and Her Father

THAT AFTERNOON we walked inland from the camp on the coast at Ghajn Tuffeiha. North of us through the terraced valley we could see the other side of the island. There the sun shone on the blue water of St. Paul’s Bay and on the white and pink and yellow houses out on the point at Ras il Kama. The floor of the valley itself was in shadow and the air was still. Birkin walked along beside me, silently puffing away on his pipe. We followed the winding road, now and again passing small groups of sandstone houses. Outside each a few children played. Occasionally we saw a man at work in one of the fields.

The tops of the stone walls on either side of the road had been hollowed by hand and in the open channels ran clear water. Periodically the channel was tapped and at such a
place the water was piped out into the fields which had been
dug so that each row of plants received a trickle of water. At
one point the channel turned and ran along the top of a wall
at right angles to the road.

"Let's follow it and see where this stuff comes from," said
Birkin, already climbing over the wall.

I followed him and we trudged up the slope. After a short
distance we climbed another wall and made our way through
a clump of cactus plants. They were tall and thick, and it
was only after a period of careful maneuvering that we
found ourselves free of them. We stood at the top of a gentle
slope looking down at a well around which a donkey was
slowly walking. As the animal circled the well, the long
wooden pole which was strapped to his back turned a creak­
ing array of wooden cogs. An endless belt of little clay cups
dipped into the depths of the well and as each cup reached
the peak of its circular journey and started below once more,
it splashed its contents of clear water into a stone catchment.
Thence the water swirled down the narrow channel we had
followed on its way to dry fields below. A young girl had
been sitting on the edge of the well, swinging her brown,
bare feet and flicking the donkey's back with a light wooden
switch. When she saw us she scrambled up onto the wall and
stood there staring at us. Then as we made our way down the
slope she called to a man who stood hoeing in the middle of
the adjoining field. He stopped working, straightened him­
self, and after looking at us for a few moments shouldered
his hoe and walked towards the well.

"We just want to look at the well," Birkin said to the
girl who remained standing on the wall, the back of one
hand pressed across her mouth. She said nothing.

The man came up to us.

"Sa ha," we said, and I extended my hand. He shook it
briefly and his hard, coarse hand engulfed mine.

"Good evening," he said smiling.

Now that he stood only a few feet from us I could see
that his bronzed, lined face was covered with a short stubble
of beard. The back of his neck had been tanned to a dark
walnut color by the sun. He wore dark cloth trousers and
a white collarless shirt buttoned at the neck. He took off
his cap and wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

“Excuse me,” I said. “I assumed that you didn’t speak English.”

He smiled again and nodded. “You’ve come to see the well?” he asked.

“Yes, we were very much intrigued by your irrigation system and thought we’d trace its source,” Birkin said.

The man’s brow wrinkled.

“The water,” I said, pointing to the road and then to the well. “We wanted to see where it came from.”

“Oh, yes,” he said. “Come over here.”

He spoke to the girl who jumped down from the wall and stopped the donkey. We walked over and peered down at the dark green water many feet below. The girl and the man joined us and I noticed that they stared eagerly into the depths of the well as if they too were looking at it for the first time.

“It’s very deep,” I said.

“Yes,” the man said, “we have little water here. Not much water here on Malta. Not like England. Too much water there.”

He laughed and we laughed with him. He raised his hands in the air.

“Jesu Marie,” he cried, “When I worked on a ship many years ago it went to England. There it rained all the time.”

“Hmm,” Birkin murmured softly to me, “must have been that second week in April.”

“Does the donkey walk around like that all day?” I asked.

“Sometimes, when we have had rain,” the man said, shrugging his shoulders. “Today, no. Just half-a-day.”

He spoke to the girl who removed the blindfold from the donkey’s eyes. She stood a little way from us looking down at her feet.

“My daughter,” the man said pointing to her. “Before you she is afraid. But she is a good girl. She helps me with the work.”

I asked him what he grew on his land.

“Oh, carrots, tomatoes, potatoes. Everything. Up there,” he indicated a house which stood some way up the side of the hill, “up there I have some olive trees and an orange
tree. Here in this field I have just planted the barley. Will you be here in April?"

I told him that we were waiting for a ship, and that, unfortunately, we would be leaving shortly.

"Ah, a pity," he said. "I would like you to see my barley. It is the best barley on the whole island. There is none better on Malta or Gozo." He paused and I saw him look at the girl. "Perhaps it is not really very good," he added, "but it is the best in the market at Rabat, always."

I stood and talked to him about his land and the crops. The real problem, he told me again, was one of water supply. A few wind pumps had been bought from America, but not enough. The pumps delivered more water from a lower depth than he could get, but, like most people on the island, he had not been able to afford one. He then talked about his family and invited Birkin and me to a meal the following day.

"Do you like poulpe?" he said.

I told him I didn’t know what poulpe was, but I was certain we’d enjoy it.

"It is very good with tomatoes and other vegetables," he said. "My brother catches poulpes from the sea. They do not look good because they have eight legs, but they taste very fine. I’m sure you will thing so too."

While we talked Birkin had strolled down to where the girl stood. She twisted the blindfold nervously in her hands and her face had blushed a deep red, but she was laughing and talking. The man and I stood watching them. After a while Birkin turned and walked back to us. He was grinning broadly.

"She says the Germans have scared all the birds away. I suppose she means they were frightened by the bombs."

We thanked the man for his invitation, waved goodbye to the girl, and then made our way back up the hill.

I stood in the middle of the road watching him climb over the wall.

"Birkin," I said, "do you know the difference between a sparrow and a pigeon? Would you recognize a robin if you saw one?"

He jumped down beside me, laughing.
"Of course I should. Anyway, she looked perfectly charming in her bare feet. She reminded me of Lola Thisbe."

"Lola who?" I said.

"Lola Thisbe," he replied. "The girl had never wrecked a railroad, but you had only to look into her deep black eyes to know that her destructive period was about to begin. Now come on, step on it, or we'll be late for dinner."


Joanne

Joanne was well satisfied with her afternoon of shopping. The few packages she carried added immeasurably to her feeling of security and well-being. Only one more payment to go until she owned her first silver fox, or any other fur for that matter. She always liked to pay cash for everything, but that coat was an exception. It was so beautiful and she just had to have it when it was put on a summer sale.

A conveniently located door just outside the shopping district prompted her to pause. "May as well have a drink before I have to go to work," she thought.

The interior of the cocktail lounge was very dim and quiet. Three expanding business men didn't turn from the bar when Joanne seated herself at a small, round table near the wall and across the room from the bar. She crossed her legs and adjusted her skirt to get the desired length and glanced approvingly at her new suede shoes.

The bartender with an appraising eye abandoned wiping the bar and came over to her table.

"What's yours, Miss?"

"Pink Lady."

She rearranged her packages on a chair beside her and took a bill from her purse while the bartender shook a shiny mixer. He poured her drink and resumed wiping the bar.

A few men drifted in and attached themselves to the bar. One tall young man walked over to her table and spoke, "Excuse me, but aren't you Joanne Summerfield?"