THE PRIORY GARDEN.

(By A. M. Burrage.)

Devanon, like the infant Moses, lay asleep in the rushes. The punt was moored to a great bed of them, and they had whispered a lullaby to him until the book which he had been reading dropped from his hand. Retford found him sprawled on the cushions, breathing regularly, showing a vast expanse of tanned chest through the opening of his cricket-shirt.

Retford splashed through the rushes knee-deep in mud. He brought a quantity of mud into the punt, but he had rolled up his trousers as high as they would go, and having kicked off his canvas shoes, he proceeded to cleanse himself by standing in the clean shallow water beyond the further gun-whale of the punt. The noises he created in so doing, and the oscillations of the punt awakened Devanon.

"Halloa!" said Devanon. "Have I been asleep? Ah, I thought you'd get yourself into a deuce of a state."

"It's clean mud," Retford answered, "and it comes off easily enough. Besides, it was worth it. I knew somehow that there was something interesting beyond this bed of rushes on the other side of those trees that screen the bank."

"Well, what did you find?"

Retford reached for his blazer, and took a cigarette-case and matches from one of his pockets.

"I found," he said,, "a foundation garden."

"Swinburne's?"

"No; that was near the sea, "in a coign on the cliff,' But like it, save for that. There are signs of an old building having stood there—a monastery, I should say because of a big pond—the sort of place where the old monks used to breed carp for their Friday's dinners. It's covered with weed now, like a billiard-table, bright green and solid-looking, so that you'd think you could walk on it. You ought to go and have a look."

"And get myself messed up with smelly mud!"

"Yes," grunted Devanon, sleepily.

"I thought," said Retford, "you liked old ruins and sad, reserted places—particularly old monasteries. Do you remember telling me that you believe you were a monk in some previous life?"

"Yes," grunted Devanon, sleepily.

Retford flicked some water over him with his thumb and finger.

"Dev," he said, "you're an awful ass, you know. You're one of those frightfully practical chaps, and three days out of four you don't believe you've got a soul. And yet you come out with this yarn of having lived before and been—of all things—a monk."

Devanon laughed.

"It's all rot, of course," he said.

"Then what made you say it?"

"Oh, I don't know. I suppose it's a dream I once had, and forgot all about for a time. But it's like a memory for all that. I was a monk, and always in awful trouble with the prior, and doing penance, and getting fed-up, but I was a monk you know, and I'd taken the vow—"

"Then you ought to have been ashamed of yourself for ever seeing her."

"Oh, I don't think I could help that. But I remember—or seem to remember—being fearfully bored because I couldn't marry her. I hated that old priory like sin. And yet, when the soldiers burnt it down, it was like watching my own heart being destroyed."

"The soldiers? What soldiers?"

"Oh, I don't know who they were. Any soldiers will do in a dream. If it had been an elephant battery I don't suppose I should have been surprised. One isn't—in dreams."

"Well," said Retford, "go and have a squint at the ruin, and see if you remember where the dear old wine cellar used to be. You'd remember that, if nothing else."

"Thanks; but the mud deters me. I'd sooner lie here and see you wash your legs. Nice mess you've made of those cushions, too."

"There's another and a much more important reason why I want you to go and have a look. I thought the garden of a ruined monastery would be enough, and I wasn't going to mention the other attraction. Thought I'd let it come as a surprise to you."

Well, tell me what it is and if its a big enough attraction I'll go."

"No."

"Then I don't stir. Good Lord, fancy expecting a chap to get up and wade through mud on a hot afternoon without telling him what it's for!"

Retford laughed, and, putting one knee on the gunwhale, proceeded to scramble on board.

"Tell you what," he said. "I'll have a bet with you. If you land, and then come back and tell me that it wasn't worth the trouble, I'll give you a small piece of gold to the value of ten shillings. If, on the other hand, you have to admit that you were glad you went, you pass over to me a piece of gold of the same size. You shall decide. My faith in your honour is little short of touching."

"Agreed," said he.

Devanon sat up. Anything in the nature of a bet appealed to him.

The two young men were spending a holiday in camping-out on one of the large Midland rivers that run through fens and pastures into the Wash. They were both well-to-do, artistic in a dilettante sort of way, and fond of idling in the open air.

Slowly Devanon removed socks and shoes and rolled his flannel trousers above his knees. Then he dropped into the rushes and waded through them, grumbling at the mud while his friend sat in the punt and laughed. He reached a low, muddy bank, climbed up it, and vanished among the trees that screened the shore.

There was a small plantation of trees some twelve yards deep, and, advancing to their farther edge, Devanon looked out upon a tract of uncultivated land, where the grass grew knee high and coarse enough to cut the hand. To his left was a large pond, whose surface looked solid, as Retford had said, for the green weed that covered it looked like the smooth cloth of a billiard table.

Broken lines of old trees ringed in this place of desolation, separating it from the waste land beyond; but there was nothing to show if the hand of Nature or the hand of man had planted them. At first sight there was only one sign of a human being having set foot there before, and that was a piece of ruined grey wall with a glassless window set in it which rose out of the tall grass. The wall was built of grey stone, and the window Gothic in shape. It said plainly as a written sign that some church or religious house had once stood there in the river meadows.

Devanon say all this, and suddenly started as if a hand had fallen on his shoulder. In the heat of the summer afternoon a cold thrill went through his blood. "I have been here before," was the thought that straightway leaped into his brain.

He looked about him. There was nothing that he recognised. The old stone wall was no more than a thing to attract his gaze. But there was something—and he tried to analyze it, to throw light upon a faint recognition of something changed, too dim to be called a memory.

The pond? No. One pond covered with green slime is much like another. It was something subtler than a mere landmark, even though he suddenly realized that the skyline of low hills was vaguely familiar. It was as if a voice in his brain were saying: "You know this place. You were here a long while ago—such a long while ago. Try to remember."

He stepped out of the shade of the trees into the sunlight, and his doing so disclosed to him a sight hitherto concealed by the bole of a tree. A girl sat on a camp-stool before an easel, palette and brushes on the ground by her side. She sat quite still, leaning a little forward, so that her head drooped, and the brim of her hat almost touched the wet canvas. She was very beautiful, dark, and warmly tinted, showing a regular profile, brow, nose, and chin in the same straight line. It needed but a change of clothing, and she might have stepped from the side of some Grecian vase. Devanon recognised her at once, and almost hailed her; a name leaped to the surface of his memory, and then sank like a stone before he had grasped it.

He took three or four paces towards her, and then halted with a jerk. He had hurried towards her as one hurries to meet an old acquaintance chanced upon in some unexpected place. And suddenly he realized that, well as he knew this girl, he could not remember her name or where he had met her.

A slight resentment against Retford interrupted the straight current of his thoughts. Obviously she was the mysterious "attraction" of which Retford had spoken. But what a fool Retford was. It was bad enough that Retford should have inadvertently intruded on the girl, with his trousers rolled up and his legs muddy, but that he should entice him (Devanon) to repeat the blunder was beyond a joke. He hesitated, uncertain and bewildered. Then, without looking at him, the girl spoke.

He did not hear what she said; but having hastily unrolled the ends of his trousers, he advanced nearer.

"I beg your pardon," said he.

It was then that he saw what he should doubtless have seen before—that the girl was asleep. Whatever remark she had made had not been addressed to him, but to some creature of her fancy.

He was about to turn away when a great sob shook her.

"The archers!" she cried out, in a high, clear voice. "The archers! Ah, God have mercy—have mercy!"

She did not move, but seemed to sit locked in the thrall of some terrible dream.

"It burns! It burns!" she cried. "Ah, God have vengeance—vengeance!"

Devanon took another step forward as if to wake her. Again her voice rang out.

"Anselm! Brother Anselm! They have snatched the roof from thy head and cast thee upon the world. Thou art of the world now. Come to me! Come—"

Devanon uttered a loud cry. Half-a-dozen quick steps brought him to the girl's side.

"In Heaven's name," he cried, as his hand fell on her shoulder, "what are you saying? When did you last call me by that name? What does it mean?"

She started, turned, and looked up at him out of a pair of dark eyes that suddenly dilated in terror. Her lips parted to emit a piercing scream. She leaped up, still screaming, and ran from him in blind terror.

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Fifteen minutes later Devanon regained the punt, bearing with him a canvas—on which was the rough beginning of a sketch of the ruined garden—an easel, a palette, and some tubes of paint.

"Well," said Retford, hearing him coming, "was it the dear old homestead? Did you find the dear old cellar, where in a previous existence, you used to beguile the time by drinking the abbot's port? And, by the way, she made a lovely picture sitting there asleep, didn't she? If you'll hand over that ten shillings now you'll save me from cashing a fiver until to-morrow."

"Don't be an ass," Devanon answered, in a strange, dry voice. "And for Heaven's sake don't ask me questions just yet."

II.

A parlourmaid opened the door and announced, "Mr Devanon," and Muriel Ferris sprang up from the settee on which she had been resting and advanced rather nervously towards the middle of the room.

"Good afternoon, Mr Devanon," she said, in a halting, nervous voice. "I,"—she laughed awkwardly—"I don't know what to say to you. It is very difficult."

He took the little hand extended towards him and pressed it gently.

"I know it is difficult," he said. "Believe me, I knew this visit of mine would be in the nature of an ordeal, and I was sorry. But let us pretend that we are acquaintances, that we have met often—recently."

"Well," she said turning, "won't you sid down? I will ring for some tea presently. Which am I to do first? Thank you for the return of my sketching materials, or apologise for the abominable way I behaved?"

"You did not behave abominably. It was very natural in the circumstances. I was a fool to wake you like that."

She made no reply, but blushed vividly.

"How did you find out where I lived?" she asked after a little pause. "It was so good of you to send my things back to me."

"I soon found out the farm-house where you had been staying. Of course you had gone—left that same night. I expected that. But the people gave me your address at Kensington. I won't apologise for writing and asking if I might call. I had to, hadn't I?"

"I suppose," she murmured; "you wondered why I was so frightened when I woke up and saw you?"

"No," Devanon replied. "I did not wonder—I knew!"

"No, you can't know."

"You were talking in your sleep. You were dreaming. I know quite well what you were dreaming. Of course I should not have presumed to wake you had you not addressed me by name."

The girl's brows contracted in a little frown.

"That," said she, "really seems impossible. I did not then know your name."

It was a name," said Devanon, "that I once went by. But tell me your dream."

Once more the colour increased in the girl's cheeks.

"Yes, Miss Ferris—I understand."

"First I must tell you that the place where you found me had always attracted me. I made several sketches there. I didn't and don't—quite know what I was in the spot. But I used to come there often. That afternoon I had begun a sketch when I dropped asleep. And in my sleep I had a most extraordinary dream."

Devanon inclined his head.

"I dreamed I was in the same place only it was a long while ago. It was very vague. The ruin was a big house—some kind of monastery—and the great pond a fine sheet of clear water where there was fish. I was the daughter of an esquire, and we lived in a minor house quite near. There was a monk at this religious house. I used to—I—well, I took an interest in him. He was a lay brother. He had something to do with the fish-pond."

Devanon drew a long breath, and he glanced at him and then dropped her gaze again.

"I can't explain how I dreamed all this," she continued. "It was as if I knew it already. My dream was really a picture of the monastery being burned and the monks being driven away from the flaming ruins by men at arms. This Brother Anselm was amongst them. I was terribly distressed. Everything I held sacred seemed to be centred in that monastery, and I knew that the greater part of the men who were being driven out would starve to death. Then you with me. Imagine my surprise and terror when I saw in you, feature for feature, Brother Anselm of my dream. I don't think I could ever endure again such a shock as I had then. To wake up, and know I was awake, and see beside me a man I had never seen before except in a dream from which I had just—"

"Yes," said Dveanon, "it was dreadful for you. I am sorry."

"It was not your fault," she answered. "How were you to know? But, of all strange coincidences, how did it happen?"

"It was not a coincidence," Devanon answered, gravely. "There is no such thing. It happened because it had to. But—pardon me—you have not told me all your dream."

She gazed at him wide-eyed.

"How—how do you know?"

"I will tell you the rest, because I dreamed it, too. No—not dreamed it, I lived it, as you lived it, three hundred and fifty years ago, when you were the daughter of a wealthy yoeman, and I was a poor monk who lost his happiness when first he saw you."

A tremor seized her, but she said nothing. Only her eyes signalled dumb amazement to him.

"Don't be afraid," he said, gently. "It is an unusual experience—*nothing* more. We are all threads in the warp *and* woof of a great tapestry. Some threads cross each other and wind away for leagues to meet again and so complete their small factor of the pattern. That is why there is no such thing as a coincidence.

He paused, as if to invite some comment, but she was silent.

"And now the part of your dream which you have not told me. I am going to be brutally frank. I am going to tell you that I loved you, as you loved me, that I struggled night and day with the desire to fall at your feet, because of the oath I had given to God.

"When King Henry's men had sacked the place and turned us all adrift, we met. I was a free man then. Our love shone in our eyes and came in broken words from our lips. We talked, and—I should not tell you this, but you know—I forgot for both our souls that night. My monkish oath still held good, and we knew it. I would not imperil the sweet and splendid soul of you by flinging the memory of my oath behind me, and going through false her's marriage ceremony with you. I left you, believeing we should meet in heaven, and died of starvation in a ditch. Now, after close upon four hundred years, our two threads in the tapestry have met again."

The girl held her breath for a moment. Her gaze was bent downwards as if she dared not look at him.

"It is very wonderful," she said at last, in a low voice. "Yes, I—I dreamed all that. Did you dream it too?"

"It seemed at first like a series of vague memories to me until I entered the ruined garden of the old priory, and knew I had been there before. Then when I saw you I knew you. And when you called me Brother Anselm in your sleep it was as if a dark curtain were lifted from before a lighted stage."

"But"—she shivered—"but it frightens me. What does it mean?"

He moved a little nearer to her, and let his hand rest gently on the back of hers.

"Miss Ferris," he said, "we are almost strangers, but we must learn gradually to know each other. You must see—as regards our two selves—what it means!"

(The End).