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The Reef

by Edith Wharton

BOOK I

I

"Unexpected obstacle. Please don't come till thirtieth.  
Anna."

All the way from Charing Cross to Dover the train had hammered the words of the telegram into George Darrow's ears, ringing every change of irony on its commonplace syllables: rattling them out like a discharge of musketry, letting them, one by one, drip slowly and coldly into his brain, or shaking, tossing, transposing them like the dice in some game of the gods of malice; and now, as he emerged from his compartment at the pier, and stood facing the wind-swept platform and the angry sea beyond, they leapt out at him as if from the crest of the waves, stung and blinded him with a fresh fury of derision.

"Unexpected obstacle. Please don't come till thirtieth.  
Anna."

She had put him off at the very last moment, and for the second time: put him off with all her sweet reasonableness, and for one of her usual "good" reasons--he was certain that this reason, like the other, (the visit of her husband's uncle's widow) would be "good"! But it was that very certainty which chilled him. The fact of her dealing so

reasonably with their case shed an ironic light on the idea that there had been any exceptional warmth in the greeting she had given him after their twelve years apart.

They had found each other again, in London, some three months previously, at a dinner at the American Embassy, and when she had caught sight of him her smile had been like a red rose pinned on her widow's mourning. He still felt the throb of surprise with which, among the stereotyped faces of the season's diners, he had come upon her unexpected face, with the dark hair banded above grave eyes; eyes in which he had recognized every little curve and shadow as he would have recognized, after half a life-time, the details of a room he had played in as a child. And as, in the plumed starred crowd, she had stood out for him, slender, secluded and different, so he had felt, the instant their glances met, that he as sharply detached himself for her. All that and more her smile had said; had said not merely "I remember," but "I remember just what you remember"; almost, indeed, as though her memory had aided his, her glance flung back on their recaptured moment its morning brightness. Certainly, when their distracted Ambassadors--with the cry: "Oh, you know Mrs. Leath? That's perfect, for General Farnham has failed me"--had waved them together for the march to the diningroom, Darrow had felt a slight pressure of the arm on his, a pressure faintly but unmistakably emphasizing the exclamation: "Isn't it wonderful?--In London--in the season--in a mob?"

Little enough, on the part of most women; but it was a sign of Mrs. Leath's quality that every movement, every syllable, told with her. Even in the old days, as an intent grave-eyed girl, she had seldom misplaced her light strokes; and

Darrow, on meeting her again, had immediately felt how much finer and surer an instrument of expression she had become.

Their evening together had been a long confirmation of this feeling. She had talked to him, shyly yet frankly, of what had happened to her during the years when they had so strangely failed to meet. She had told him of her marriage to Fraser Leath, and of her subsequent life in France, where her husband's mother, left a widow in his youth, had been re-married to the Marquis de Chantelle, and where, partly in consequence of this second union, the son had permanently settled himself. She had spoken also, with an intense eagerness of affection, of her little girl Effie, who was now nine years old, and, in a strain hardly less tender, of Owen Leath, the charming clever young stepson whom her husband's death had left to her care...

A porter, stumbling against Darrow's bags, roused him to the fact that he still obstructed the platform, inert and encumbering as his luggage.

"Crossing, sir?"

Was he crossing? He really didn't know; but for lack of any more compelling impulse he followed the porter to the luggage van, singled out his property, and turned to march behind it down the gang-way. As the fierce wind shouldered him, building up a crystal wall against his efforts, he felt anew the derision of his case.

"Nasty weather to cross, sir," the porter threw back at him as they beat their way down the narrow walk to the pier.

Nasty weather, indeed; but luckily, as it had turned out, there was no earthly reason why Darrow should cross.

While he pushed on in the wake of his luggage his thoughts slipped back into the old groove. He had once or twice run across the man whom Anna Summers had preferred to him, and since he had met her again he had been exercising his imagination on the picture of what her married life must have been. Her husband had struck him as a characteristic specimen of the kind of American as to whom one is not quite clear whether he lives in Europe in order to cultivate an art, or cultivates an art as a pretext for living in Europe. Mr. Leath's art was water-colour painting, but he practised it furtively, almost clandestinely, with the disdain of a man of the world for anything bordering on the professional, while he devoted himself more openly, and with religious seriousness, to the collection of enamelled snuff-boxes. He was blond and well-dressed, with the physical distinction that comes from having a straight figure, a thin nose, and the habit of looking slightly disgusted--as who should not, in a world where authentic snuff-boxes were growing daily harder to find, and the market was flooded with flagrant forgeries?

Darrow had often wondered what possibilities of communion there could have been between Mr. Leath and his wife. Now he concluded that there had probably been none. Mrs. Leath's words gave no hint of her husband's having failed to justify her choice; but her very reticence betrayed her. She spoke of him with a kind of impersonal seriousness, as if he had been a character in a novel or a figure in history; and what she said sounded as though it had been learned by heart and slightly dulled by repetition. This

fact immensely increased Darrow's impression that his meeting with her had annihilated the intervening years. She, who was always so elusive and inaccessible, had grown suddenly communicative and kind: had opened the doors of her past, and tacitly left him to draw his own conclusions. As a result, he had taken leave of her with the sense that he was a being singled out and privileged, to whom she had entrusted something precious to keep. It was her happiness in their meeting that she had given him, had frankly left him to do with as he willed; and the frankness of the gesture doubled the beauty of the gift.

Their next meeting had prolonged and deepened the impression. They had found each other again, a few days later, in an old country house full of books and pictures, in the soft landscape of southern England. The presence of a large party, with all its aimless and agitated displacements, had served only to isolate the pair and give them (at least to the young man's fancy) a deeper feeling of communion, and their days there had been like some musical prelude, where the instruments, breathing low, seem to hold back the waves of sound that press against them.

Mrs. Leath, on this occasion, was no less kind than before; but she contrived to make him understand that what was so inevitably coming was not to come too soon. It was not that she showed any hesitation as to the issue, but rather that she seemed to wish not to miss any stage in the gradual reflowering of their intimacy.

Darrow, for his part, was content to wait if she wished it. He remembered that once, in America, when she was a girl, and he had gone to stay with her family in the country, she

had been out when he arrived, and her mother had told him to look for her in the garden. She was not in the garden, but beyond it he had seen her approaching down a long shady path. Without hastening her step she had smiled and signed to him to wait; and charmed by the lights and shadows that played upon her as she moved, and by the pleasure of watching her slow advance toward him, he had obeyed her and stood still. And so she seemed now to be walking to him down the years, the light and shade of old memories and new hopes playing variously on her, and each step giving him the vision of a different grace. She did not waver or turn aside; he knew she would come straight to where he stood; but something in her eyes said "Wait", and again he obeyed and waited.

On the fourth day an unexpected event threw out his calculations. Summoned to town by the arrival in England of her husband's mother, she left without giving Darrow the chance he had counted on, and he cursed himself for a dilatory blunderer. Still, his disappointment was tempered by the certainty of being with her again before she left for France; and they did in fact see each other in London. There, however, the atmosphere had changed with the conditions. He could not say that she avoided him, or even that she was a shade less glad to see him; but she was beset by family duties and, as he thought, a little too readily resigned to them.

The Marquise de Chantelle, as Darrow soon perceived, had the same mild formidableness as the late Mr. Leath: a sort of insistent self-effacement before which every one about her gave way. It was perhaps the shadow of this lady's presence--pervasive even during her actual brief eclipses--

that subdued and silenced Mrs. Leath. The latter was, moreover, preoccupied about her stepson, who, soon after receiving his degree at Harvard, had been rescued from a stormy love-affair, and finally, after some months of troubled drifting, had yielded to his step-mother's counsel and gone up to Oxford for a year of supplementary study. Thither Mrs. Leath went once or twice to visit him, and her remaining days were packed with family obligations: getting, as she phrased it, "frocks and governesses" for her little girl, who had been left in France, and having to devote the remaining hours to long shopping expeditions with her mother-in-law. Nevertheless, during her brief escapes from duty, Darrow had had time to feel her safe in the custody of his devotion, set apart for some inevitable hour; and the last evening, at the theatre, between the overshadowing Marquise and the unsuspecting Owen, they had had an almost decisive exchange of words.

Now, in the rattle of the wind about his ears, Darrow continued to hear the mocking echo of her message: "Unexpected obstacle." In such an existence as Mrs. Leath's, at once so ordered and so exposed, he knew how small a complication might assume the magnitude of an "obstacle;" yet, even allowing as impartially as his state of mind permitted for the fact that, with her mother-in-law always, and her stepson intermittently, under her roof, her lot involved a hundred small accommodations generally foreign to the freedom of widowhood--even so, he could not but think that the very ingenuity bred of such conditions might have helped her to find a way out of them. No, her "reason", whatever it was, could, in this case, be nothing but a pretext; unless he leaned to the less flattering alternative that any reason seemed good enough for postponing him!

Certainly, if her welcome had meant what he imagined, she could not, for the second time within a few weeks, have submitted so tamely to the disarrangement of their plans; a disarrangement which--his official duties considered--might, for all she knew, result in his not being able to go to her for months.

"Please don't come till thirtieth." The thirtieth--and it was now the fifteenth! She flung back the fortnight on his hands as if he had been an idler indifferent to dates, instead of an active young diplomatist who, to respond to her call, had had to hew his way through a very jungle of engagements! "Please don't come till thirtieth." That was all. Not the shadow of an excuse or a regret; not even the perfunctory "have written" with which it is usual to soften such blows. She didn't want him, and had taken the shortest way to tell him so. Even in his first moment of exasperation it struck him as characteristic that she should not have padded her postponement with a fib. Certainly her moral angles were not draped!

"If I asked her to marry me, she'd have refused in the same language. But thank heaven I haven't!" he reflected.

These considerations, which had been with him every yard of the way from London, reached a climax of irony as he was drawn into the crowd on the pier. It did not soften his feelings to remember that, but for her lack of forethought, he might, at this harsh end of the stormy May day, have been sitting before his club fire in London instead of shivering in the damp human herd on the pier. Admitting the sex's traditional right to change, she might at least have advised him of hers by telegraphing directly to his rooms. But in

spite of their exchange of letters she had apparently failed to note his address, and a breathless emissary had rushed from the Embassy to pitch her telegram into his compartment as the train was moving from the station.

Yes, he had given her chance enough to learn where he lived; and this minor proof of her indifference became, as he jammed his way through the crowd, the main point of his grievance against her and of his derision of himself. Half way down the pier the prod of an umbrella increased his exasperation by rousing him to the fact that it was raining. Instantly the narrow ledge became a battle-ground of thrusting, slanting, parrying domes. The wind rose with the rain, and the harried wretches exposed to this double assault wreaked on their neighbours the vengeance they could not take on the elements.

Darrow, whose healthy enjoyment of life made him in general a good traveller, tolerant of agglutinated humanity, felt himself obscurely outraged by these promiscuous contacts. It was as though all the people about him had taken his measure and known his plight; as though they were contemptuously bumping and shoving him like the inconsiderable thing he had become. "She doesn't want you, doesn't want you, doesn't want you," their umbrellas and their elbows seemed to say.

He had rashly vowed, when the telegram was flung into his window: "At any rate I won't turn back"--as though it might cause the sender a malicious joy to have him retrace his steps rather than keep on to Paris! Now he perceived the absurdity of the vow, and thanked his stars that he need not plunge, to no purpose, into the fury of waves outside the

harbour.

With this thought in his mind he turned back to look for his porter; but the contiguity of dripping umbrellas made signalling impossible and, perceiving that he had lost sight of the man, he scrambled up again to the platform. As he reached it, a descending umbrella caught him in the collar-bone; and the next moment, bent sideways by the wind, it turned inside out and soared up, kite-wise, at the end of a helpless female arm.

Darrow caught the umbrella, lowered its inverted ribs, and looked up at the face it exposed to him.

"Wait a minute," he said; "you can't stay here."

As he spoke, a surge of the crowd drove the owner of the umbrella abruptly down on him. Darrow steadied her with extended arms, and regaining her footing she cried out: "Oh, dear, oh, dear! It's in ribbons!"

Her lifted face, fresh and flushed in the driving rain, woke in him a memory of having seen it at a distant time and in a vaguely unsympathetic setting; but it was no moment to follow up such clues, and the face was obviously one to make its way on its own merits.

Its possessor had dropped her bag and bundles to clutch at the tattered umbrella. "I bought it only yesterday at the Stores; and--yes--it's utterly done for!" she lamented.

Darrow smiled at the intensity of her distress. It was food for the moralist that, side by side with such catastrophes as his, human nature was still agitating itself over its

microscopic woes!

"Here's mine if you want it!" he shouted back at her through the shouting of the gale.

The offer caused the young lady to look at him more intently. "Why, it's Mr. Darrow!" she exclaimed; and then, all radiant recognition: "Oh, thank you! We'll share it, if you will."

She knew him, then; and he knew her; but how and where had they met? He put aside the problem for subsequent solution, and drawing her into a more sheltered corner, bade her wait till he could find his porter.

When, a few minutes later, he came back with his recovered property, and the news that the boat would not leave till the tide had turned, she showed no concern.

"Not for two hours? How lucky--then I can find my trunk!"

Ordinarily Darrow would have felt little disposed to involve himself in the adventure of a young female who had lost her trunk; but at the moment he was glad of any pretext for activity. Even should he decide to take the next up train from Dover he still had a yawning hour to fill; and the obvious remedy was to devote it to the loveliness in distress under his umbrella.

"You've lost a trunk? Let me see if I can find it."

It pleased him that she did not return the conventional "Oh, WOULD you?" Instead, she corrected him with a laugh--Not

a trunk, but my trunk; I've no other--" and then added briskly: "You'd better first see to getting your own things on the boat."

This made him answer, as if to give substance to his plans by discussing them: "I don't actually know that I'm going over."

"Not going over?"

"Well...perhaps not by this boat." Again he felt a stealing indecision. "I may probably have to go back to London. I'm--I'm waiting...expecting a letter...(She'll think me a defaulter," he reflected.) "But meanwhile there's plenty of time to find your trunk."

He picked up his companion's bundles, and offered her an arm which enabled her to press her slight person more closely under his umbrella; and as, thus linked, they beat their way back to the platform, pulled together and apart like marionettes on the wires of the wind, he continued to wonder where he could have seen her. He had immediately classed her as a compatriot; her small nose, her clear tints, a kind of sketchy delicacy in her face, as though she had been brightly but lightly washed in with water-colour, all confirmed the evidence of her high sweet voice and of her quick incessant gestures. She was clearly an American, but with the loose native quality strained through a closer woof of manners: the composite product of an enquiring and adaptable race. All this, however, did not help him to fit a name to her, for just such instances were perpetually pouring through the London Embassy, and the etched and angular American was becoming rarer than the fluid type.

More puzzling than the fact of his being unable to identify her was the persistent sense connecting her with something uncomfortable and distasteful. So pleasant a vision as that gleaming up at him between wet brown hair and wet brown boa should have evoked only associations as pleasing; but each effort to fit her image into his past resulted in the same memories of boredom and a vague discomfort...

## II

Don't you remember me now--at Mrs. Murrett's?"

She threw the question at Darrow across a table of the quiet coffee-room to which, after a vainly prolonged quest for her trunk, he had suggested taking her for a cup of tea.

In this musty retreat she had removed her dripping hat, hung it on the fender to dry, and stretched herself on tiptoe in front of the round eagle-crowned mirror, above the mantel vases of dyed immortelles, while she ran her fingers comb-wise through her hair. The gesture had acted on Darrow's numb feelings as the glow of the fire acted on his circulation; and when he had asked: "Aren't your feet wet, too?" and, after frank inspection of a stout-shod sole, she had answered cheerfully: "No--luckily I had on my new boots," he began to feel that human intercourse would still be tolerable if it were always as free from formality.

The removal of his companion's hat, besides provoking this reflection, gave him his first full sight of her face; and this was so favourable that the name she now pronounced fell

on him with a quite disproportionate shock of dismay.

"Oh, Mrs. Murrett's--was it THERE?"

He remembered her now, of course: remembered her as one of the shadowy sidling presences in the background of that awful house in Chelsea, one of the dumb appendages of the shrieking unescapable Mrs. Murrett, into whose talons he had fallen in the course of his head-long pursuit of Lady Ulrica Crispin. Oh, the taste of stale follies! How insipid it was, yet how it clung!

"I used to pass you on the stairs," she reminded him.

Yes: he had seen her slip by--he recalled it now--as he dashed up to the drawing-room in quest of Lady Ulrica. The thought made him steal a longer look. How could such a face have been merged in the Murrett mob? Its fugitive slanting lines, that lent themselves to all manner of tender tilts and foreshortenings, had the freakish grace of some young head of the Italian comedy. The hair stood up from her forehead in a boyish elf-lock, and its colour matched her auburn eyes flecked with black, and the little brown spot on her cheek, between the ear that was meant to have a rose behind it and the chin that should have rested on a ruff. When she smiled, the left corner of her mouth went up a little higher than the right; and her smile began in her eyes and ran down to her lips in two lines of light. He had dashed past that to reach Lady Ulrica Crispin!

"But of course you wouldn't remember me," she was saying.

"My name is Viner--Sophy Viner."

Not remember her? But of course he DID! He was genuinely

sure of it now. "You're Mrs. Murrett's niece," he declared.

She shook her head. "No; not even that. Only her reader."

"Her reader? Do you mean to say she ever reads?"

Miss Viner enjoyed his wonder. "Dear, no! But I wrote notes, and made up the visiting-book, and walked the dogs, and saw bores for her."

Darrow groaned. "That must have been rather bad!"

"Yes; but nothing like as bad as being her niece."

"That I can well believe. I'm glad to hear," he added, "that you put it all in the past tense."

She seemed to droop a little at the allusion; then she lifted her chin with a jerk of defiance. "Yes. All is at an end between us. We've just parted in tears--but not in silence!"

"Just parted? Do you mean to say you've been there all this time?"

"Ever since you used to come there to see Lady Ulrica? Does it seem to you so awfully long ago?"

The unexpectedness of the thrust--as well as its doubtful taste--chilled his growing enjoyment of her chatter. He had really been getting to like her--had recovered, under the candid approval of her eye, his usual sense of being a personable young man, with all the privileges pertaining to the state, instead of the anonymous rag of humanity he had