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THE OBSEQUIES

By B. M. GOOLD-ADAMS

THE wind blew sheets of rain along the platform. The car was waiting. Of imposing size, with a good deal of glass, a nickel-plated vase that had never held flowers, an unused timepiece, it had been purchased from an income most of which had found its way annually into the pockets of bookmakers. On the right-hand side of the wide inside seat, the fawn corduroy cushions were pressed down into a flattened hollow, as though from some heavy, perpetual weight. Two years' dropsy had preceded the heart failure.

Wheels swished through puddles in the neglected drive; a lake was forming on the gravel sweep in front of the Priory. Above the door, the family arms on a dingy hatchment were being newly varnished by the damp. Over the peach-like bloom of the wet grass, a string of ducks, quacking mournfully, proceeded in the direction of the monks' fish-ponds.

In the low-raftered hall the deaf mute sat beside a hissing acrid smoking wood fire, scarcely visible, apathetic, red-eyed, holding a shivering griffon on her knees.

Millicent passed. The cleanly starched nurse, tired, but with thinly firm lips, wafted an atmosphere of disinfectant as she leant across the library tea-table to help herself to more cake. Stout, flushed, with untidy iron-grey hair, Mrs. Merton, in black voile blouse and a skirt too tight for her fifty-five years, held a steaming tumbler of whisky and soda; and was unrecognisable as the original of the photograph of a pretty girl in a sailor jumper, in a tarnished silver frame on the writing-table.

The family solicitor had not arrived, and for the first time in thirty years entire authority of decision rested with her. It had taken nearly forty-eight hours for this idea to penetrate. Her unstable arrangements for the funeral had to be placed before Mr. Filey. She did not miss her husband. They had quarrelled noisily and perpetually, and had disliked being away from each other. She still possessed the well-formed legs and ankles which had originally attracted Mr. Merton, and to the end he was proud of them as against all competition from younger women. He held himself no poor judge. His son, returning six weeks later, found foreign post cards by the dozen, which justified this claim.

The new mistress of the Priory had not yet recovered from the shock of Saturday's telegram. She began to cry as she kissed her mother-in-law, who said: "Dear, dear, Millicent, you really ought not to have come."

The air on the staircase was heavy with the semi-darkness of two days' drawn blinds, the wide landing outside the locked door scarcely lit by a night-light on a chair. Shadows swayed with the splash of rain. Through the baize door ajar at the top of the back stairs, faintly came the rattle of crockery and an echo of laughter, from the servants' quarters. A song which the gramophone had ground out night after night in the hall, her previous visit, rang persistently in the daughter-in-law's head:

"Every evening I am seen
Walking with my Angeline,
She's the girl I i—do—lise,
For she's got such dreamy eyes."

She heard the nurse say: "You would like to see him for your husband's sake. I think, if you feel up to it, you had better do so to-day. You see he died early Saturday morning, and in these cases it is always advisable to screw down the coffin early." She added that Mrs. Merton had been very difficult after the death; she had refused to allow the body to be touched for some hours, there had been a great deal of

trouble in bandaging the knees down and getting things done. Everything considered, he really looked very well now.

There were daffodils and narcissi on the dressing-table and on the mantelpiece among photograph frames; arum lilies and three small bunches of violets on the sheet which covered the rigid outline on the wide brass bed. The persistent odour of burning cresoline caught her nostrils and throat. Two candles smouldered in china candlesticks. The nurse lit the gas and blew out the candles.

She turned the sheet back. The heavy face with stubbly moustache had gained in dignity. It struck Millicent that it had a remote resemblance to her baby son. A sudden pity for its being kept thus behind a locked door smote on her. She bent down and kissed the swollen forehead; realising shiveringly, by its chill, the sentimental futility of her act.

Mr. Filey arrived at nine-thirty. Remembering swift and untrustworthy variations in the Priory cooking, he had decided to dine in town, and charge it to travelling expenses. Bald, kindly, forty-five, patient, except when suffering as at present from a slight indigestion, he unwound a wool comforter, and as a caterpillar emerging from its cocoon, disembarrassed himself from two travelling coats. He replaced in his attaché-case a paper-backed edition of *His Excellency the Governor*, with which he had been struggling during the last hour of his journey. In it the part of the Colonial Secretary had been heavily underscored. He knew that he would look the rôle, but that dignity of bearing, even on the amateur stage, could not atone for more than a certain number of lapses of memory. He was missing two rehearsals at least through his present visit. Saturday—Monday—Wednesday—if the funeral were to take place on Wednesday—

Later in the evening it became obvious that the funeral would not take place on Wednesday. Mrs. Merton had not made up her mind whether to deposit Henry in Holiwell Churchyard, where many of the Mertons had been buried, or the family vault at Saffron-le-Change, eleven miles distant.

Whichever it was, it involved her future burying-place. Saffron-le-Change would mean delay, application would have to be made to, and permission received from, the Home Office, before the vault, closed some years previously, could be reopened. Mr. Filey urged Holiwell. The vault was full—was known to be full—had been closed because it was full. Mrs. Merton left the library to stop the whimpering of her youngest son's fox terrier tied on the landing. The nurse abruptly insisted on the necessity for a leaden shell within the next twenty-four hours, whatever was decided upon.

Against this unnecessary expenditure, of no interest from the point of view of his firm, Mr. Filey took a resolute stand, on the grounds of extravagance. Moreover, the flower of England's manhood was in khaki and all lead was needed for other and more important purposes. His opponent went into details with the accuracy which had secured her recommendation from the Cavendish Square specialist, and rising to her feet expressed her willingness to conduct him to the death-chamber, so that he might there judge for himself. Mr. Filey said that he would take her word for it, and she might telephone to the undertaker the next morning as soon as the establishment was open.

By the next day the odour of cresoline had passed through the locked door. One noticed it on the landing. A white mist lay over the grounds, a shroud through which no noise from the outer world could penetrate. Silence, broken only by a sudden outburst of voices in which Mrs. Merton's dominated, or by a strange female, with clinking pail and crushed bonnet, who was scrubbing down interminable back stairs and stone passages.

A stylish young woman in black, from Palmer & Yarvell, the principal ladies' outfitters in Casterham, occupied the dusty little boudoir during part of the morning, sipping sherry and crumbling seed-cake, as she fitted the maid-servants with ready-made mourning, and measured Mrs. Merton and her deaf daughter. On her knees, amidst scattered pins

and back numbers of the *Delineator*, she advocated a skirt ten inches off the ground and five yards round the hem, as the last number of *Vogue* showed that they were wearing in Paris. Millicent escaped to the library, and found *The Garden of the Soul* strangely comfortless. Mr. Filey had taken charge of the dead man's keys, and was going through the contents of the writing-table.

"I suppose Mrs. Merton will not alter her mind again regarding Thursday? . . . It is absolutely necessary for me to be back in the office by Friday morning at latest. . . . You must find it very monotonous here with this detestable weather. . . . You are looking a little depressed to-day. . . . I wish I could take you to a cinema."

The smell of cresoline descended from the landing.

Afternoon brought the Vicar, prepared to rearrange his engagements round the date and hour of the funeral. He was worried at not having been called to the bedside. An Italian iron crucifix on a side-table in the library had for many months encouraged him to believe that something might have been done professionally for the late squire, had a favourable opportunity arisen for touching on such matters. It had not. He expressed his willingness to hold a special celebration of Holy Communion for the bereaved household at eight o'clock on the following morning; and suggested that any guests staying under the Priory roof should also be invited to attend. Mrs. Merton had been interrupted in the midst of voluble reminiscences. The milliner had brought up an assortment of widows' bonnets on approval, from Palmer & Yarevell. She said that there was so much to be done between then and Thursday that she was afraid that no one from the Priory would have time to go. Her husband had always been the best of men, truly religious, though he had not had as much time as some other people for thinking about spiritual things. The Vicar left before sherry and seed-cake arrived.

A leaden shell was delivered at eight that evening. Little

light glinted from badly cleaned silver and tarnished frames of indifferent family portraits in the dining-room. It had caught something of the atmosphere of the room above, across whose floor heavy footsteps were heard moving to and fro, punctuated by lighter, quicker ones of the nurse. Some hours previously a fire had been lit up there, to heat the requisites for soldering the lead. There was an unpleasant ringing in the daughter-in-law's ears—Mr. Filey, as he pushed away his cutlet and drained his second glass of wine, faded momentarily from her vision, then reappeared again. The deaf-mute, conscious of something amiss, stopped eating. Her anxious eyes moved from Millicent's to the solicitor's face. Mrs. Merton helped herself for the second time to mashed potatoes. The clink of the spoon and a further creaking overhead occurred almost simultaneously. The daughter-in-law again found the room filled with mist.

"It is outrageous," said Mrs. Merton suddenly, a piece of mutton poised on her fork, "that Ford should send his men at this hour. Nurse's dinner will be cold. What is the matter with your cutlet, Millicent? Don't you like them? Well, well, Mr. Filey, it's what must come to all of us, when all's said and done. Only sixty-three. Still, one might say, quite a young man."

Light and time surged together for Millicent and disappeared. Later she realised that she was lying on the hall sofa. The nurse was rubbing her feet. The local doctor stood between lamp and fire, putting a hypodermic syringe into its case.

"People who are invalids have no business to turn up uninvited in other people's houses, and collapse on their hands at a time like this," remarked Mrs. Merton's voice with justice, from somewhere near the stairs. "Had you finished your dinner, Doctor, when nurse telephoned? Are you sure you won't have some ham and a glass of claret?"

The funeral was to leave the Priory at two-thirty on Thursday. Question of reopening the Saffron-le-Change vault had been waived, but the interment was to take place there in

the churchyard. Colour and scent splashed into the hall all day Wednesday. Wreath after wreath arrived, and the shining elm box in the upstairs room was almost wholly hidden beneath tuberose, violets, gardenias, and lilac. The car took Millicent to the florists in Casterham after lunch. The rain had stopped, a west wind was blowing, there were glimpses of blue between drifting spring clouds. She ordered a wreath of yellow tulips, instead of the cross of carnations and arum lilies that had seemed appropriate at an earlier hour.

Thursday morning the car travelled, at irregular intervals, between the house and the station. John Merton, late of the Indian Civil Service, small, dapper, with grey moustache, bearing his sixty-odd years with dignified precision, arrived earliest. He had come down overnight from the home he shared with a spinster sister in Northumberland. He had cordially disliked his late cousin. His feeling towards the widow was even more positive. But respect for his own family made it correct for him to attend the funeral of its head.

That the younger Mrs. Merton, whom he had not previously met, was anæmic-looking and had little conversational ability, was of small moment to him once he discovered that her voice and manner belonged to that social stratum from which the deceased, had he possessed a sense of what was due to those who bore his name, should have chosen his wife. The old man conducted her to the drawing-room on the pretext of reinspecting woolwork executed by his grandmother, there to impress her with the fact that from now onwards she had the right to style herself "Mrs. Merton." "Charles" should be omitted from the visiting cards she would doubtless order on her return home. What the order of precedence at the funeral would be, as far as she and her sister-in-law were concerned, he could not tell her. But she must insist on her right to a seat in the first carriage behind the hearse. Millicent handed him over to Daniel Merton, naval lieutenant, who entered at that moment, bearing with bored decorum a floral

cross and a Jaeger travelling rug. She then went upstairs to tack a clean white collar into her black dress.

At one o'clock, eighteen people lunched in the dining-room. Mr. Filey, and Ford the undertaker, had difficulty in impressing Mrs. Merton with the unsuitability of presiding over the party in person. She insisted that her husband would have considered her absence a failure in hospitality. She also had to be reassured that etiquette presupposed her daughter-in-law too incapacitated by grief to make a public appearance until the arrival of the hearse, before consenting to cold salmon, veal pie, and whisky and soda, on a tray in her boudoir at a quarter-past one. The younger woman, agitated and neuralgic, ordered tea and biscuits in her room for the same hour. Two o'clock had struck before an apologetic housemaid appeared with black coffee, three éclairs, and a macaroon.

A quarter-past two. Millicent tied a veil over her heavy crape hat and slowly struggled with a new pair of suède gloves. Her knees shook a little. She glanced at her trunk, which was packed and ready for departure that evening. Murmur of voices and hurrying footsteps on the landing, then an abrupt knock and summons for her. Half-way downstairs the interior of the library was visible, filled with the lunchers talking and smoking. The dead man's felt slippers still lay beside the couch on which painted little Mrs. Heath, the doctor's wife, sat, her knees crossed, a cigarette between her lips. The old brown sherry for which the cellar was noted had not made its appearance on the luncheon-table, Mr. Ford having announced that white wine was the only kind permissible on these melancholy occasions. Sir William Burney, who had come down from town, counting on the excellent liquor the house usually offered as the one thing likely to make a distasteful day bearable, emerged to greet his daughter, coffee-cup in hand, in a state of overfed irritability, expressing doubts as to whether his sciatica would after all permit his attendance at the church.

There was a sudden movement amongst servants grouped

at the foot of the stairs. The drawing-room door opened and the shining elm box was borne through it on six men's shoulders. It was carried out under the Merton hatchment. The hall was crowded. Smouldering fire and the shabby pair of slippers in the library showed suddenly deserted through the doorway up the first flight of stairs.

"Mr. Ford," said Mrs. Merton, who had acquired a tone of excessive formality with her swathings of crape, "does Mrs. Charles accompany me, or go in the second carriage?"

"Your daughter only with you, Mrs. Merton," was the reply. "First carriage, Mrs. and Miss Merton. Second carriage, Mrs. Charles Merton, Mr. John Merton, Lieutenant Merton, Mr. Filey. Third carriage——" The spring afternoon reeked of petrol as the enumerated scrambled, according to precedence, into motor broughams, which then, cutting the damp gravel, moved slowly behind the hearse.

"We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out——"; the tolling bell had stopped, the bald-headed clergyman, clutching his flapping surplice, preceded, book in hand, the six staggering men, with their flower-decked load, up the narrow pathway to the Norman porch. The dark church seemed full. "For a thousand years in Thy sight are but as yesterday, seeing that is past as a watch in the night——" Small boys in the choir eyed the black-robed figures in front pews curiously. The straw-stuffed hassocks were uncomfortable to kneel on. Someone just behind was sucking a lozenge which smelt of eucalyptus. Sunlight fell through a saint's robe in a high window. It stained the white blossoms on the coffin with patches of red and blue.

"So also is the resurrection——" A general movement. Down the nave faces of old women peered at the mourners. Men shielded their silk hats as bodies jostled against them and feet shuffled over the flag-stones out into the churchyard.

Over earth piled high, the widow's veil fluttered. Beside her the deaf girl cried, with bowed head. The coffin-handles

clicked. There was a creaking and a straining of ropes. A handful of gravel rattled on the brass inscription plate. The crowd pressed closer to the grave's edge. The daughter-in-law abruptly turned her back to it. There was clean primrose light in the sky, as on Easter Day five years before, when the Vicar had stopped her at the gate: "Miss Burney, Mr. Merton is choosing a new family burial plot. Forgive me for delaying you, but you will now naturally feel a personal interest in the matter——"

"and the fellowship of the Holy Ghost be with us——"

"Over?" said Sir William. "Tell that fellow I'll give him an extra half-crown if he can get to the station in time for the 5.18."