

Let Not The Sun—

by Algernon Blackwood

It began delightfully: “Where are *you* going for your holiday, Bill?” his sister asked casually one day at tea, someone having mentioned a trip to Italy; “climbing, I suppose, as usual?” And he had answered just as casually, “Climbing, yes, as usual.”

They were both workers, she a rich woman’s secretary, and he keeping a stool warm in an office. She was to have a month, he a bare three weeks, and this summer it so happened, the times overlapped. To each the holiday was of immense importance, looked forward to eagerly through eleven months of labour, and looked back upon afterwards through another long eleven months. Frances went either to Scotland or some little pension in Switzerland, painting the whole time, and taking a friend of similar tastes with her. He went invariably to the Alps. They had never gone together as yet, because—well, because she painted and he climbed. But this year a vague idea had come to each that they might combine, choosing some place where both tastes might be satisfied. Since last summer there had been deaths in the family; they realised loneliness, felt drawn together like survivors of a wreck. He often went to tea with her in her little flat, and she accompanied him sometimes to dinner in his Soho restaurants. Fundamentally, however, they were not together, for their tastes did not assimilate well, and their temperaments lacked that sympathy which fuses emotion and thought in a harmonious blend. Affection was real and deep, but strongest when they were apart.

Now, as he walked home to his lodgings on the other side of London, he felt it would be nice if they *could* combine their holidays for once. Her casual question was a feeler in the same direction. A few days later she repeated it in a postscript to a letter: “Why not go together this year,” she wrote, “choosing some place where you can climb and Sybil and I can paint? I leave on the 1st; you follow on the 15th. We could have two weeks in the same hotel. It would be awfully jolly. Let me know what you feel, and mind you are *quite* frank about it.”

They exchanged letters, discussed places, differed mildly, and agreed to meet for full debate. The stage

of suggestion was past; it was a plan now. They must decide, or go separately. One of them, that is to say, must take the responsibility of saying No. Frances leaned to the Engadine—Maloja—whereas her brother thought it “not a bad place, but no good as a climbing centre. Still, Pontresina is within reach, and there are several peaks I’ve never done round Pontresina. We’ll talk it over.” The exchange of letters became wearisome and involved, because each wrote from a different point of view and feeling, and each gave in weakly to the other, yet left a hint of sacrifice behind. “It’s a very lovely part,” she wrote of his proposal for the Dolomites, “only it’s a long way off and expensive

to get at, and the scenery is a bit monotonous for painting. *You* understand. Still, for two weeks—” while he criticised her alternative selections in the Rhone Valley as “rather touristy and overcrowded, don’t you think?—the sort of thing that everybody paints.” Both were busy, and wrote sometimes briefly, not making themselves quite plain, each praising the other’s choice, then qualifying it destructively at the end of apparently unselfish sentences with a formidable and prohibitive “but.” The time was getting short meanwhile. “We ought to take our rooms pretty soon,” wrote Frances. “Immediately, in fact, if we want to get in anywhere,” he answered on a letter-card. “Come and dine to-night at the Gourmet, and we’ll settle everything.”

They met. And at first they talked of everything else in the world but the one thing in their minds. They talked a trifle boisterously; but the boisterousness was due to excitement, and the excitement to an unnatural effort to feign absolute sympathy which did not exist fundamentally. The bustle of humanity about them, food, and a glass of red wine, gradually smoothed the edges of possible friction, however.

“You look tired, Bill.”

“I am rather,” he laughed. “We both need a holiday, don’t we?”

The ice was broken.

“Now, let’s talk of the Alps,” she said briskly. “It’s been so difficult to explain in writing, hasn’t it?”

“Impossible,” he laughed, and pulled out of his pocket a sheet of notepaper on which he had made some notes. Frances took a Baedeker from her velvet bag on the hook above her head. “Capital,” he laughed; “we’ll settle everything in ten minutes.”

“It will be so awfully jolly to go together for once,” she said, and they felt so happy and sympathetic, so

sure of agreement, so ready each to give in to the other, that they began with a degree of boldness that seemed hardly wise. "Say exactly what you think—quite honestly," each said to the other. "We must be candid, you know. It's too important to pretend. It would be silly, wouldn't it?" But neither realised that this meant, "I'll persuade you that my place is best and the only place where I could really enjoy my holiday." Bill cleared a space before him on the table, lit a cigarette, and felt the joy of making plans in his heart. Francis turned the pages to her particular map, equally full of delight. What fun it was!

"All I want, Bill dear, is a place where I can paint—forests, streams, and those lovely fields of flowers. Almost anywhere would do for me. You understand, don't you?"

"Rather," he laughed, making a little more room for his own piece of paper, "and you shall have it, too, old girl. All I want is some good peaks within reach, and good guides on the spot. We'll have our evenings together, and when I'm not climbing, we'll go for picnics while you paint, and—and be awfully jolly all together. Sybil's a nice girl. We shall be a capital trio." He put her Baedeker at the far corner of the table for a moment.

"Oh, *please* don't lose my place in it," she said, pulling the marker across the page and leaving the tip out.

"I'm sorry," he replied, and they laughed—less boisterously.

"You tell me your ideas first," she decided, "and then I'll tell you mine. If we can't agree then, we're not fit to have a holiday at all!"

It worked up with deadly slowness to the rupture that was inevitable from the beginning. Both were tired after, not a day's, but a year's work; both felt selfish and secretly ashamed; both realised also that an unsuccessful holiday was too grave a risk to run—it involved eleven months' disappointment and regret. Yet, if this plan failed, any future holiday together would be impossible.

"After all," sighed Frances peevishly at length, "perhaps we *had* better go separately."

It was so tiring, this endless effort to find the right place; their reserve of vitality was not equal to the obstacles that cropped up everywhere. Full, high spirits are necessary to see things whole. They exaggerated details. "It's funny," he thought; "she *might* realise that climbing is what I need. One can paint everywhere!" But in her own mind the reflection was

the same, turned the opposite way: "Bill doesn't understand that one can't paint *anything*. Yet, for climbing, one peak is just as good as another." He thought her obstinate and faddy; she felt him stubborn and rather stupid.

"Now, old girl," he said at length, pushing his papers aside with a weary gesture of resignation, having failed to convince her how admirable his choice had been, "let's look at *your* place." He laughed patiently, but the cushions provided by food and wine and excitement had worn thin. Friction increased; words pricked; the tide of sympathy ebbed—it had been forced really all along, pumped up; their tastes and temperaments did *not* amalgamate. Frances opened her Baedeker and explained mechanically. She now saw clearly the insuperable difficulties in the way, but for sentimental and affectionate reasons declined to be the first to admit the truth. She was braver, bigger than he was, but her heart prevented the outspoken honesty that would have saved the situation. He, though unselfish as men go, could not conceal his knowledge that he was so. Each vied with the other in the luxury of giving up with apparent sweetness, only the luxury was really beyond the means of either. With the Baedeker before them on the table, the ritual was again gone through—from her point of view, while in sheer weariness he agreed to conditions his strength could never fulfil when the time came. They met half-way upon Champéry in the Valais Alps above the Rhone. It satisfied neither of them. But speech was exhausted; energy flagged; the restaurant, moreover, was emptying and lights being turned out.

They put away Baedeker and paper, paid the bill, and rose to go, each keenly disappointed, each feeling conscious of having made a big sacrifice. On the steps he turned to help her put her coat on, and their eyes met. They felt miles apart. "So much for my holiday," he thought, "after waiting eleven months!" and there was a flash of resentful anger in his heart. He turned it unconsciously against his sister.

"Don't write for rooms till the end of the week," he suggested. "I *may* think of a better place after all."

It was the tone that stung her nerves, perhaps. She really hated Champéry—a crowded, touristy, 'organised' place. Her sacrifice had gone for nothing. "Even now he's not satisfied!" she realised with bitterness.

“Oh, if you don’t feel it’ll do, Bill, dear,” she answered coolly, “I really think we’d better give it up going together, I mean.” Her force was exhausted.

He felt sore, offended, injured. He looked sharply at her, almost glared. A universe lay between them now. Before there was time to reflect or choose his words, even to soften his tone, he had answered coldly:

“Just as you like, Frances. I don’t want to spoil your holiday. You’re right. We’d better go separately then.”

Nothing more was said. He saw her to the station of the Tube, but the moment the train had gone he realised that the final wave of her little hand betrayed somehow that tears were very close. She had not shown her face again. He felt sad, ashamed, and bitter. Deeper than the resentment, however, was a great ache in his heart that was pain. Remorse surged over him. He thought of her year of toil, her tired little face, her disappointment. Her brief holiday, so feverishly yearned for, would now be tinged with sadness and regret, wherever she went. Memory flashed back to their childhood together, when life smiled upon them in that Kentish garden. They were the only two survivors. Yet they could not manage even a holiday together. ...

Though so little had been said at the end, it was a rapture. . . He went home to bed, planing a splendid reconstruction. Before they went to their respective work-places in the morning he would run over and see her, put everything straight and sweet again, explaining his selfishness, perhaps, on the plea that he was overtired. He wondered, as he lay ashamed and sad upon his sleepless bed, what *she* was thinking and feeling now . . . and fell asleep at last with his plan of reconstruction all completed. His last conscious thought was—“I wish I had not let her go like that . . . without a nice good-bye!”

In the morning, however, he had not time to go; he postponed it to the evening, sending her a telegram instead: “Come dinner to-night same place and time. Have worked out perfect plan.” And all day long he looked forward eagerly to their meeting. Those childhood thoughts haunted him strangely—he remembered the enormous plans all had made together years ago in that old Kentish garden where the hopfields peered above the privet hedge and frightened them. There were five of them then; now there were only two.

But plans, large or small, are not so easily made. Fate does not often give two chances in succession. And Fate that day was very busy in and out among the London traffic. Frances, hopeful and delighted, kept the appointment,—and waited a whole hour before she went anxiously to his flat to find out what was wrong. In the awful room she knew that Fate had made a different plan, and had carried it out. She was too late for him to recognise her, even. In the pocket of the coat he had been wearing she found a sheet of paper giving the names of hotels at Maloja, pension terms, and railway connections from London. She also found the letter he had written engaging the rooms. The envelope was addressed and stamped, but left open for her final approval. She keeps it still.

What she also keeps, however, more than the recollection of real, big quarrels that had come into their lives at other times, is the memory of the way they had left one another at that Tube station, and the horrid fact that she had gone home with resentment and unforgiveness in her heart. It was such a little thing at the moment. But the big, formidable quarrels had been adjusted, made up, forgotten, whereas this other regret would burn her till she died. “We were so cross and tired. But it might so easily have been different. If only . . . I had not left him . . . just like that . . . I”.

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