**Virginia Woolf *Night and Day***

**CHAPTER XXV**

At a quarter-past three in the afternoon of the following Saturday Ralph Denham sat on the bank of the lake in Kew Gardens, dividing the dial-plate of his watch into sections with his forefinger. The just and inexorable nature of time itself was reflected in his face. He might have been composing a hymn to the unhasting and unresting march of that divinity. He seemed to greet the lapse of minute after minute with stern acquiescence in the inevitable order. His expression was so severe, so serene, so immobile, that it seemed obvious that for him at least there was a grandeur in the departing hour which no petty irritation on his part was to mar, although the wasting time wasted also high private hopes of his own.

His face was no bad index to what went on within him. He was in a condition of mind rather too exalted for the trivialities of daily life. He could not accept the fact that a lady was fifteen minutes late in keeping her appointment without seeing in that accident the frustration of his entire life. Looking at his watch, he seemed to look deep into the springs of human existence, and by the light of what he saw there altered his course towards the north and the midnight.... Yes, one’s voyage must be made absolutely without companions through ice and black water—towards what goal? Here he laid his finger upon the half-hour, and decided that when the minute-hand reached that point he would go, at the same time answering the question put by another of the many voices of consciousness with the reply that there was undoubtedly a goal, but that it would need the most relentless energy to keep anywhere in its direction. Still, still, one goes on, the ticking seconds seemed to assure him, with dignity, with open eyes, with determination not to accept the second-rate, not to be tempted by the unworthy, not to yield, not to compromise. Twenty-five minutes past three were now marked upon the face of the watch. The world, he assured himself, since Katharine Hilbery was now half an hour behind her time, offers no happiness, no rest from struggle, no certainty. In a scheme of things utterly bad from the start the only unpardonable folly is that of hope. Raising his eyes for a moment from the face of his watch, he rested them upon the opposite bank, reflectively and not without a certain wistfulness, as if the sternness of their gaze were still capable of mitigation. Soon a look of the deepest satisfaction filled them, though, for a moment, he did not move. He watched a lady who came rapidly, and yet with a trace of hesitation, down the broad grass-walk towards him. She did not see him. Distance lent her figure an indescribable height, and romance seemed to surround her from the floating of a purple veil which the light air filled and curved from her shoulders.

“Here she comes, like a ship in full sail,” he said to himself, half remembering some line from a play or poem where the heroine bore down thus with feathers flying and airs saluting her. The greenery and the high presences of the trees surrounded her as if they stood forth at her coming. He rose, and she saw him; her little exclamation proved that she was glad to find him, and then that she blamed herself for being late.

“Why did you never tell me? I didn’t know there was this,” she remarked, alluding to the lake, the broad green space, the vista of trees, with the ruffled gold of the Thames in the distance and the Ducal castle standing in its meadows. She paid the rigid tail of the Ducal lion the tribute of incredulous laughter.

“You’ve never been to Kew?” Denham remarked.

But it appeared that she had come once as a small child, when the geography of the place was entirely different, and the fauna included certainly flamingoes and, possibly, camels. They strolled on, refashioning these legendary gardens. She was, as he felt, glad merely to stroll and loiter and let her fancy touch upon anything her eyes encountered—a bush, a park-keeper, a decorated goose—as if the relaxation soothed her. The warmth of the afternoon, the first of spring, tempted them to sit upon a seat in a glade of beech-trees, with forest drives striking green paths this way and that around them. She sighed deeply.

“It’s so peaceful,” she said, as if in explanation of her sigh. Not a single person was in sight, and the stir of the wind in the branches, that sound so seldom heard by Londoners, seemed to her as if wafted from fathomless oceans of sweet air in the distance.

While she breathed and looked, Denham was engaged in uncovering with the point of his stick a group of green spikes half smothered by the dead leaves. He did this with the peculiar touch of the botanist. In naming the little green plant to her he used the Latin name, thus disguising some flower familiar even to Chelsea, and making her exclaim, half in amusement, at his knowledge. Her own ignorance was vast, she confessed. What did one call that tree opposite, for instance, supposing one condescended to call it by its English name? Beech or elm or sycamore? It chanced, by the testimony of a dead leaf, to be oak; and a little attention to a diagram which Denham proceeded to draw upon an envelope soon put Katharine in possession of some of the fundamental distinctions between our British trees. She then asked him to inform her about flowers. To her they were variously shaped and colored petals, poised, at different seasons of the year, upon very similar green stalks; but to him they were, in the first instance, bulbs or seeds, and later, living things endowed with sex, and pores, and susceptibilities which adapted themselves by all manner of ingenious devices to live and beget life, and could be fashioned squat or tapering, flame-colored or pale, pure or spotted, by processes which might reveal the secrets of human existence. Denham spoke with increasing ardor of a hobby which had long been his in secret. No discourse could have worn a more welcome sound in Katharine’s ears. For weeks she had heard nothing that made such pleasant music in her mind. It wakened echoes in all those remote fastnesses of her being where loneliness had brooded so long undisturbed.

She wished he would go on for ever talking of plants, and showing her how science felt not quite blindly for the law that ruled their endless variations. A law that might be inscrutable but was certainly omnipotent appealed to her at the moment, because she could find nothing like it in possession of human lives. Circumstances had long forced her, as they force most women in the flower of youth, to consider, painfully and minutely, all that part of life which is conspicuously without order; she had had to consider moods and wishes, degrees of liking or disliking, and their effect upon the destiny of people dear to her; she had been forced to deny herself any contemplation of that other part of life where thought constructs a destiny which is independent of human beings. As Denham spoke, she followed his words and considered their bearing with an easy vigor which spoke of a capacity long hoarded and unspent. The very trees and the green merging into the blue distance became symbols of the vast external world which recks so little of the happiness, of the marriages or deaths of individuals. In order to give her examples of what he was saying, Denham led the way, first to the Rock Garden, and then to the Orchid House.

For him there was safety in the direction which the talk had taken. His emphasis might come from feelings more personal than those science roused in him, but it was disguised, and naturally he found it easy to expound and explain. Nevertheless, when he saw Katharine among the orchids, her beauty strangely emphasized by the fantastic plants, which seemed to peer and gape at her from striped hoods and fleshy throats, his ardor for botany waned, and a more complex feeling replaced it. She fell silent. The orchids seemed to suggest absorbing reflections. In defiance of the rules she stretched her ungloved hand and touched one. The sight of the rubies upon her finger affected him so disagreeably that he started and turned away. But next moment he controlled himself; he looked at her taking in one strange shape after another with the contemplative, considering gaze of a person who sees not exactly what is before him, but gropes in regions that lie beyond it. The far-away look entirely lacked self-consciousness. Denham doubted whether she remembered his presence. He could recall himself, of course, by a word or a movement—but why? She was happier thus. She needed nothing that he could give her. And for him, too, perhaps, it was best to keep aloof, only to know that she existed, to preserve what he already had—perfect, remote, and unbroken. Further, her still look, standing among the orchids in that hot atmosphere, strangely illustrated some scene that he had imagined in his room at home. The sight, mingling with his recollection, kept him silent when the door was shut and they were walking on again.

But though she did not speak, Katharine had an uneasy sense that silence on her part was selfishness. It was selfish of her to continue, as she wished to do, a discussion of subjects not remotely connected with any human beings. She roused herself to consider their exact position upon the turbulent map of the emotions. Oh yes—it was a question whether Ralph Denham should live in the country and write a book; it was getting late; they must waste no more time; Cassandra arrived to-night for dinner; she flinched and roused herself, and discovered that she ought to be holding something in her hands. But they were empty. She held them out with an exclamation.

“I’ve left my bag somewhere—where?” The gardens had no points of the compass, so far as she was concerned. She had been walking for the most part on grass—that was all she knew. Even the road to the Orchid House had now split itself into three. But there was no bag in the Orchid House. It must, therefore, have been left upon the seat. They retraced their steps in the preoccupied manner of people who have to think about something that is lost. What did this bag look like? What did it contain?

“A purse—a ticket—some letters, papers,” Katharine counted, becoming more agitated as she recalled the list. Denham went on quickly in advance of her, and she heard him shout that he had found it before she reached the seat. In order to make sure that all was safe she spread the contents on her knee. It was a queer collection, Denham thought, gazing with the deepest interest. Loose gold coins were tangled in a narrow strip of lace; there were letters which somehow suggested the extreme of intimacy; there were two or three keys, and lists of commissions against which crosses were set at intervals. But she did not seem satisfied until she had made sure of a certain paper so folded that Denham could not judge what it contained. In her relief and gratitude she began at once to say that she had been thinking over what Denham had told her of his plans.

He cut her short. “Don’t let’s discuss that dreary business.”

“But I thought—”

“It’s a dreary business. I ought never to have bothered you—”

“Have you decided, then?”

He made an impatient sound. “It’s not a thing that matters.”

She could only say rather flatly, “Oh!”

“I mean it matters to me, but it matters to no one else. Anyhow,” he continued, more amiably, “I see no reason why you should be bothered with other people’s nuisances.”

She supposed that she had let him see too clearly her weariness of this side of life.

“I’m afraid I’ve been absent-minded,” she began, remembering how often William had brought this charge against her.

“You have a good deal to make you absent-minded,” he replied.

“Yes,” she replied, flushing. “No,” she contradicted herself. “Nothing particular, I mean. But I was thinking about plants. I was enjoying myself. In fact, I’ve seldom enjoyed an afternoon more. But I want to hear what you’ve settled, if you don’t mind telling me.”

“Oh, it’s all settled,” he replied. “I’m going to this infernal cottage to write a worthless book.”

“How I envy you,” she replied, with the utmost sincerity.

“Well, cottages are to be had for fifteen shillings a week.”

“Cottages are to be had—yes,” she replied. “The question is—” She checked herself. “Two rooms are all I should want,” she continued, with a curious sigh; “one for eating, one for sleeping. Oh, but I should like another, a large one at the top, and a little garden where one could grow flowers. A path—so—down to a river, or up to a wood, and the sea not very far off, so that one could hear the waves at night. Ships just vanishing on the horizon—” She broke off. “Shall you be near the sea?”

“My notion of perfect happiness,” he began, not replying to her question, “is to live as you’ve said.”

“Well, now you can. You will work, I suppose,” she continued; “you’ll work all the morning and again after tea and perhaps at night. You won’t have people always coming about you to interrupt.”

“How far can one live alone?” he asked. “Have you tried ever?”

“Once for three weeks,” she replied. “My father and mother were in Italy, and something happened so that I couldn’t join them. For three weeks I lived entirely by myself, and the only person I spoke to was a stranger in a shop where I lunched—a man with a beard. Then I went back to my room by myself and—well, I did what I liked. It doesn’t make me out an amiable character, I’m afraid,” she added, “but I can’t endure living with other people. An occasional man with a beard is interesting; he’s detached; he lets me go my way, and we know we shall never meet again. Therefore, we are perfectly sincere—a thing not possible with one’s friends.”

“Nonsense,” Denham replied abruptly.

“Why ‘nonsense’?” she inquired.

“Because you don’t mean what you say,” he expostulated.

“You’re very positive,” she said, laughing and looking at him. How arbitrary, hot-tempered, and imperious he was! He had asked her to come to Kew to advise him; he then told her that he had settled the question already; he then proceeded to find fault with her. He was the very opposite of William Rodney, she thought; he was shabby, his clothes were badly made, he was ill versed in the amenities of life; he was tongue-tied and awkward to the verge of obliterating his real character. He was awkwardly silent; he was awkwardly emphatic. And yet she liked him.

“I don’t mean what I say,” she repeated good-humoredly. “Well—?”

“I doubt whether you make absolute sincerity your standard in life,” he answered significantly.

She flushed. He had penetrated at once to the weak spot—her engagement, and had reason for what he said. He was not altogether justified now, at any rate, she was glad to remember; but she could not enlighten him and must bear his insinuations, though from the lips of a man who had behaved as he had behaved their force should not have been sharp. Nevertheless, what he said had its force, she mused; partly because he seemed unconscious of his own lapse in the case of Mary Datchet, and thus baffled her insight; partly because he always spoke with force, for what reason she did not yet feel certain.

“Absolute sincerity is rather difficult, don’t you think?” she inquired, with a touch of irony.

“There are people one credits even with that,” he replied a little vaguely. He was ashamed of his savage wish to hurt her, and yet it was not for the sake of hurting her, who was beyond his shafts, but in order to mortify his own incredibly reckless impulse of abandonment to the spirit which seemed, at moments, about to rush him to the uttermost ends of the earth. She affected him beyond the scope of his wildest dreams. He seemed to see that beneath the quiet surface of her manner, which was almost pathetically at hand and within reach for all the trivial demands of daily life, there was a spirit which she reserved or repressed for some reason either of loneliness or—could it be possible—of love. Was it given to Rodney to see her unmasked, unrestrained, unconscious of her duties? a creature of uncalculating passion and instinctive freedom? No; he refused to believe it. It was in her loneliness that Katharine was unreserved. “I went back to my room by myself and I did—what I liked.” She had said that to him, and in saying it had given him a glimpse of possibilities, even of confidences, as if he might be the one to share her loneliness, the mere hint of which made his heart beat faster and his brain spin. He checked himself as brutally as he could. He saw her redden, and in the irony of her reply he heard her resentment.

He began slipping his smooth, silver watch in his pocket, in the hope that somehow he might help himself back to that calm and fatalistic mood which had been his when he looked at its face upon the bank of the lake, for that mood must, at whatever cost, be the mood of his intercourse with Katharine. He had spoken of gratitude and acquiescence in the letter which he had never sent, and now all the force of his character must make good those vows in her presence.

She, thus challenged, tried meanwhile to define her points. She wished to make Denham understand.

“Don’t you see that if you have no relations with people it’s easier to be honest with them?” she inquired. “That is what I meant. One needn’t cajole them; one’s under no obligation to them. Surely you must have found with your own family that it’s impossible to discuss what matters to you most because you’re all herded together, because you’re in a conspiracy, because the position is false—” Her reasoning suspended itself a little inconclusively, for the subject was complex, and she found herself in ignorance whether Denham had a family or not. Denham was agreed with her as to the destructiveness of the family system, but he did not wish to discuss the problem at that moment.

He turned to a problem which was of greater interest to him.

“I’m convinced,” he said, “that there are cases in which perfect sincerity is possible—cases where there’s no relationship, though the people live together, if you like, where each is free, where there’s no obligation upon either side.”

“For a time perhaps,” she agreed, a little despondently. “But obligations always grow up. There are feelings to be considered. People aren’t simple, and though they may mean to be reasonable, they end”—in the condition in which she found herself, she meant, but added lamely—“in a muddle.”

“Because,” Denham instantly intervened, “they don’t make themselves understood at the beginning. I could undertake, at this instant,” he continued, with a reasonable intonation which did much credit to his self-control, “to lay down terms for a friendship which should be perfectly sincere and perfectly straightforward.”

She was curious to hear them, but, besides feeling that the topic concealed dangers better known to her than to him, she was reminded by his tone of his curious abstract declaration upon the Embankment. Anything that hinted at love for the moment alarmed her; it was as much an infliction to her as the rubbing of a skinless wound.

But he went on, without waiting for her invitation.

“In the first place, such a friendship must be unemotional,” he laid it down emphatically. “At least, on both sides it must be understood that if either chooses to fall in love, he or she does so entirely at his own risk. Neither is under any obligation to the other. They must be at liberty to break or to alter at any moment. They must be able to say whatever they wish to say. All this must be understood.”

“And they gain something worth having?” she asked.

“It’s a risk—of course it’s a risk,” he replied. The word

was one that she had been using frequently in her arguments with herself of late.

“But it’s the only way—if you think friendship worth having,” he concluded.

“Perhaps under those conditions it might be,” she said reflectively.

“Well,” he said, “those are the terms of the friendship I wish to offer you.” She had known that this was coming, but, none the less, felt a little shock, half of pleasure, half of reluctance, when she heard the formal statement.

“I should like it,” she began, “but—”

“Would Rodney mind?”

“Oh no,” she replied quickly.

“No, no, it isn’t that,” she went on, and again came to an end. She had been touched by the unreserved and yet ceremonious way in which he had made what he called his offer of terms, but if he was generous it was the more necessary for her to be cautious. They would find themselves in difficulties, she speculated; but, at this point, which was not very far, after all, upon the road of caution, her foresight deserted her. She sought for some definite catastrophe into which they must inevitably plunge. But she could think of none. It seemed to her that these catastrophes were fictitious; life went on and on—life was different altogether from what people said. And not only was she at an end of her stock of caution, but it seemed suddenly altogether superfluous. Surely if any one could take care of himself, Ralph Denham could; he had told her that he did not love her. And, further, she meditated, walking on beneath the beech-trees and swinging her umbrella, as in her thought she was accustomed to complete freedom, why should she perpetually apply so different a standard to her behavior in practice? Why, she reflected, should there be this perpetual disparity between the thought and the action, between the life of solitude and the life of society, this astonishing precipice on one side of which the soul was active and in broad daylight, on the other side of which it was contemplative and dark as night? Was it not possible to step from one to the other, erect, and without essential change? Was this not the chance he offered her—the rare and wonderful chance of friendship? At any rate, she told Denham, with a sigh in which he heard both impatience and relief, that she agreed; she thought him right; she would accept his terms of friendship.

“Now,” she said, “let’s go and have tea.”

In fact, these principles having been laid down, a great lightness of spirit showed itself in both of them. They were both convinced that something of profound importance had been settled, and could now give their attention to their tea and the Gardens. They wandered in and out of glass-houses, saw lilies swimming in tanks, breathed in the scent of thousands of carnations, and compared their respective tastes in the matter of trees and lakes. While talking exclusively of what they saw, so that any one might have overheard them, they felt that the compact between them was made firmer and deeper by the number of people who passed them and suspected nothing of the kind. The question of Ralph’s cottage and future was not mentioned again.