The Secret

By Margaret Sutton Briscoe

ILLUSTRATIONS BY DAVID ROBINSON

"COME," said Peter de Koven, "the party's over; everybody's gone—let's sit down somewhere and talk about them."

"No," I remonstrated. "Ever so many are here still. I am hostess. I can't run off."

"Nobody's here who isn't doing just what I want you to do."

I glanced about the rooms. Peter was right. Each little colony was evidently informed with the easy spirit of the hour, that pleasant breathing-space when only the habitués of the house remain, when the caterers come in again with a kind of postscript collation.

"We can have something to eat in the conservatory," said Peter. "You know you haven't tasted a mouthful to-night." I said I thought I had, but I was quite certain I had not when, a little later, I found myself sitting opposite Peter de Koven and looking hungrily at the food placed on the small table before us. "This is the best part of a good party," he said, and I agreed with him.

We went ranging to and fro, Peter and I, as we ate our supper, chatting freely on all things and nothing, when it was suddenly borne in upon me that my old friend had possessed himself of my undivided society in this psychological hour for some reason. He had something to tell me and only waited for a fitting opening. So soon as this was really clear to me I ceased talking and sat looking questioningly at Peter, which was, perhaps, just what he wanted.

"There's one subject we haven't opened to-night," he said. "We have talked over everything else on earth, but we haven't once mentioned the South Sea Islands."

If this was his way of arriving at what he had to confide I was quite willing. I distinctly prefer an uncircuitous route to any topic, but this was Peter's geographical excursion, his South Sea Islands, not mine, so I nodded agreement.

"We have rather slighted the group," I said. "I didn't mean to militate against them. Suppose you begin. I warn you you'll have to do most of the talking."

"I don't know much of them myself," said Peter, "but I understand they are excellent places to keep a secret—if you happen to own one. I know of a man who kept his secret there for years safely."

"What was this secret?" I asked.

"Wait until I tell you," said Peter.

Then he told me.

It was a most amazing narration, true to the smallest details, he insisted. The story, briefly, was of a young Englishman who had settled on a remote South Sea Island and there, as a consistent finale, married in a moment of infatuation a native girl. They lived together, happily, it seemed, and had several children, all daughters. The children were, physically, very like their father. That may have been one reason why he suddenly conceived a fancy for Anglicizing his domesticity. To this end he quietly imported—his people in England knew nothing whatever of his South Sea Island life—an English governess and installed her with authority above his native wife. The wife, who seemed to have been a docile little creature, made his plan simpler for him by dying at the birth of another daughter. He then removed his establishment to yet another island, where they were unknown, and there his home stood for that of a decorous English gentleman, his daughters for strictly reared young Englishwomen living their rather dull British lives on their father's South Sea Island plantation.

An American had told Peter this strange story. She chanced to be visiting the island and met, with no suspicion, what she supposed to be an interesting English family. She grew to know quite intimately the reticent and most competent English governess who had wrought this extraordinary race metamorphosis.

In one of the temporary absences of the master of the house—he had been called to England, as he often was, on business of importance—the American received an appealing letter from the governess, hinting vaguely that she feared there was reason to suspect all was not quite as the absent master of the plantation would wish. She wanted to know if her friend would consent to pay her a visit. It was plain she feared she might need support, even assistance. The lady appealed to read between the lines that, in their father's absence, the distracted governess was detecting signs of some danger threatening the daughters of his house.

"It's anything but a pretty story," said Peter de Koven. "There's no use in dallying on the details. The governess herself drove to the neighboring plantation to fetch her guest and found she had made better time than she had believed she might, so back they drove that same day. They turned into a road which led through the bottom of the plantation and there heard the most amazing racket, weird shouting, the wildest singing, the maddest laughter. The governess tied the horse to a tree and the two women broke their way through the heavy foliage in the direction of the noise. They reached the bank of a little pond, and—you know the South Sea custom of fishing; men, women, and children, splashing about in the water, switching the fishes with rods into the shallows, catching them, eating them alive, raw—that's what those young girls left in the charge of their English governess were doing! That's what my friend stood there and saw them do. Such a spectacle, she said, she had never imagined. Not a trace of their superimposed civilization was left in those young half-breed savages. There—among the native youths and maidens that filled the pond, naked, play-mad children of nature—disported the carefully educated daughters of an English gentleman, one with them, one of them!

"The governess drew back from the bank and stood in a little clearing, her white face looking up into the blue sky. She said nothing; she only wrung and wrung and wrung her hands. It was all over. There was nothing more for any one to do. I don't know what she cabled to their father. She sent for him that night. I know what she might have cabled: 'Your secret is out.' What do you suppose became—what could become of those young girls?"

I sat looking at Peter across the little table. Never since I had known him, which is fairly all of his life, had I seen him so moved. "Go on," I said, "you aren't telling me a ghastly story like that, to-night, for no purpose."

He laughed and looked up at me. "You have guessed it," he said, more naturally. "No, this isn't the story I want to tell you to-night. I told you this one first, merely as a kind of preparation for the real story. I've been uncertain if I ought to burden you—but I've needed advice. I need a woman's point of view. I need—"

"Go on," I said, a little impatiently.

"Thank you," said Peter de Koven, earnestly.

"Suppose," he said, presently, "that you knew a man—" He began his story as if he had carefully prepared it, and, as he went on, it seemed to me a sort of advocate's speech. "We can put it this way," he said. "Suppose I know a man who has waked up one fine morning—the guardian of a young girl. He hasn't sought the office. It was thrust on him by the ward herself. She knew him slightly, and, for some reason of her own, he was the guardian she asked to have appointed. She was to be of age in a short while. The former guardian—she had been in his care since her babyhood—saw fit to expire suddenly, just before his term of service had run out. It looked like a nominal responsibility. A few months, and the girl was to be her own mistress. Also, her marriage seemed not much farther off. The former guardian was a business acquaintance of mine. As it happened, I had been on a brief business visit at

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his country home the summer before. I saw the girl there several times, once when she was not seeing me! She made then a deep impression on me of a kind. I was strolling along a wooded road and just ahead of me I saw two figures, a man and woman, break out from the bushes on the roadside. They were climbing down the high bank into the road. The girl's foot slipped and she fell, with no great effort to prevent it, into the arms of the young man. He caught her and held her, plainly not for the first time. They were both laughing. He kissed her repeatedly. It was as pretty a wood-scene as you ever witnessed. They were both very young, perfectly happy, both deeply in love, evidently. The girl lifted her hand and—I don't know why the gesture touched me as it did—except that it was very tender and girlishly done—it stayed by me as a memory—she lifted her hand and laid it against her lover's face with an exquisite gentleness, the most innocent and pure expression of affection. I slid away into the bushes and left them there together. The girl was the ward of my host. Her lover—I recognized him too—was a neighbor of theirs, the son of an acquaintance of my own. I wondered how his mother would like to have seen what I saw there in the lane. They came of an old, proud stock. The girl's family were not of that kind exactly, perfectly respectable, but not people of high social position. The girl, so her guardian told me, was an orphan, and wealthy. She was, he said, the only daughter of an English father and an American mother—the latter a distant cousin of his; which accounted for the child's being left to his care. Of course, with the sudden death of the guardian, it was the duty of the newly appointed trustee—he took the office only because it seemed churlish to refuse—to open a safe-deposit box where all the private papers were kept that related to his ward. There he found the gravest responsibility, he says, he has ever assumed. Do you know who this ward of his proved to be? The youngest daughter of our South Sea Island friend. This was the father's means of rescuing her—one, at least, from his brood. He had separated her even from himself, sent her to a new country, with a new name. She was to know nothing about her origin—never to know. The secret was to be kept religiously. It was evidently made worth while to her guardian to keep it, and he had done so—perfectly. But for the accident of his sudden death, it is possible (he was clever in his expedients) that no one would ever have known the truth. The girl herself had not the remotest suspicion of her real identity. She believed her guardian was her mother's cousin. He was no relation on earth to her.

"The new guardian has come to me for advice. The man his ward cares for is, as you might suppose he would be, the last man, perhaps, that she ought to marry. His family—they simply would never permit it to happen, if they knew the truth. It was his mother—there seems to have been a malign fate—she was the American woman who stood by that South Sea Island pond and saw this child's older sisters reverted to type! After that—I've heard her tell the story—no half-breed South Sea Islander could enter her family. You know how feeling runs on such things. There's no room for argument. Rightly or wrongly, people care—immensely—or, they are more or less indifferent. When they care—they never change.

"What ought—what do you think the child's guardian is called upon to do? If he simply holds his peace, perhaps no one will ever know any of the story. Remember, this is a love-match on both sides. If the girl's secret is told to her lover, his family must be informed too, for he is very young. Then there would be no marriage. I am not sure even of the lover, with his education. Can you imagine a harder case—for everybody concerned? The guardian thinks he understands his ward; he thinks he might tell her—imagine the telling!—and then trust her to—if she must, poor child!—dispose of her lover herself, on any pretext she finds easiest, to still keep her secret.

"Is that the least cruel way out? Or should he do nothing, say nothing, and let events take their course?"

"Peter," I said, thickly—the room swam before my eyes, "you say feeling runs as to such things—as it happens: that people care or do not care. If this poor child's guardian should decide to speak, and if he should happen to be a man who has never married, a man close by always whenever any one of us—any one is in trouble; so close that it seems as if he would always do anything, at all cost to himself, for one in distress—even to being chivalric in a way—that his—his old friends could not—could not stand for him. . . . Oh, Peter—"

I had known Peter since we were both children together. "In any event there could be nothing like that," he said, gently. "In the first place, her guardian is an old fogy to the girl. She has never considered him differently. In the second place, rightly or wrongly, he is—one of those who *care*, and—no, they never change. He says he has a friend, a woman, he can go to, a loving, tender-hearted, above all a *safe* woman. He knows that she will understand all he tells her, and more. His plan is to confide in her, in confidence tell her this whole story, and, if he is able, he wants to tell it so that it may deeply move her, because he needs her practical advice."

Tableaux on tableaux the scenes of Peter's story rose before me. The South Sea Island . . . that wild fishing under the wilder foliage . . . and then—the quiet lane, the gentle lovers; back of all, deep in that tropic shadow, the pursuing, unconquerable secret that would not be kept.

"You aren't telling me a ghastly story like that for no purpose"

"You haven't come to me for some one else," I cried. "You—I have known that all through—you are the guardian, Peter. And you aren't here asking me for advice—you wouldn't. All you want is endorsement. Whatever you have been deciding to do—"

Again the wooded lane rose before me, the girl's sweet gesture of innocent possession. My eyes were full of tears as I sat looking mistily across the table at Peter.

"Whatever you have been deciding to do is already done."

"Yes," said Peter. I— What do you think I should have done?" he asked.

Someone's Birthday

By John Kendrick Bangs

To-day is Someone's Birthday! Whose
Is all unknown to me,
But I beseech thee, O my Muse,
All kindliness to be.

Oh make it bright, and richly lade
With life's best blessings, pray,
For lad or lassy, man or maid,
Who celebrates to-day.

If there be tears in any eyes,
Or griefs that stir the soul,
Place o'er them thy most smiling skies
And ease the pangs of dole.

If there be cares that vex the mind,
Or troubles in the heart,
Oh Day be gloriously kind,
And bid all woe depart.

Upon a bitter past the gates
Of Lethe close, and ope
The golden door to the estates
Of Peace, and Rest, and Hope!