

AWAY FROM HOME

Keith wiped his brow as he locked the door of his car. Before him and above lay the long winding ascent to Beacon Hill, whilst behind him, close by, straggled the smoky outskirts of the town, his home town. The afternoon was hot and close but he shunned the inviting shade of a nearby copse, and started, sorrowfully, up the path.

He had come there to think, to sort matters out, to establish and resolve clearly in his mind the disturbed, turbulent, of his marriage. He had walked that way often before. Years before, Alice and he had frequently undertaken this climb, hand in hand, joyously, happily, to lay together, playfully, in the grass. What had been the outcome of all their aspirations and their whispered promises to each other? Was their marriage a failure and now at an end? He climbed on. Slowly the town fell below him and he paused to enjoy, once again, the hazy panorama.

Beacon Hill was both a local landmark and an acknowledged beauty spot. It was formed by a great upward thrust of the land which the sea, during centuries of patient erosion, had bisected across one axis and then set about the long task of out flanking it. From its summit a viewer could stand above the sheer cliffs and look out across two sea-locked bays, or turn and gaze back, down the semi-wooded slopes, inland. Despite the acknowledged great beauty, apart from the occasional, fanatical, rambler, it was frequented only by the local population; day-trippers and holiday makers voting with their feet to show their preference for the lowly sands to the arduous climb to the top. On a weekday such as this day, it could be virtually deserted.

And Keith wanted to be alone. More that anything he longed for a few hours of complete isolation. As he continued upwards, his mind ruefully explored the events of the past few months, seeking a starting point where things went wrong, a formula, some explanation. Alice was seeing another man. She was having an affair; he was certain of that. He had no absolute proof, but he had noticed so many small pointers, minute indicators, tiny careless clues, none of which were in itself conclusive. Taken together, they interlocked and a disquieting picture emerged.

He supposed that like many their marriage had suffered its share of troubles and misfortunes during the last four years. Perhaps the trouble had begun with their unexplained inability to have a child. They had both submitted to the ignominy of clinical examination and the degradation of laboratory tests, all to no avail. Perhaps if there had been an explanation, a finger pointed at one of them, they would have understood, but they had been told that there was no medical reason for their barrenness.

Then his job expanded with promotion and additional responsibilities and took him away from home. At first it was just the odd night, planted mid-week, but this propagated itself into blocks of days then whole weeks separated only by alternate weekends. It was inevitable that Alice would develop her own interests, and excusable. It was unthinkable that he should expect her to sit alone at home every night, alone, and watch the television. She had joined a local political association, attended night school and, latterly, taken part in a number of amateur operatic productions. Keith had approved, self-pleased at his wife's independence but, gradually, her life was drifting away from his, like a pair of untethered rafts on the high seas. The nature of her questions when he came home changed. She grew less interested in his job and how he had spent his time and, lately, had ceased to burden him with the details of hers. Much as he had sometimes been bored by her verbal torrent, he found its absence disconcerting. As the months progressed, despite all these external interests and activities, Alice appeared to be in the clutches of a depressive melancholy and he had feared that she had taken to drinking during his absences.

Then suddenly, between two close weekends at home, she underwent a miraculous transformation. The sad and morose woman he left on Sunday was beaming, radiant and attentive on his return the following Saturday. Keith was delighted and sought the elusive explanation.

The attentiveness turned out to be short lived, but her *joie de vivre* steadily established itself and smothered her previous depression. On occasions she might revert, but these de-generations were few, random, and short lived.

Keith remained puzzled. Over and over he asked himself penetrating questions, but he received no satisfactory answer until the other clues appeared, such as the times when he telephoned and no-one answered. Then there were friends who had called and Alice had blatantly fabricated stories to explain her absent or impending departure. Her whole posture was a mystery which ultimately came to have only one, single, explanation. She was seeing another man.

He paused as he neared the summit. He had caught a glimpse of someone ahead and had no wish to meet anyone now. There was another path leading from the brow down the other flank of the premonitory and he resolved to cross to this one and descend a short distance before sitting down. There he should be alone. Was he being fair to Alice? How exactly should he now act? She had said nothing and apart from the inventions, inconsistencies, and her changed attitude, there was no tangible evidence. He had never caught her *in flagrante delecto*, for example. Could it all be in his mind? Yet, he had no absolute way of knowing what she got up to when he was away from home, no way at all, and he was not exactly faultless himself. Should he confront her and ask her outright? Had he the courage and what if she denied it? What would he do if she admitted it?

Keith stopped walking. He had reached the peak of the climb and now he enjoyed a broad view of the cliff edge and the sea beyond, but his attention was drawn to the person he had seen earlier. She, a dark haired woman, was not fifteen yards from him, standing, looking out to sea, tightly gripping the low railing that had been erected when the stability of the cliff top had been in doubt. She appeared to be totally immersed in thought and oblivious of his approach.

Suddenly, to his alarm, she started to climb over the railing. Keith shouted and as she turned he realised from the desperation in her features was her intentions were. Her hesitation was sufficient to allow him to get to her side and firmly grasp her wrist, although she struggled vigorously to free herself, imploring him to allow her to jump. As he clung to her, he had the ghastly vision of the cliff collapsing below their feet and of them, locked together, plummeting to be dashed on the rocks hundreds of feet below. He was nearer the edge now as she continued to struggle, and a rush of hot, briny, air fanned his face as he glimpsed the sea surging below over the blackened crags. With the shrill voices of the gulls shrieking in his ears, he tugged and pushed landwards and, in a shower of tears, the woman's resistance collapsed.

They sat on the grassy slope. It was several minutes before a semblance of composure came over her features. "You should have let me go," she blurted. "It's all over, my life. There's no point to it now, no point at all. He's leaving me! Oh, please, why didn't you let me go?" Keith positioned himself between her and the sea as if to shut out all sight of the edge. All thoughts of his problems, of Alice, had been dispelled, tumbling to the beach below. Instead his heart raced as he lifted the damp, pretty, chin and caught the flashing, pitiful look of her brown eyes.

"You don't really mean that, do you?" he said softly. "Just sit there and tell me about it. Everything will seem better when you have."

The woman sobbed her way through her story. Keith marvelled. In so many ways it paralleled his own. Her husband had met another woman. It was a fact. She had followed him and seen the two of them together. She knew where this other woman lived and that they were intending to leave together that very afternoon. She had seen the railway tickets. No, she had not confronted her husband with these facts. No, the thought had not occurred to her. Gently, Keith asked her if she was absolutely certain that her conclusions were correct. There could be all sorts of innocent and rational explanations for her husband's behaviour. She should have talked to him first, surely, before contemplating anything as dramatic as to attempt suicide?

As he talked to her and tried to straighten out her problems, the solution to his problems crystallized in his mind. The course that he now advocated for this poor unfortunate woman was

exactly the one he must follow. As soon as he could, he would return home and confront Alice. They would sit down and talk in out, calmly and rationally. But first he had this woman to deal with. "Will you tell me your name," Keith asked. "In confidence," he added, sensing that his intrusion into her private life had already protruded an unwelcomed distance.

"Susan," she whispered. "Susan" Her voice tailed off. "Susan," she confirmed, positively. Her strength grew as the minutes passed. Keith could see the recovery and became anxious to pursue his own problems.

"If I let you stand, you won't do anything silly?" Susan shook her head and, brushing down her skirt, she stood unsteadily. "You remember you said you thought your husband"

"Peter," she inserted.

"Peter was planning to catch a train this afternoon. Do you know what time train it is?"

"I think it was one at three-forty," murmured Susan, clearly uncomfortable at the thought. Keith looked at his watch. It had stopped at two-thirty and he had now entirely lost track of time. Still, he wanted to get home. Seeing Alice now occupied his thoughts.

"I think we should hurry, then," he said. "I know that it is unlikely, but if you are right we might be able to reach your house before your husband sets out."

"I must look a state," said Susan, nodding glumly. Keith thought that she looked attractive and wondered about the kind of woman who could be such a counter-attraction. She led the way to the path, but stopped suddenly at the top of the descent. "Oh, no!" she cried. "There's someone coming up! I couldn't face anyone, not looking like this! Please, we must go down the other way."

Keith looked down. In the distant haze he saw the indistinct, dancing, figure of another woman, picking her way between the clumps of gorse. Then she was lost from his vision in a dip in the ground. "Come alone then," he said, taking Susan's arm. "It shouldn't take us long."

He stopped the car outside the spacious detached house and turned to look at her. "Are you all right from here?" he asked. Her eyes flashed again, now imploring.

"Please come in with me," she begged. "It's a lot to ask, I know, but please come in with me. I need the support to face him if he is there, and someone to help me face the vacuum if he is not." Keith bit his lip. He knew he could not refuse yet he knew, instinctively, that every minute was inexorably keeping Alice from him.

"Peter!" cried Susan as a man opened the door. Burying her face in her hands she ran past him into the depths of the house.

"What's going on?" said Peter sharply, glaring at Keith.

"I had better explain," Keith started as the door clicked behind him. With Susan sobbing again, sheltering in the deep recesses of a large armchair, he recounted the afternoon's events. As he progressed, her husband's face grew grim and darkened. "He's going to throw me out," thought Keith. "I'm sure of it." It was not the case. By the end of the narration, Peter was sat in the companion armchair, starring, amazed, at his wife.

"I suppose I owe you both some kind of explanation," he began. "It's true, all of it. I have been having an affair with another woman. We did plan to go away together this afternoon, but I couldn't go through with it, no way. I told her so, this afternoon - that everything is over - that we are finished for good, totally!"

Susan stirred. Keith watched in fascination as tentative bridges were established between the couple and a gradual, cautious, limited, trust developed. He was inspired. That was how it should be with Alice. That was how it would be! It was a short distance to his house. Leaving the car in the garage, he opened the front door and called his wife's name to any empty house. Unbelieving, he searched from room to room until, in the kitchen, he found an unsealed envelope, addressed to him. With shaking hands he opened the flap and read:

“Darling Keith,

This was to have been a note to tell you that I have gone away with the most wonderful man I have ever known, someone who I worship. But now, suddenly, like so many things in my life, that relationship has rotted at the core. Peter has discarded me and gone back to his wife. I am left alone now, utterly alone, with nothing. I cannot come back to you. By the time you read this note I will be nothing. Please, please, do not waste your time and search for me. You will not find me. I am nothing.

Please, please forgive me, and pray for me. I am so sorry,

Alice”

As he read it, a mental picture grew, of him standing next to Susan at the top of Beacon Hill and looking down. There was the woman's figure below. In desperation he ransacked his memory, but as much as he tried the figure remained elusive and indistinct. All he could do was follow it into the dip, out of sight, then up the path to the summit, substitutingAlice?

Dusk gathered. He remained there, sat at the table, as the shadows around him lengthened, grew weaker, and blended into the night. At the foot of the cliffs below Beacon Hill the seagulls ceased their plaintive cries and returned to their nests. The sea, alone, relentlessly continued its centuries-old task. At length he stood and stretched, replaced the note in the envelope, and went out to the car. It was time he was away from home, again.

THE END

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