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WORLD'S CLASSICS

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The Franchise Affair

Kharkiv
«Folio»

CHAPTER I

It was four o'clock of a spring evening; and Robert Blair was thinking of going home.

The office would not shut until five, of course. However, when you are the only Blair, of Blair, Hayward, and Bennet, you go home when you think you will. And when your business is mostly wills, conveyancing, and investments, your services are in small demand in the late afternoon. Moreover, when you live in Milford, where the last post goes out at 3.45, the day loses whatever momentum it ever had long before four o'clock.

It was not even likely that his telephone would ring. His golfing cronies would by now be somewhere between the fourteenth and the sixteenth hole. No one would ask him to dinner, because in Milford invitations to dinner are still written by hand and sent through the post. And Aunt Lin would not ring up and ask him to call for the fish on his way home, because this was her biweekly afternoon at the cinema, and she would at the moment be only twenty minutes gone with feature, so to speak.

Therefore, he sat there, in the lazy atmosphere of a spring evening in a little market town, staring at the last patch of sunlight on his desk (the mahogany desk with the brass inlay that his grandfather had scandalised the family by bringing home from Paris) and thought about going home. In the patch of sunlight was his tea tray; and it was typical of Blair, Hayward, and Bennet that tea was no affair of a japanned tin tray and

a kitchen cup. At 3.50 exactly, on every working day, Miss Tuff bore into his office a lacquer tray covered with a fair white cloth and bearing a cup of tea in blue-patterned china, and, on a plate to match, two biscuits; *petit-beurre* Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, digestive Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays.

Looking at it now, idly, he thought how much it represented the continuity of Blair, Hayward, and Bennet. The china he could remember as long as he could remember anything. The tray had been used when he was very small by the cook at home to take the bread in from the baker, and had been rescued by his young mother and brought to the office to bear the blue-patterned cups. The cloth had come years later with the advent of Miss Tuff. Miss Tuff was a wartime product; the first woman who had ever sat at a desk in a respectable solicitor's in Milford. A whole revolution Miss Tuff was in her single gawky thin earnest person. However, the firm had survived the revolution with hardly a jolt, and now, nearly a quarter of a century later, it was inconceivable that thin grey dignified Miss Tuff had ever been a sensation. Indeed, her only disturbance of the immemorial routine was the introduction of the tray-cloth.

In Miss Tuff's home, no meal was ever put straight on to a tray; if it comes to that, no cakes were ever put straight on to a plate; a tray-cloth or a doyley must intervene. So Miss Tuff had looked askance at the bare tray. She had, moreover, considered the lacquered pattern distracting, unappetising, and "queer." So one day, she had brought a cloth from home; decent, plain, and white, as befitted something that was to be eaten off. And Robert's father, who had liked the lacquer tray, looked at the clean white cloth and was touched by young Miss Tuff's identification of herself with the firm's interests, and the cloth had stayed, and was now as much a part of the firm's life as the deed boxes, and the brass plate, and Mr. Heseltine's annual cold.

It was when his eyes rested on the blue plate where the biscuits had been that Robert experienced that odd

sensation in his chest again. The sensation had nothing to do with the two digestive biscuits; at least, not physically. It had to do with the inevitability of the biscuit routine; the placid certainty that it would be digestive on a Thursday and *petit-beurre* on a Monday. Until the last year or so, he had found no fault with certainty or placidity. He had never wanted any other life but this: this quiet friendly life in the place where he had grown up. He still did not want any other. But once or twice lately, an odd, alien thought had crossed his mind; irrelevant and unbidden. As nearly as it could be put into words it was, "This is all you are ever going to have." And with the thought would come that moment's constriction in his chest. Almost a panic reaction; like the heart squeezing that remembering a dentist appointment would cause in his ten-year-old breast.

This annoyed and puzzled Robert; who considered himself a happy and fortunate person, and adult at that. Why should this foreign thought thrust itself on him and cause that dismayed tightening under his ribs? What had his life lacked that a man might be supposed to miss?

A wife?

But he could have married if he had wanted to. At least he supposed he could; there were a great many unattached females in the district, and they showed no signs of disliking him.

A devoted mother?

But what greater devotion could a mother have given him than Aunt Lin provided; dear doting Aunt Lin.

Riches?

What had he ever wanted that he could not buy? And if that wasn't riches, he didn't know what was.

An exciting life?

But he had never wanted excitement. No greater excitement, that is, than was provided by a day's hunting or being all-square at the sixteenth.

Then what?

Why the "This is all you are ever going to have" thought?

Perhaps, he thought, sitting staring at the blue plate where the biscuits had been, it was just that Childhood's attitude of something-wonderful-tomorrow persisted subconsciously in a man as long as it was capable of realisation, and it was only after forty, when it became unlikely of fulfilment, that it obtruded itself into conscious thought; a lost piece of childhood crying for attention.

Certainly, he, Robert Blair, hoped very heartily that his life would go on being what it was until he died. He had known since his schooldays that he would go into the firm and one day succeed his father; and he had looked with good-natured pity on boys who had no niche in life ready-made for them; who had no Milford, full of friends and memories, waiting for them; no part in English continuity as was provided by Blair, Hayward, and Bennet.

There was no Hayward in the firm nowadays; there had not been one since 1843; but a young sprig of the Bennets was occupying the back room at this moment. Occupying was the operative word, since it was very unlikely that he was doing any work; his chief interest in life being to write poems of an originality so pristine that only Nevil himself could understand them. Robert deplored the poems but condoned the idleness, since he could not forget that when he had occupied that same room he had spent his time practising mashie shots into the leather armchair.

The sunlight slipped off the edge of the tray and Robert decided it was time to go. If he went now, he could walk home down the High Street before the sunlight was off the east-side pavement; and walking down Milford High Street was still one of the things that gave him conscious pleasure. Not that Milford was a showplace. It could be duplicated a hundred times anywhere south of Trent. But in its unselfconscious fashion, it typified the goodness of life in England for the last three hundred years. From the old dwelling house flush with the pavement that housed Blair, Hayward, and Bennet and

had been built in the last years of Charles the Second's reign, the High Street flowed south in a gentle slope—Georgian brick, Elizabethan timber-and-plaster, Victorian stone, Regency stucco—to the Edwardian villas behind their elm trees at the other end. Here and there, among the rose, white, and brown, appeared a front of black glass, brazening it out like an overdressed parvenu at a party; but the good manners of the other buildings discounted them. Even the multiple businesses had dealt leniently with Milford. True, the scarlet and gold of an American bazaar flaunted its bright promise down at the south end, and daily-offended Miss Truelove who ran the Elizabethan relic opposite as a teashop with the aid of her sister's baking and Ann Boleyn's reputation. But the Westminster Bank, with a humility rare since the days of usury, had adapted the Weavers Hall to their needs without so much as a hint of marble; and Soles, the wholesale chemists, had taken the old Wisdom residence and kept its tall surprised-looking front intact.

It was a fine, cheerful, busy little street, punctuated with pollarded lime trees growing out of the pavement; and Robert Blair loved it.

He had gathered his feet under him preparatory to getting up, when his telephone rang. In other places in the world, one understands, telephones are made to ring in outer offices, where a minion answers the thing, asks your business, and says that if you will be good enough to wait just a moment she will "put you thrrrough" and you are then connected with the person you want to speak to. But not in Milford. Nothing like that would be tolerated in Milford. In Milford, if you call John Smith on the telephone, you expect John Smith to answer in person. Therefore, when the telephone rang on that spring evening in Blair, Hayward, and Bennet's, it rang on Robert's brass-and-mahogany desk.

Always, afterwards, Robert was to wonder what would have happened if that telephone call had been one minute later. In one minute, sixty worthless seconds, he would have

taken his coat from the peg in the hall, popped his head into the opposite room to tell Mr. Heseltine that he was departing for the day stepped out into the pale sunlight and been away down the street. Mr. Heseltine would have answered his telephone when it rang and told the woman that he had gone. And she would have hung up and tried someone else. And all that followed would have had only academic interest for him.

But the telephone rang in time; and Robert put out his hand and picked up the receiver.

"Is that Mr. Blair?" a woman's voice asked; a contralto voice that would normally be a confident one, he felt, but now sounded breathless or hurried. "Oh, I am so glad to have caught you. I was afraid you would have gone for the day. Mr. Blair, you don't know me. My name is Sharpe, Marion Sharpe. I live with my mother at The Franchise. The house out on the Larborough road, you know."

"Yes, I know it," Blair said. He knew Marion Sharpe by sight, as he knew everyone in Milford and the district. A tall, lean, dark woman of forty or so; much given to bright silk kerchiefs, which accentuated her gipsy swarthiness. She drove a battered old car, from which she shopped in the mornings while her white-haired old mother sat in the back, upright, delicate, incongruous, and somehow silently protesting. In profile, old Mrs. Sharpe looked like Whistler's mother; when she turned full-face and you got the impact of her bright, pale, cold, seagull's eye, she looked like a sibyl. An uncomfortable old person.

"You don't know me," the voice went on, "but I have seen you in Milford, and you look a kind person, and I need a lawyer. I mean, I need one now, this minute. The only lawyer we ever have business with is in London—a London firm, I mean—and they are not actually ours. We just inherited them with a legacy. But now I am in trouble and I need legal backing and I remembered you and thought that you would—"

"If it is your car—" Robert began. "In trouble" in Milford meant one of two things; an affiliation order, or an offence

against the traffic laws. Since the case involved Marion Sharpe, it would be the latter; but it made no difference because in neither case was Blair, Hayward, and Bennet likely to be interested. He would pass her on to Carley, the bright lad at the other end of the street, who revelled in court cases and was popularly credited with the capacity to bail the Devil out of hell. ("Bail him out!" someone said, one night at the Rose and Crown. "He'd do more than that. He'd get all our signatures to a guinea testimonial to the Old Sinner.")

"If it is your car—"

"Car?" she said, vaguely; as if in her present world it was difficult to remember what a car was. "Oh, I see. No. Oh, no, it isn't anything like that. It is something much more serious. It's Scotland Yard."

"Scotland Yard!"

To that *douce* country lawyer and gentleman, Robert Blair, Scotland Yard was as exotic as Xanadu, Hollywood, or parachuting. As a good citizen, he was on comfortable terms with the local police, and there his connection with crime ended. The nearest he had ever come to Scotland Yard was to play golf with the local Inspector; a good chap who played a very steady game and occasionally, when it came to the nineteenth, expanded into mild indiscretions about his job.

"I haven't *murdered* anyone, if that is what you are thinking," the voice said hastily.

"The point is: are you *supposed* to have murdered anyone?" Whatever she was supposed to have done this was clearly a case for Carley. He must edge her off on to Carley.

"No; it isn't murder at all. I'm supposed to have kidnapped someone. Or abducted them, or something. I cannot explain over the telephone. And anyhow, I need someone now, at once, and—"

"But, you know, I don't think it is me you need at all," Robert said. "I know practically nothing about criminal law.

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