

A Way Through The Woods

Katharine McMahon

John Gresham was shown into a joyless drawing-room.

No fire burned in the grate, not a speck of dust softened the polished bureau or chair legs, even the late spring flowers stood meekly to attention in symmetrical arrays of pink and white. A blend of gold, cream and subdued green, the room gave no indication that the mistress of the house was a young woman, unless perhaps by the translucent gleam of immaculate, over-elaborate lace curtains. Near the plain mantel was a small inlaid table, its purpose to support two photographs. One must be Nicholas; the face beneath the uniform cap displayed anonymous, clear-cut features in half profile. The second, oblong mounted, was presumably Sophia, though she was scarcely recognizable to John Gresham; her face looked thin under hair swept back according to pre-war fashion, her gaze remote, her mouth softened only by Vaseline on the kind camera lens.

Hearing footsteps, he gently replaced the portrait and turned to the door, and there she was, rather less delicate-featured than in the photograph, very pale, her eyes puzzled but revealing the correct degree of welcome.

"Mr Gresham. What a pleasant surprise."

"I'm sorry to have disturbed you. I wanted to come in person."

She offered him tea, but no, he would not stay, he had just been passing and had an appointment later.

"First, let me congratulate you on your engagement," he said. "I read the announcement, and of course your aunt was very full of it."

She smiled self-consciously and clasped her hands to conceal the ring.

"But I'm afraid it's as the executor of my wife's Will that I've come. She died, you know, in March."

Her poise was fractured, she looked genuinely upset.

"Mrs Gresham! I had no idea. Oh I'm so sorry."

"Yes, well, she had been very ill for a long time, as you were perhaps aware."

"No, I didn't realise. I'm sorry. I'm rather out of touch with my aunt, you see."

"The fact is my wife left you something and I thought....as it might seem....Well, I had other business in town so I thought I'd come."

She was regarding him now with some warmth. She smiled again. "Really I hardly knew her. I can't think why she would leave me anything."

"Oh, it's very small, terribly small, just a couple of notebooks - they were Helen's. I know, it's very odd, but my wife particularly wanted you to have them. She only made a Will in February, you see, and was still very much in her right mind. I couldn't refuse her.!

"But how extraordinary! What about Helen? Doesn't she want them?"

"No, no. I checked with her. I wrote. She replied that my wife had discussed it with her. Really she would rather they were thrown away, she said but she thought it was up to my wife as she'd had them for years. Helen gave them to my wife a long time ago, you see. Helen didn't want them, and Eleanor asked for them."

Sophia's posture had altered. She was leaning forward a little in her chair, her hands clenched together. . "Well, it was really very kind of you to have come all this way to bring them to me."

"No, I was in town. But I haven't brought them. That was the other thing - you have to collect them in person. I'm sorry. They're in Needlewick. It's silly, I know. I would understand if you didn't bother. I'll put them away, or burn them if you'd rather."

Sophia now collapsed back, laughing.

"Really, it's most peculiar. What a mystery! Well, Mr Gresham, I'm afraid I can't say that I've any plans to come to Needlewick at the moment. Colin and I intend to marry in September, you see. Quite soon. There's lots to be done."

"Of course, of course." He was drawing his feet together, ready for departure. They both stood.

"I'll let you know what I decide, shall I?" she asked, leading him into the hall and opening the front door for him.

"Yes, yes, there's no hurry."

She shook his hand.

'It really was very kind of you to come."

"Not at all, not at all."

Sophia watched Mr Gresham walk hurriedly away, a slight figure, much too frail. She had scarcely known him before; he had been only a tentative, masculine presence, yet his smile now seemed welcome and familiar to her. Poor Mr Gresham, alone.

She closed the heavy door and stood for a moment smoothing her dress and hair. The visit had left her in a state of nervous excitement. Mrs Gresham was dead.

Upstairs, Sophia stood at a mirror, arrested by her own reflection with its suddenly flushed cheeks. She could picture Eleanor Gresham in her garden, the lawn ripe at her feet, a breeze stirring the brim of her broad hat and the ruffles of her gown.

Sophia turned abruptly from the glass and, though it was far too early, began to dress for dinner. Colin was expected and it was worth taking considerable trouble for him as he always noticed what she wore - his delight in her was perhaps what she most liked about him. It was a pity that, as the hours ticked by, she would become oppressed and irritated by the combined company of Colin and her father. Neither could be natural with the other; it annoyed her particularly that her father's behaviour should be so pleased and deferential. She must insist on going out for a walk with Colin after dinner, although that would mean kisses: hand kisses, cheek kisses she liked; mouth kisses seemed intrusive and a little dirty. It was as if they were being performed under the approving eye of her father even when he was miles away.

Carefully reknitting her hair, she speculated on the contents of Mrs Gresham's Will. 'The woman didn't even like me,' she would later tell Colin - she mentally rehearsed the words. "She thought I was bad for Helen, I could tell. Haven't I told you about my cousin, Helen Callwood? I went to stay with her when I was about thirteen and Nicholas had measles. It was thought I'd be safer away from the germs and they sent me to stay with my mother's sister, Aunt Margaret, and her husband, who's a doctor, and my cousin, in this tiny village called Needlewick. It's really remote." That was the summer. That was the summer.

No meal in the presence of Mr Simon Theobald could be comfortable; even Sophia who had dined alone with her father for a number of years could never be at ease, and poor Colin compensated for his anxiety with overzealous attempts at conversation, clumsy clashing of cutlery and conscientious lip-wiping.

There were elements in Simon Theobald's domestic life which he had failed to control and, as if in compensation, he now clung ever more assiduously to the rituals learnt in childhood. Food must be

perfectly served; neither he nor Sophia was permitted to speak without first laying down knife and fork and resting hands on lap; no drop of wine or gravy must splash on the white cloth. At the end of a course Theobald would cleanse imaginary crumbs from his fingers by flicking his thumbs across them several times. Sophia was acutely aware of her father's every indrawn breath and click of teeth. The sight of a soft pudding caused her jaw muscles to clench in anticipation of the unnecessary grinding of his molars through the unresisting blancmange. For her, company at dinner was a blissful release. Colin's proposal, so acceptable to her father, also released her from the torture of meal times; she ceased to be the unwilling focus of all her father's attention and might even laugh or blow her nose.

"Mr Gresham called today, father."

His mouth was full of lamb and young peas. In the time it took him to prepare for speech she had begun to regret this rash revelation.

"Mr Gresham?"

His clear blue gaze, from eyes remarkably large and lavishly lashed, met hers in polite interest.

'Yes. Sorry, I thought you'd know him. He's a lawyer in Needlewick. I met him when I went to stay there. His wife was a great friend of mother's."

"I know who Mr Gresham is."

"Where's Needlewick?" Colin interrupted.

Now that the Pandora's Box was opened Sophia would have given much to have it closed again. No good would come of it. Already her father's neat movements of knife and fork had become yet more deliberate.

She vented her anger on Colin. "You wouldn't have heard of it, it's a minute village where my mother was born."

"Ah." Colin shot a hurried glance at his host and reached for the dish of potatoes - a spoon bounced on the cloth and flicked spots of melted butter on to the salt cellar.

"Yes, I stayed there once with my aunt and uncle. The Greshams were family friends. It seems that Mrs Gresham has left some books for me. She died. Did you know that father?"

"I believe it was mentioned."

"But how exciting! Are they of any value, these books? "

"No, I shouldn't think so. Why didn't you tell me Mrs Gresham was dead, father?"

There was another long pause while he completed his meal and pushed his plate a fraction of an inch away. "I had no idea you would be interested. You've never mentioned her.

"She was mama's dearest friend."

"I don't remember your mother ever writing to her much."

"No. No."

Colin came crashing to the rescue. 'Talking of writing - I've been defending a fearfully interesting case today. Fraud. Incredible the lengths people will go to..."

They walked along the Embankment, the wind tossing litter and flying blossom about their ankles. Sophia was soon shivering.

"It's so cold for May." He drew her closer by tucking her arm through his. "You're not wearing enough. You never do."

"I wanted to get out quickly. Good God, Colin, I don't know how you can bear the atmosphere in that house. You must be mad to inflict it on yourself."

"I'd do far worse for you, Sophia."

"I know you would. I know."

"I sometimes wonder why you deliberately provoke him by talking about your mother."

"I don't do it to provoke him - not entirely. Colin, she's my mother! I rave to keep her alive for myself, I do precious little else for her."

"Has she written lately?" When they talked about her mother, she always felt that his compassionate tone would be more suitable if he was addressing someone dangerously ill or recently bereaved. She despised him for it.

"You know she doesn't write. Why should she, I never write to her." Her raised voice alerted the interest of other strollers and he hurriedly withdrew his arm. "I think my mother will be sorry to know Eleanor Gresham is dead. I wish I'd known her better. I can't think why she thought of me when she was writing her Will."

Overhead cherry blossom hung in dim clusters. Mrs Gresham. The cow parsley in the bank outside her house, her garden hazed by yellow heat and the roses full-blown.

At breakfast two days later Sophia received the letter confirming her unusual legacy. She pushed the envelope to one side and began to spread butter on her toast.

"You received the letter from Gresham, then?"

"Yes."

The morning sunlight through the long voile curtains of the breakfast room was blinding, she had to shield her face.

"Yes, it's absurd. I can't go all the way to Needlewick for such a silly thing. I've far too much to do."

"Although, as I've said, Sophia, you ought to visit your uncle and aunt before your marriage."

"Oh perhaps I might go later in the summer."

"Yes. And you could collect your book then."

Simon Theobald had in part made his fortune by never turning down a gift or an opportunity.

"Maybe, yes."

But later, when her father had left the house, she raged about the rooms in a ferment of emotional energy. What did Helen's diary contain that could be of relevance now? Why had it been given to Eleanor Gresham? And why must Sophia now go to Needlewick when Mr Gresham might so easily have posted it or indeed delivered it himself? Mrs Gresham had undoubtedly become eccentric in the late stages of her illness.

But curiosity burned; Sophia must read the diary which would of course contain many references to her own visit in that summer of 1909. And Needlewick was not after all so very far away; she need only stay overnight or Colin could even motor her up in a day. But she did not want Colin in Needlewick. The thought brought her up short before a large oval mirror on the landing as if suddenly caught rehearsing the name of a secret lover. She did not want Colin in Needlewick.

Finally, for peace, she opened the door of her brother's room.

She recoiled, as always, from the reality of his complete absence. The shutters were closed and in the grey light from the doorway the room was dim, cold and very tidy, for though not kept as a shrine it was unused.

She closed the door, went to the bed and laid her head on the pillow. Nicholas, I wrote to you so often in the Needlewick summer. Do you remember how homesick I was - how you-sick? I would have caught your measles willingly rather than be exiled like that.

She stood up and whispered fiercely: "I'll go, I'll go."

It would be her last trip anywhere without Colin for some time, and she'd tell him that for sentimental reasons she must make it alone. Anyway, he wouldn't be interested in girlish memories.

"I'll go then, shall I, Nicholas? Shall I go?"

Her words fell on the dark carpet, the long bookshelves and the smooth quilt, where they died softly with no ears to hear them.