

**The Love-Story of
Alette Brunton**

Gilbert Frankau

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ALLETTE BRUNTON

BY
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TO MY WIFE AND LOYAL ASSOCIATE
AIMÉE DE BURGH FRANKAU
IN ALL LOVE AND A GREAT REVERENCE
THIS STORY OF A WOMAN'S COURAGE

But woman's gamble (there's only one;
And it takes some pluck to play,
When the rules are broke ere the game's begun;
When, lose or win, you must pay!)
Is a double wager on human kind,
A limitless risk--and she goes it blind.

For she stakes, at love, on a single throw,
Pride, Honor, Scruples, and Fears,
And dreams no lover can hope to know,
And the gold of the after-years.
(And all for a man; and there's no man lives
Who is worth the odds that a woman gives.)

--From "The Judgment of
Valhalla."

THE LOVE-STORY OF ALIETTE BRUNTON

PREAMBLE

1

In our heart of hearts--which we in England take almost as much pains to hide from ourselves as from our fellow-creatures--most of us realize that life without love is a weariness, a conflict bereft of hope, a struggle for no victory. Yet Love, the Real Thing--whether it be love of a god or love of our fellow-creatures, the love of a man for his mate, of a mother for her son, of a friend for his friend or a girl for her chosen--is not the law of the majority. Because Love, the Real Thing--as all real things--demands infinite self-sacrifice: and infinite self-sacrifice is too divine a code for the average imperfect human being, who must needs make himself other codes or perish.

This, therefore, Aliette's love-story, deals of necessity with the self-sacrifices endured not only by Aliette but by many of those who came within the orbit of her personality.

Rightly to understand the people of this tale and the motives which swayed them, it is vital that you should comprehend, at the very outset, how essentially English they all were; how essentially old-fashioned, in the best sense of that much misused word; and how difficult it was, even for Aliette, to learn that Love, the Real Thing, had come into their lives, making blind havoc of every unwritten rule and every written law to which they owed allegiance.

For all these people, Bruntons, Fullerfords, Wilberforces, and Cavendishes, were ordinary orderly English folk; trained in that school of thought which prizes sheer character above mere intellect, which teaches self-restraint and self-respect and self-reliance, and believes--as an ultimate issue--in "playing the game."

It is no bad code, this old-fashioned English code of "playing the game." Humanity owes it much, will owe it even more. But, like all forms of discipline,

it is apt to weigh heavily on individuals; and heaviest on those who, believing in the code, must needs make choice between playing the game according to the rules of love or playing the game according to the rules of average imperfect human beings.

That Alette Brunton and Ronald Cavendish played their game according to the dictates of love and their own consciences, remains the sole excuse--if excuse be needed--for the happiness to which, at long last, they both won.

2

Of the various English families here concerned, the Fullerfords of Clyst Fullerford are at once the oldest and the least distinguished--according to modern standards of "distinction." Yeomen by original birth, yeomen at heart they have remained; content, in an age of ostentation, to serve their country quietly, and retire--at the end of service--into the lush obscurity of the Devon countryside, there maintaining modest state and modest revenues until such time as a Church of England God is pleased to summon them elsewhere.

Alette's father, Andrew, born in the very early sixties, followed the Fullerford tradition of service, and became puisne judge of an obscure colonial law-court before retiring. His marriage, at the age of twenty-four, to Marie Sheldon, caused--owing to Marie's abandonment of the rigid Sheldon Catholicism for the scarcely less rigid Protestantism of the Fullerfords--no small sensation.

This marriage, founded on a self-sacrifice of which only Alette's mother knew the full burden, yielded two sons, both of whom give their lives for their country early in 1915, and three daughters: Eva, eldest of the family, who married Captain Harold Martin of the Devonshire Regiment in 1910, and became "colonel's lady"--a position she filled most admirably; Alette; and Mollie, youngest of the five.

It was not until her second daughter's birth in 1892 that the Sheldons fully pardoned Marie Fullerford's infidelity to their religion--Alette, named after a remote French ancestress, becoming as it were the symbol of family reunion, and inheriting, on the death of Grandmama Sheldon, a little block of consolidated stock in further token of forgiveness. Shortly after which inheritance, in December, 1912, she married--for reasons which will be apparent in our story--Hector Brunton, barrister of the Middle Temple, and no small gun in the legal world; while Mollie, then a long-legged flapper of

tomboy proclivities, reluctantly returned from Wycombe Abbey School to "assist mother in looking after things."

Mollie "looked after things" until the boys were killed. Then she joined the nursing service. To that service her body still bears witness in the shape of three white scars--souvenirs of a bombed hospital.

3

Although, socially speaking, there is little if any difference between the Fullerfords and the Bruntons, the latter family shine considerably the more effulgent in the public eye. One finds them in newspaper paragraphs; one sees them at court, at the opera, at the Ritz. In fact, wheresoever the ostentatious world of the nineteen-twenties foregathers, the Bruntons forgather with it; not because they themselves are ostentatious, but because, being of their period, they must needs follow the tide--as Rear-Admiral Billy, in that bluff manner which fifteen years' absence from the sea-service has scarcely impaired, is the first to admit.

"Damn vulgar commercial age, but we can't put the clock back, worse luck," says Rear-Admiral Billy Brunton to his brother, Sir Simeon Brunton, K.C.V.O., recently retired with ambassadorial rank from the diplomatic service. To which Sir Simeon, after three glasses of port, has been known to retort with a suave: "It hasn't done us so badly."

And this is a fact! For the Bruntons, originally sea-folk, and as poor as most of the senior service, have developed an uncanny instinct for marrying money.

Rear-Admiral Billy, head of the clan and now rising seventy-five, yielded to the instinct before the age of thirty; bringing home as bride, from his first cruise to Australia, a distinguished daughter of the Melbourne squatocracy, by whom he had two sons, Hector and Adrian; and from whom, on her death in 1906, he received sufficient money to make his declining years perfectly comfortable--though in a very modest fashion when compared with his younger brother Simeon, whose first wife was a Sturgis, of Sturgis, Champion & Sturgis, the high-speed steel manufacturers, and whose second, an Anglo-Indian, still very much alive at the time our story opens, inherited a largish slice of shares in her father's main enterprise, "The Raneegunge Jute and Cotton Mills, Ltd."

"Still"--once again employing the language of Rear-Admiral Billy--"Simeon's

feeding a pretty long string of unmated fillies in his stables; and I've only got a brace of colts who seem tolerably capable of foraging for themselves in mine."

The "colts," Hector, born in '77, and Adrian two years later, certainly foraged for themselves with considerable assiduity. Adrian entered the church; and developed the Brunton instinct to such purpose that he endowed himself with a bishop's daughter and a Mayfair congregation at the early age of thirty-five--though it must be put to his credit that he abandoned his Hill Street surplice for a chaplain's khaki tunic in the Holy Land, and did not return to his bishop's daughter until early in 1919, by which time she had manœvered for him the comfortable vicarage at High Moor, a prosperous Oxfordshire living, whose exact center is Admiral Billy's Moor Park.

Meanwhile Aliette's husband--having persuaded himself that he was indispensable to his country--became a king's counselor, dividing his days between the common law courts, where emoluments were fat if advertisement lean, and the criminal courts, wherein, as prosecuting counsel for the crown, he on occasions glittered exceedingly.

A large and a successful family--they look--these Bruntons, when you make their massed acquaintance in three pages of "Who's Who." But Julia Cavendish, née Wixton, used to have a page to herself!

4

You will find mention of the "four sisters Wixton," of their "charming" mother and their "distinguished" father in most mid-Victorian memoirs. Tennyson wrote a poem to the baby Clementina. Robert Browning is rumored to have stopped May's perambulator on more than one occasion in Kensington Gardens. Alice had an affair, very nebulous and of her period, with one of the less celebrated Preraphaelite painters.

But on the demise of Josiah Wixton (his wife and book-publishing business survived him a bare three years), all but one of his daughters disappear from artistic history. May married a tea-broker named Robinson, and was left a childless but affluent widow in 1908. Alice vanished with John Edwards of the Indian civil service into the Punjab--finally returning with a livery husband and one daughter, Lucy, to settle down among the retired Anglo-Indians of Cheltenham. Clementina allied herself--no less pompous phrase is adequate--with Sir John Bentham of the Bank of England.

Remained, therefore, to carry on the literary tradition, only the eldest of the Wixtons, who married Maurice Cavendish, the Oxford don, presented him with a son, Ronald, and became "Julia Cavendish, the novelist."

It is a curious commentary on the ingratitude of our educated classes that the Rutland Cavendishes, who are at least as distinguished scholastically as the Bruntons in the social world, have to rely for their public fame almost entirely on Julia.

"Because in Julia Cavendish," as wrote her one-time friend, "Dot" Fancourt, "we have a really great Victorian. She stands for everything that is best of that bygone school: for a technique, now, alas! despised. Her novels are not perfect; they lack, perhaps, that warm touch of humanity which one finds in Charles Dickens, in William Makepeace Thackeray. But at least they are the novels of a true educated Englishwoman, reflections of a fine, faithful spirit. Even apart from her skill as a story-teller, Julia Cavendish, with her great belief in the traditional decencies, with her reverence for the teachings of the Protestant Church, for discipline and the subjugation of self to the common weal, towers like a rock above the wish-wash flood of cheap sex and cheaper psychoanalysis which obsess most young writers of this self-conscious Georgian epoch."

And with that, to our story!

CHAPTER I

1

Miracle, by St. Peter out of Three-to-a-Flush, a thoroughbred chestnut not quite good enough for steeple-chasing but considerably too good for that very quiet hunt, the Mid-Oxfordshire, was just out of his box, and pretty fresh. Looking over the flint wall which separated the well-kept gardens from the newly-swilled tiling of the stable-courtyard at Moor Park, the horse's questing eyes could just see, between clipped yew-trees, the red-brick façade of the modest Georgian house, its windows glinting in the March sunlight. Miracle knew that a footpath led straight across the gardens from the front door of the house to the white gate in the wall of his stable-courtyard; and suddenly, hearing a footfall on the path, he whinnied.

"All right, you," soothed Miracle's groom, a little lame man with tattooed forearms and a wry smile. The white gate clicked open, revealing Aliette.

Hector Brunton's wife had never accustomed herself to riding astride. Her small figure, in its short black habit and loose-fitting coat, looked modern enough. She wore the conventional bowler hat, white stock, and patent-leather riding-boots. Yet there was something old-fashioned about her, despite the fashionable get-up; something, to use an old-fashioned word, distinguished.

She closed the gate, and came slowly across the courtyard. Her yellow-gloved hands carried a thonged hunting-crop and a leather sandwich-case.

"You might fasten this on for me, Jenkins," said Aliette. The voice, low yet with each tone perfectly clear, held a hint of diffident shyness, alluring in so poised a creature.

While Jenkins busied himself with the sandwich-case and girthed up, Aliette held Miracle's head, gentling his nose with deft fingers, and explaining--half to herself and half to the horse--why she had brought no sugar for him.

"No sugar for gee-gees these days, Miracle. Not at the admiral's. Billy's mean about his sugar. Pity you don't drink port, Miracle dear. There's plenty of port."

She laughed at that; and it was as though you saw a woman transformed. Her face, smooth in repose, almost colorless save for the scarlet lips and the big wallflower-brown eyes under the dark lashes, broke into a hundred dimples. There were dimples at the corners of her mouth, in the cream of her oval cheeks, on the crinkled upper-lip under the small fine nose; even-if you looked carefully enough--behind the close-set ears.

Miracle began fidgeting; and laughter went out of the face, leaving it smooth, purposeful.

"Those girths are too tight, Jenkins."

"I don't think so, mum."

"Loosen them one hole, please. They can be tightened at the meet." Now Aliette spoke with the quiet certainty of one who understands both serving-men and horses; and with that same certainty--her orders obeyed--bent down to insert a finger between clipped skin and taut webbing. As the head under the hat-rim stooped to its task, her coiled hair showed vividest brown, almost the color of flames in sunlight, against the cream of her neck.

Miracle stood quietly enough while his mistress gathered up the reins; put her unspurred left into Jenkins's hand; mounted; arranged her apron; and thrust foot home into the stirrup. Then, for the sheer love of hunting that was in him, he tossed at the snaffle, hogged his back, and whisked round toward the big arched gateway which gave on to the highroad.

"Steady, old chap," soothed Aliette. She looked too light a rider for that raking horse; but her little hands settled him down easily enough. "I'm in plenty of time, aren't I, Jenkins?"

"Yes, mum." The groom pulled a silver watch from his moleskin waistcoat. "It hasn't gone nine yet, mum."

As she rode quietly on to the highroad Aliette saw, either side of her under the archway, Rear-Admiral Billy's stables--empty save for the admiral's black cob, a luggage pony, and a huge charger-like animal which, on rare occasions, carried her husband. Horses are even more expensive to keep than children nowadays!

The little woman and the big thoroughbred danced left-handed down the highroad; passed Admiral Billy's unpretentious lodge, half-hidden by yew-hedges, clipped with nautical precision to turrets of dark-green velvet; skirted Moor Pond; and took the bridle-path for Upper Moorsby.

It was a great morning of earliest March. The ground under hoof still sparkled here and there with surface frost; but there was no "bone" in it. Warmth softened the tang of the air. Above the bare tops of the trees between which they trotted, Aliette saw a thin cloudless sky. In the clearings, crisscrossed with uncarted larch-poles, primroses sparkled softly. Almost it seemed as though a purple bloom already showed on the young birches.

She pulled to a walk, thinking as she rode. Her thoughts came slowly, precisely: Aliette was not the type of woman who liked rushing her fences, either mentally or on horseback.

"Spring," she mused; "another spring! And hunting nearly over. Then there'll be nothing but tennis till next winter. Except 'the season.' How I dislike 'the season'! It wouldn't be so bad if one had children. One could watch them riding in the park."

A little ripple of dissatisfaction submerged her mind. She leaned forward and patted Miracle's arched neck. The clipped skin quivered in response.

"What's the use of making one's self unhappy?" thought Aliette. "All that's done with. Best forget."

She trotted on, rising squarely from the Mayhew saddle, hands like velvet on Miracle's bridle-reins. The path rose through fragrant woodlands; met the roadway. Now, at walk between leafless chestnuts, thought troubled her once more.

This must be the third springtime since her discovery of Hector's infidelity. She re-lived the scene: he, big and blustering, in the paneled dining-room at Lancaster Gate: herself quiet, controlled, but furious to the core. She heard herself saying to him: "You misunderstand me, Hector. It isn't a question of jealousy. It's a question of loyalty, and--cleanliness." That last word hurt the man. She had meant it to hurt.

Three years! It seemed a long time. Since then--despite occasional entreaty--she had withdrawn herself. She was too fastidious, perhaps. Suddenly, she wished

herself less fastidious. Her childlessness cried out in her, "Condone!" But she knew she could never condone. The time for that had gone by. Other infidelities, she knew, had followed the first. Hector was not the man to restrain his natural impulses. His very entreaties proved him more libertine than husband.

And Aliette rode on, through Upper Moorsby, red-cottaged behind tumble-down palings, disused cycle-shop at one end, shut church at the other; past Moorsby Place, ring-fenced and inhospitable; across the common toward High Moor.

There was love of the countryside in her heart as she rode, love of horse and love of hound, love for the quick scurry of hoofs on turf, for the white scuttle of rabbits to bramble. But there was no love for any man. That love she had never known. Marriage--as she still imagined marriage--meant affection: mutual regard, mutual interests, children. Especially children! If only she could have had children!

Putting thought away from her, Aliette let Miracle have his head, and cantered on between the gorse and the brambles.

Cantering, her heart sang to her. "Fox-hunting! Fox-hunting! Fox-hunting!" Padded Miracle's hoofs. She watched their shadow lolloping the brambles; watched the track ahead. And suddenly, at the bend of the track, she grew aware of a horse coming fast behind her. Miracle gathered himself for a gallop. Checking him, she heard a man's voice:

"I say, I'm most awfully sorry; but can you tell me if I'm right for the kennels?"

Man and beast, a great raw-boned, rat-tailed gray with a huge fiddle head and enormous withers, which she knew belonged to Ross Titterton, the horse-breaker at Key Hatch, hove fighting alongside. As though by mutual consent, they eased to a bumpy walk.

"Yes. This is quite right," said Aliette.

Examining the man, she saw a serious, clean-shaven face, eyes of pale clear blue, a broad forehead, a lean jowl, full lips, the nose prominent and almost pure Greek in shape, the chin determined, and the hair a curious goldy-gray as though bleached by the tropics.

"Thanks so much."

She judged him just over six feet and just under forty. He looked a horseman in his high black boots, dark cord breeches, pepper-and-salt cutaway coat, and buckskin gloves.

"I hope I didn't startle your horse. This brute of Ross's pulls like a steam-engine," he apologized with an almost imperceptible drawl.

"I know." Aliette smiled. "Mr. Titterton tried to sell him to us last year."

"Oh, I can't afford to keep horses," confessed the man. "This is only a loan. Ross was sergeant-major of our yeomanry crowd in Palestine. He offered me a ride once--and I've taken him at his word. You don't mind my jogging along with you like this, do you?"

"Of course not. We turn off to the right here."

They rode down, chatting with the easy camaraderie of fox-hunting folk, into sight of a village. It lay just below them, on a spur of the common--pointed church-spire, gray vicarage crouching at foot, among a blob of slate-roofed smoke-plumed cottages. Beyond it, the ground unrolled to a brown and green checker-board of square hedged fields, lozenged here and there with pale woodlands.

"That's High Moor Church," announced Aliette, pointing her whip at the spire.

"High Moor!" The man cogitated. "Isn't a fellow named Brunton the rector?"

"Yes. You speak as if you knew him."

"Only slightly. I see a good deal of his brother. The K.C., you know. I'm at the bar."

"Oh!" Aliette hesitated a moment. "I'm his wife."

"Whose! The parson's?"

"No. The K.C.'s."

Both laughed, feeling the conventional ice broken.

"My name's Cavendish, Mrs. Brunton. Ronald Cavendish. You probably know my mother--most people do."

"Julia Cavendish, the novelist. Of course I know of her; but we've never met. What a wonderful woman she must be!"

"She is." Ronnie's serious face lit. Usually shy with women, he felt quaintly at ease with this one. She seemed so sure of herself. And how she rode! That horse must take some steering. He wanted, suddenly, to see her across country; to send his gray pelting after her chestnut. Of her peculiar beauty, except as a horsewoman, he was not yet conscious.

But Aliette, even in those first moments of their meeting, knew herself stirred, ever so subtly, to interest. Julia Cavendish's son! Didn't she remember something, something rather decent about Julia Cavendish's son?

It flashed into her memory just as they made the lich-gate of High Moor Church. "Conspicuous gallantry . . . rallied his squadron under fire . . . great personal risk."

3

The sight of the Rev. Adrian disturbed further musing. He tittuped out of the rectory drive as they came by--a little clean-shaven creature, jovially wrinkled, his short legs in their canvas gaiters gripping the flanks of a cock-thropled bay mare with a bobbed tail and a roving eye. The Rev. Adrian on Thumbs Up contrived, somehow, to look far more like a keeper than the proverbial hunting parson.

"Morning, Aliette," he greeted. Then, before she could introduce Ronnie, "I say, didn't you and I meet at Jaffa?"

"We did." Ronnie laughed. "Delightful spot."

Explanations over, they rode three abreast past the slate-roofed cottages, the Rev. Adrian acknowledging with perfunctory bridle-hand the salutes of his parishioners; and veered left along a metaled road between high telegraph-poles.

"Are you stopping at Titterton's?" asked the parson, eying Ronnie's gray.

"No. He couldn't manage me a room. I'm putting up at the pub in Key Hatch just for the week-end."

"Do they do you well at the Bull?"

"Not badly."

They jogged on, Adrian and Ronnie chatting. Aliette rather silent. An open car, whose occupant waved greeting, purred past. Miracle shied, bumping the

gray.

"Dash that fellow Moss! Why can't he ride to the meet like a Christian?" muttered the parson.

Ahead of them, on the straight white of the road, they could see various other horsemen and horsewomen, a slow-moving dogcart, and two or three figures a-wheel. They overhauled and passed a flaxen-haired young farmer, very red of face and waistcoat, on an unclipped four-year-old; they added to their cavalcade a surly-eyed woman with weatherbeaten features who straddled a ewe-necked black, and answered to the inappropriate name of "Lady Helen." They came upon the dogcart, and Alette reined alongside for a chat. The parson and Lady Helen jogged on.

"Mr. Cavendish--Mrs. O'Riordan," introduced Alette.

The lady in the dogcart appeared to fill it, dwarfing the man at her side. She was a vast, voluptuous blond, full-nosed and full-lipped, slightly too well tweeded for the country. Her blue eyes, as they surveyed Alette and Ronnie, held that peculiar twinkle common to all over-sexed women; they seemed to be pondering the problem, "Has Alette at last found a lover?"

Mrs. O'Riordan herself, after a hectic but--with one exception--camouflaged career, had recently settled down to her second (and, she believed, final) adventure in matrimony. The "exception," a semi-literary, semi-theatrical Irish land-owner who drove the dogcart, had caused her considerable trouble to capture; trouble which involved an elopement, a year of uncertainty, a brace of arranged divorces, various columns of undesirable publicity in the Sunday papers, and the loss of several influential acquaintances. During these troubles Alette, an old school-friend, had championed Mary O'Riordan's cause; and earned, by so doing, if not gratitude at least a very tolerable counterfeit thereof.

Ronnie's horse, bucking violently at a passing cyclist, interrupted conversation. The riders trotted on.

"Nice man," commented Mary O'Riordan.

"Good-looking woman, Alette," remarked her husband.

Mary O'Riordan eyed her new male possession jealously. He was very attractive to the sex, this dark-haired, lantern-jowled Irishman she had captured from his first wife. It displeased her to hear him admire other women--

especially women like Aliette, whose poised slimness set her own hoydenish bulk at such disadvantage.

4

It is a fifty-year-old custom of the Mid-Oxfordshire Hunt--the pack, started by old Squire Petersfield of Great Petersfield just before Waterloo, has changed hands many times but never failed its subscribers of their two days a week, with one "bye" monthly--that the first meet in March should be at the Kennels, an unpretentious building of sandstone and concrete which shelters under the black slope of Petersfield Woods.

Already, half a mile away, Ronnie could see two blobs of pink, and hounds--a runnel of moving white--pouring out of the gate their kennelman held open. Hounds and pink disappeared from view as Aliette led off the road up a sandy track between high blackthorns, and kicked Miracle into a canter.

Following, Ronnie's pulses tingled. He hunted so rarely; but always, hunting, this zest got into his blood. Only to-day, somehow, the zest seemed heightened. It was as though the cantering figure ahead typified the game. He felt drawn to her, drawn after her round the bends of the track, drawn instinctively, drawn irresistibly.

All the last four miles of highroad they had been meeting people. Now, just for a moment, they seemed utterly alone. And he knew, abruptly, that he wanted to be alone with this woman; that he desired her companionship.

They came to a locked gate. He dismounted, put his back against it, and lifted it off the hinges for her. She smiled down at him, "Thank you, Mr. Cavendish." He noticed, for the first time, how laughter dimpled the cream of her cheeks. They could hear other people coming up the track.

The gray waltzed to Ronnie's remounting. Aliette watched him swing to saddle, appraising--as she imagined--only his horsemanship. But now, in her too, zest stirred, a strange new zest not entirely attributable to the chase.

Three other riders trotted through the gateway, dispelling illusion. "This way," said the wife of Hector Brunton, K.C.

They ambled, side by side, diagonally across rabbit-bitten pasture; ambled, single-file, through a gap in the hedge-rows; struck an uphill bridle-path; and arrived, almost last, at the meet.

On the flat strip of grass behind the kennels--the direct road to them zigzags steeply down through Petersfield Woods--Will Oakley, the huntsman, his crab-apple face a trifle less saturnine than usual under its cap-peak, was just getting ready to throw off. Fifteen couple of fairly level hounds desisted from their rolling and watched him eagerly.

Colonel Sanders, the M.F.H., a heavy old-fashioned soldier, white-mustached, in a heavy old-fashioned hunting-kit (his special low-crowned bell-toppers were the despair of a certain aristocratic hatter in St. James's Street) had just finished his inevitable pow-wow with the kennelman. Ross Titterton (the whippety ex-sergeant-major came early, bent on a little profitable horse-copery) stood, bridle over arm, by Sir Siegfried Moss, an immaculate scarlet-coated, black-mustached young politician who rode, by horse-show standards, magnificently.

The Rev. Adrian, no thruster, was finishing an early cigar to be followed by an early nip from his silver flask. Lady Helen had engaged the whipper-in in a reluctant monosyllabic conversation--Jock Herbert was a shy, moon-faced young man from the North--on the eternal question of scent. The remainder of the field, about sixty in all, stood in equine groups of threes and fours a little away from hounds.

Mrs. O'Riordan's dogcart, Sir Siegfried's car and second horseman ("Must hunt in one's own constituency occasionally, even if it is a provincial pack," pronounced that very astute young politician), three flappers and a brace of young men on push-bikes, Mrs. Colonel Sanders and a trio of hard-bitten daughters afoot, a farm hand or two, and the socialist doctor of Key Hatch (who was on a walking-tour with his knapsacked wife and had come quite by accident on this "parasitic sport-crazy gathering of the capitalist class") completes the picture.

The M.F.H. greeted Mrs. Brunton, whom he secretly thought an adjectival nice little woman, adjectivally too pretty for that dimmed husband of hers, and gave orders to throw off.

Low ripple of black, white, and tan between high bobs of black and scarlet, pack, whip, and huntsman circled the dark of Petersfield Woods and headed down-hill in the March sunlight. Bay, black, and brown against green turf, followed the field. Very last, fighting-mad for a gallop, boring sideways along the slope, came the fiddle-headed gray. And "Confound the brute!" muttered

Ronald Cavendish, seeing, over one shoulder, a slim black figure on a big chestnut; a slim black figure which seemed suddenly more important than the business of the chase.

But Aliette, watching hounds ahead, had utterly forgotten that one strange flash of premonition.

5

"Not much luck so far, Mrs. Brunton."

They had been at it nearly two blank hours; trotting from covert to tenantless covert; waiting vainly at covert-side for the "welcome whimper" of hound to scent, for the full music which follows the whimper, for the twang of the huntsman's horn and the "view-halloo" of fox's departure.

"We ought to find here," said Aliette.

Ronnie's gray, at last mastered to good manners, stood quietly beside her chestnut at the west corner of Parson's Copse. To the left of them a ditch and an elder-hedge screened the wood. All along the ditch and the elder-hedge other horsemen and horsewomen were waiting. Through the hedge they caught glimpses of browned bracken, of dun tree-boles, of a green ride here and a clump of dead bramble there. In front, the mole-heaved turf crested in shadow to a clouding sky. To the right and below them Parson's Hill sloped to an open valley country: first a strip of ill-fenced waste-land, a white road; then hedged grass-fields, young wheat, brown plows, a gleam of water; beyond, a church-tower, squat among poplars; further still, rising turf and twin hills dark with gorse.

Now, from the other side of the wood, they heard Will Oakley's voice: "Leu in, Ranger! Leu in." A whip cracked. They caught the soft twang of a horn.

Life stirred in the wood: a wary pigeon rose blue through branches; bracken rustled as a bunny sprinted to hole; a blackbird popped out of the hedge, popped in again. They were wise to hounds moving in covert; saw white sterna waving through brown bracken; heard a whimper, another whimper, the horn again. Dubiously, a hound gave tongue; then a second hound. The horses under them twitched excitement. Something red and furtive whisked across the ride. They heard Oakley's echoing voice: "Yooi push him up, push him up"; heard a touch of his horn; caught the flicker of his scarlet among tree-boles.

And suddenly, the pack crashed to deep-toned melody. The copse rang to it. The horses under them began to dance. The whole copse was a crash of hound-music, now drawing away, now nearing them.

"Fox all right this time," said Ronald Cavendish; and even as he spoke, Aliette, watching the rise in front, saw a low shadow streak across the shadows and disappear.

Then, simultaneously, Jock Herbert bellowed from the south corner of the wood: "Tally-ho! Gone away, gone away, gone away"; a hound or two in full cry leaped down out of covert fifty yards ahead; the colonel's voice roared, "Keep back, gentlemen, keep back," behind them; fourteen couple of crazy hounds streamed down after one; and Will Oakley's roan came thundering up the ride, crashed through the hedge, over the ditch, and up the crest after a pack you could have covered under the "pocket-handkerchief," without which no reporter considers his account of a run complete.

The rest was a mad scurry of eight hoofs to skyline, glimpse of a low fence, flown without thought, of the hounds pouring down-hill, of Will Oakley, horn still in hand, tally-hoing them on.

"Now where, in the name of all that's holy," mused the Rev. Adrian, "will that fox make for?" Most of the field were already away: he could see them galloping alongside the wood, topping the fence at crest-line. To the Rev. Adrian's eyes it looked as though they were leaping into eternity.

Himself and a few wise ones, Ross Titterton included, had waited; and so waiting, they saw that the fox must have circled for the valley.

Hounds, going far faster than the parson approved, crossed the white road below him. He put his cock-thropled nag to a cautious canter, and bumped downwards across the wasteland. Ross Titterton passed him at a furious gallop; Lady Helen gave him a lead through a gap in the dilapidated fencing. He could see hounds beyond the road: the master and Will Oakley were well up; close behind him rode his brother's wife, Jock Herbert, and that "young Cavendish" whom he remembered at Jaffa.

So far, Aliette and Ronnie had scarcely spoken. The dog-fox had gone away too suddenly, the ground beyond that first flown fence had been too full of

rabbit-holes, for anything except concentration on the immediate job. But even in that first moment they had been aware of comradeship. Their thoughts, if either could have uttered them, would have been: "I'm glad we were together--just in that place, just at that moment."

Now, as they swept side by side across the twenty-acre grass--gray pulling like mad; chestnut scarcely extended; wind of their going in their faces; field behind and hounds in full cry ahead--the man spoke:

"We got away well."

"Rather." Aliette, drawing in front, smiled at him over her left shoulder. He let the gray have his head. Hounds topped their hedge, flashed on. They saw Will Oakley's roan fly over; saw the master's scarlet back and bell-topper lift disappear; and cleared the stake-and-bound side by side.

More grass. They grew aware of other riders behind them: Sir Siegfried, very pleased with himself; Ross Titterton, riding jealous to be up; Lady Helen.

The next fence was blackthorn, thick as night, not a gap in it. The hounds, spreading out, scrambled through. Will Oakley's horse balanced himself like a good hunter; jumped; and took it clean. Jock Herbert followed him over. The colonel, hat crammed to pate, galloped at it; blundered through somehow.

Sir Siegfried, on his bay, shot past Ronnie. Aliette, easing Miracle for his leap, saw the self-satisfied smile wiped from the politician's face as he took off; felt Miracle rise under her; landed safe on plow; turned her head to glimpse a big gray horse in mid-air; and, turning, heard the thud of a fall as Sir Siegfried's four-hundred-guinea bay pecked, slid, and rolled over sideways, wrenched to disaster by clumsy hands.

"Good toss, that," laughed Ronald Cavendish as they cantered slow over the heavy plow. "Who is he?"

"The member for Mid-Oxfordshire." Aliette, too, laughed: it had been a great little burst from covert, and the heart in her--the heart that loved hounds and horses--still beat to it.

"Good fox," said Ronnie.

"Isn't he!" said Aliette.

He was! By now four good fields separated its brushed quarry from the loud

pack that labored--sterns and heads level--across sliced loam.

"Devil take the stuff!" muttered Colonel Sanders, watching hounds draw away from him. And "Thank God for a gate!" muttered Colonel Sanders as he made for it.

Huntsman and whip, too, were making for that gate. Aliette and Ronnie followed their lead, the gray plunging across the holding furrows like a ship in a storm. Looking back, they saw the pink politician struggling with his horse, half a dozen black-coats safely landed, Lady Helen barging in their wake.

A bumpkin in corduroys at the open gate shouted the master to "mind they wheatfields." The colonel damned his impertinence, and rode on after Will Oakley. Aliette and Ronnie shot single file down the trodden path between pricking corn, and flew the stile at end of it.

The pack, overrunning scent, had thrown up half-way across the next wheatfield. Casting themselves to pick up the line, hounds--noses to ground, sterns high--hunted on their own. Huntsman, whip and master, motionless on their horses, glad of the breather, sat watching. Suddenly Ranger feathered with eager stem, whimpered, and gave tongue. They were off again--Ranger in front, Audacious at Ranger's flank, a quiet smile on Will Oakley's face as he cantered after them.

"Pretty work," said Ronald Cavendish. He and Aliette still led the field; but the moment's check had given Ross Titterton and half a dozen others their chance. They came now, full split after gray and chestnut, across the young wheat. Among them, though the wheat was his own, galloped the red-faced, red-waistcoated farmer--and the Rev. Adrian, whose eye for country had compensated for his dislike of jumping.

Something inside Aliette, some curious instinct, vague and incomprehensible, seemed to resent those crowding horsemen. She was aware, dimly, that she would rather be alone, alone with the man who rode at her side. She wanted hounds to mend their pace, to run mute on a breast-high scent, clean away from the field. She wanted to feel Miracle extended under her, to hear the gray thudding after.

But now the hounds hunted slowly, puzzling out their line across a sheep-fouled pasture. As Miracle sailed a low fence, Aliette saw Key Hatch Church,

squatting among poplars a mile to their right; a plowman, hat off by halted team, pointing the line; some foot-followers in a lane on the left; and in front, six fields away, the sudden gleam of water.

Then the pace mended. The pack raced in full cry to Parson's Brook; plunged in, plunged through; and checked dead on the far side. Will Oakley, putting spurs to his horse, got over. Jock Herbert just managed it. Pulling up this side the brook, Alette and the rest of the first flighters watched the huntsman as he cast hounds forward.

"There's a ford half a mile down," spluttered the Rev. Adrian; and made for it, followed by Lady Helen, Sir Siegfried, his hat dented, his pink plow-plastered, who had at last managed to catch up, the red-waistcoated farmer, and half a dozen others.

Ronnie glanced at Alette. He had no idea if his horse would face water or not. The brook, broadish under rotting banks, looked formidable; and it was almost like taking it in cold blood--this waiting for hounds to pick up the scent again. All the same, he knew that if Miracle went over he would get the gray across if he had to swim for it.

"Better make for the ford, Mrs. Brunton," called the colonel. He and Ross Titterton galloped off.

They were alone again: two ordinary orderly English people, a little dumb in each other's presence, both moved by very extraordinary thoughts, thoughts to which they were quite incapable of giving exact expression.

Alette's red lips had pursed to stubborn determination. "I hate funking things," thought Alette. To her, subconsciously, it was as though the water typified something more than a mere obstacle encountered in the day's hunting. She knew Miracle could jump it. Neither she nor Miracle would "funk things." Then why the thought? "Because," some voice in her gave clear answer, "he might."

"It isn't as bad as it looks," said the voice of the man at her side. "I'll give you a lead over."

And at that the voice in her began laughing. She felt unaccountably comforted. "Why should I mind?" she thought.

Beyond the brook, at the big bullfinch on the far side of the meadow, a hound

feathered. "Yoi-doit, then. Yoi-doit," came Will Oakley's voice. The hound gave tongue, owing to the line; Aliette saw Ronnie take his gray short by the head, ram his spurs home, and ride straight at the water.

Miracle raced after the gray, catching up with every stride. Side by side, they galloped the fifty yards to the brook, rose at it, glimpsed it deep under them, flew it, landed.

Landing, she knew him safely over. Racing on, she heard the thud of his horse-hoofs behind. Her heart thrilled to the horse-hoofs; it seemed, suddenly, as though some string had snapped in her heart. The pack in front was utterly mad: she heard a burst of hound-music from beyond the bullfinch, knew that they were running a breast-high scent, running clean away from her. She gave Miracle his head, shielded her eyes with her crop-arm, crashed through the hedge, heard the gray crash through behind her.

Now she saw the hounds again, a close ripple of black, white, and tan, eight hundred yards away across post-and-railed common land. Miracle went after them, drawing up stride by stride, steeplechasing his fences. But the man on the gray would not be denied. A rail smashed behind her. He was following, following. He mustn't catch up with her--must never catch up with her.

The ground rose. Not very far ahead she saw a dark-red dot making for the gorse-clad hills. She heard Will Oakley's "Halloo! Halloo!" as he capped hounds on. They ran nearly mute now, sterns straight, hackles up. The fox vanished from view as they raced up-hill; reappeared again.

But Aliette was no longer aware of the chase. She could barely realize that hounds were running into their fox, that the two pink coats twenty yards ahead of her were whip and huntsman. All her conscious mind was at her left shoulder, listening, listening to the horse-hoofs behind. Could it be that she herself was the quarry of those thudding hoofs, quarry of the man who drove those thudding hoof-beats onward? He mustn't catch up with her! He must never catch up with her! And yet could it be that some instinct in her, some instinct earth-old and primeval, wanted to be caught?

That same instinct had been at work in the man on the fiddle-headed horse, the man who rode with his hands low and his teeth clenched, sitting down to his job as though he would go through Oxfordshire and out the other side in pursuit of Aliette. He had been aware of it, dimly, as they waited by the brook;

aware of it, furiously, as he jumped. But now, instinct was blurred by the actual chase. He had come out for a "good gallop"; he was having his gallop. His feet were jammed home to the hunting-heel, his hat rammed to his head. His eye took in and loved the whole scene: the sky clouding blue-gray above them, the shadows skimming green turf below, the speeding pink of the hunt-coats behind the speeding black, white, and tan of the pack, the flame of gorse on the crest-line ahead.

Yet always, as he galloped, the man knew an urge stronger than the mere urge of the chase; knew that there was some dim reason why he had waited at Parson's Brook on a strange horse instead of going full split for the ford; why he must ride on--on and on--ride as he had never ridden before--ride the gray's shoes off, rather than lose touch with that black-habited figure in front. God! How well she went! How magnificently she went!

Will Oakley was not worrying about either of them. For once in their lives the Mid-Oxfordshire hounds were going like the Belvoir or the Cottesmore. Their fox was sinking before them. Will Oakley knew, as his roan topped the green bank which runs like an earthwork round the foot of Gorse Hill, that he would view "the varmint" close; viewed him.

No need, now, to lift hounds from scent: they, too, saw that draggled down-brushed shape, making its last effort; and crashed to fiercest music. Will Oakley hallooed them on, and Jock Herbert. "Yooi to him, Ranger," they hallooed, "Yooi to him, Audacious." Reynard swerved snarling from Ranger's teeth; Audacious snapped, missed; Victory rolled him over; massed pack were on him, mad for blood, as Will Oakley flung himself to ground.

Aliette, pulling up by instinct, saw the huntsman's scarlet ringed with leaping hounds; heard his joyful "Tear him and eat him, tear him and eat him"; and came back to sanity as the gray galloped up, halted, and stood with steaming flanks and steaming nostrils while his rider slid from saddle.

6

"By Jove, Mrs. Brunton, that was perfectly great!"

"Thanks to your lead over Parson's Brook."

They stood by their sweating horses, two perfectly normal people, rather pleased with their prowess, quite childishly delighted with the brush which Will

Oakley held out to her.

"T isn't often we gives you a run like that, ma'm," said the huntsman; and his saturnine face might have been a boy's, as he produced a piece of whipcord from his breeches pocket and began fastening the brush to Aliette's saddle-ring.

Various belated riders, the wily parson, the panting colonel, and the chagrined politician among them, came up and began congratulating. Sandwich-boxes were produced, flasks, cigarettes. Sir Siegfried looked at his watch; and started in to consider what degree of exaggeration might be warranted in subsequent reports of their day. It was nearly half-past two o'clock--call it three. They had begun to draw Parson's Wood at about one--make it half-past twelve. It is to be feared that the hour's run, by the time it was reported to Sir Siegfried's connubial fireside, had suffered considerable extension.

But neither Aliette nor Ronnie, as they walked their horses side by side into Key Hatch village (Gorse Hill is twelve miles from kennels, and the colonel, well satisfied with his kill, had ordered the pack home), spoke of the run.

Indeed, they hardly spoke at all. And when she said good-by to him at the open posting-doorways of the Bull, neither remembered to ask the other where or whether they should meet again. Which forgetfulness, thought Aliette as she turned Miracle's head for home, was the strangest part of a strangely joyous day.

But Ronald Cavendish, watching her mounted figure disappear down the village street, thought only of their ride together.