Proof

Naomi Royde−Smith

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Nobody ever wondered why the Blundells came to marry each other, because Agnes Blundell, who had a little surface charm and no reticences, told new acquaintances all about it in the first half−hour. This habit of hers was recognised as a joke among their acquaintances. As Blundell's reputation grew, some of his friends took it rather more seriously.

In the summer of 1914 young George Poyster and little Benfleet, who had never met the Blundells before, were asked to Ranmore for the same week−end, and each bet the other five pounds that he would evade Mrs. Blundell's famous recital. Hugh Ormsby held the stakes. He had just got his private secretaryship and was working with Blundell on the administration of the Home Secretary's new Bill. He was drawn into the affair before he'd quite realised what it was all about, and Sunday afternoon found him feeling like the worst kind of traitor.

Most of the house party had joined in the betting, and there was a great deal of money on Benfleet, of whom Agnes Blundell was taking no notice. Ormsby always believed that Lady Denham guessed how her party was amusing itself. If she did she certainly disapproved.

Anyway, she sent Agnes and Benfleet off together after tea to church at Pinfolds. It is a seven−mile drive to Pinfolds, and the effect of evensong, sunset, and "The day Thou gavest" on Agnes made assurance doubly sure. Benfleet told us afterwards that he had kept it off till the return journey.

George Poyster, rich and relieved, for he had not in the least wanted to be told, asked what the story was, and he was given it in chorus and antiphone.

"By George!" said little Benfleet as the phrases rattled round him. 'That's just what she did say, called him her dear old bear, said she was fastidious to a fault. That's why she'd never married before. Does she always tell it that way?"

Ormsby was glad to escape into the garden with his shame, under cover of the uproar that answered Benfleet.

Mr. and Mrs. Blundell were walking together on the terrace. As Ormsby joined them—he couldn't have avoided it, coming as he did straight through the library window—Agnes Blundell's plaintive voice was reiterating an acrimonious note: and, after all, Graham, I am your wife." His reply: "But, my dear girl, that has nothing to do with it. I am not allowed to tell any one," reached Hugh before they saw him. But Agnes drew no veil.

"Graham is so secretive, Mr. Ormsby. I know he knows what the Home Secretary is going to do with that fascinating de Lorges; I expect you do too," and the horrified young man, shaken, wounded even, to the quick of his earnest, self−conscious discretion, almost admitted that he did.

It was probably from the dizzy moment when he might have told (a weakness she must have divined, though she never actually profited by it) that Hugh began to hate Agnes Blundell. Till then he had only disliked and avoided her. We all knew that he worshipped Graham. Some of us were grateful to the boy for the passionate correctness of the atmosphere with which he surrounded his chief. It seemed to compensate, not too belatedly we might hope, for that long tale of small annoying leakages which had clouded Blundell's career. Until that night on the terrace at Ranmore Hugh had shared the general belief that Graham could and habitually did withstand her inquisitive and loquacious egoism. There had only been one occasion when it was clear that he must have talked. It happened during the second year of their marriage. The matter.was hushed up, the leakage was indeed only of minor importance, but it cost Blundell the promotion which was then due to him. That was ten years before Hugh came down from Oxford and passed brilliantly into the Civil Service as Blundell had done before him.

But that evening Hugh thought he had heard a note of defeat in Blundell's patient voice. "My dear girl," it sighed in his drowsy ears as he lay awake through the green twilight of the mid−summer small hours, "that has nothing to do with it—nothing to do with it," and then desperately, ashamedly, "I am not allowed to tell any one." He had said it; he must have said it so often before—"hundreds of times," shivered poor Hugh, turning on his pillow.

At breakfast next morning Agnes was coquettish.

"Oh, Mr. Ormsby," she rolled her fine eyes at him, "you were discreet last night! Wait till you are married!" She developed the theme on the journey back to town, having announced to Ormsby's mute dismay that he was to see her safely home. "Part of your official duty. Graham is motoring up with Sir Edward Denham, so you will have to look after poor little me. Graham wouldn't be happy if he didn't know how well you do it. He cares so, still, after all these years.

Isn't it odd?"

When he put her into the taxi at Victoria, Mrs. Blundell gave him the address of a fashionable sorcerer. "No, no, not a palmist, a psychometrist. He holds things—letters, handkerchiefs, buttons, anything—and tells me the most wonderful things about them. I always go straight to him when I've been staying away or am in any difficulty. Mr. Ormsby"—and she leant over the closed door— "would you get me a letter—an envelope even—of de Lorges'? You must have crowds of them in his dossier."

"And that woman must be forty if she's an hour," thought Hugh as he reeled away. He was still in those early twenties when it seems that age ought to bring wisdom. But he was wrong. Agnes was only six months older than her husband, and Blundell would be thirty−eight that July.

It was, as a matter of fact, on his birthday a few weeks later that Graham Blundell met Edie Pitland. She was half−sister of that mysterious little beauty whom Sir James Holsworthy married so suddenly, and who certainly ought to have been in musical comedy, though no one had ever seen her on any stage. All that was known of Lady Holsworthy's past was uncertain, even her maiden name. It might, of course, have been Pitland, but Edie was only her half−sister, and Edie was only seen occasionally during her holidays, which were always spent at Holsworthy House.

The girl stayed there generally alone, for the Holsworthys only went to Devonshire in August.

It was not easy to question Edie. It wasn't that she wouldn't answer questions, but her answers never seemed to lead to any definite story, and no one was allowed to talk with her for long.

Lady Holsworthy needed the undivided attention of all her guests, if only to pick up the "h's" she dropped so softly and unexpectedly from her pretty, careful speech. Edie's "h's" were quite safe.

Indeed, her quiet pose; the queer radiance of her absorption in a world of her own; the unresentful dignity of her "Good night, Madeleine," when she was sent to bed—or at any rate to a solitary schoolroom dinner, she a tall nineteen with her hair up—only made the puzzle harder.

Madeleine Holsworthy was so like a canary that it was possible to believe she really had forgotten who and where and what she was five years ago: but Edie's candour was not without shrewdness, and her silences were as intelligent as her speech was easy and graceful. It is difficult to suppose that she did not tell Blundell all she knew of herself and of the sister by whose beauty she was so visibly dazzled, before they parted, but she certainly confided in no other friend.

Blundell did not know the Holsworthys, and they were still in London when he went down to Hunter's Inn for a fortnight's golf in the first week of July. Agnes was doing her annual rest−and−beauty cure in the seclusion of a fashionable and very expensive toilet specialist's After−Season Retreat. As she explained loud and wide every year, "I owe it to Graham to keep my complexion and figure perfect; but he does miss me so dreadfully. He writes every day, sometimes twice a day, like Cyrano de Bergerac. I wire if there is no letter from him on my breakfast tray."

Graham used this yearly liberty to make notes and photographs for his studies of wild−bird life which appeared occasionally in Scribner's.

On the morning of his birthday he woke rather earlier than usual after a very vivid dream. As a rule he slept soundly and had no memory of dreaming that outlasted his bath. Agnes's voluble records of astounding visions and prophetic warnings given to her in sleep had bred in him an active avoidance of the whole subject of dreams, an evasion which extended to his thoughts of his own rare experiences. But this particular dream was pleasant and

clear. He remembered it with interest as he shaved. The cliff path which he had followed in his dreams till it brought him to a ledge where a sea gull was standing beside a nest screamingly full of newly−hatched youngsters was, in its beginning, the track he had noticed above Watermouth three days before.

It wanted two hours to breakfast−time when he was dressed, and the morning light was perfect for photography on the north cliff. It amused him to go out to the place he had seen so clearly in sleep.

He reached the place and found the nest and the parent bird so exactly as he had dreamed them that his mind went wondering beneath his careful attention, absorbed in manipulating lens and shutter, to know whether he were not dreaming still.

The click of the exposure sent the great black−back wheeling down to the water in slow, narrowing planes between the walls of cliff that held the little bay. When he had watched the gull settle beyond the wash of the incoming tide, Graham turned and saw Edie Pitland at his elbow, watching too.

"I've just dreamt that someone was photographing Blackie's third family," she said.

Afterwards, when he told Hugh (and it was eventually imperative to tell someone), Graham confessed that for one moment he had revolted against the miasmic suggestion that he too had participated in some abhorred occult prevision. It was like an echo of Agnes. "I'm so terribly psychic, you know. I seem to feel everything that's going to happen to me." He felt that she was poisoning the truth of the clear morning for him with the mendacities of her scented curtained sleep.

But Edie's magic was a swift antidote. After her first smiling acknowledgment of the dream as an introduction to this stranger, her interest was all for his business. They climbed together to a place secure and reasonably hidden, where they watched for the appearance of the arrant mother.

"I made this frock myself," she told him, "because all my other morning ones are pink or white, and of course that frightens them away. I found this stuff at a little draper's by the bridge at Barnstaple. Wasn't it luck!"

There are among Blundell's papers photographs of hawks' nests, of gulls asleep and on the wing; of many birds busied about their private lives, marked "Culborne" and "Oare," "Shallowford"

and "Woodhanger" in Edie's round, unformed writing, and two snapshots of Edie herself, tall and wind−blown in the home−made, neutral−coloured frock, taken, one at Desolate, the other on Ilkerton Bridge, and dated by Blundell, "St. James's Day, 1914." Other records of that fortnight.there are none. Blundell burned all her letters before he went with his regiment to Flanders in 1917.

St. James's Day fell on the last Saturday of July in the year of the War, and in the late afternoon of that day Blundell was telegraphed for to return to Whitehall. He drove to Minehead in the early hours of Sunday morning to get the London train. Edie went with him as far as Porlock Weir, where they changed horses and had breakfast together. She probably walked back to Lynmouth alone. She was young and strong and a great walker.

A month later she was doing V.A.D. work at the Exeter hospital, and early in November, 1916, she died of Mediterranean fever in Malta. Hugh Ormsby, who saw her in London before she left, thought her the loveliest thing alive, but the photo graph Lady Holsworthy sent to all the papers with a little account of her work and death shows a rather severe young face unbecomingly surrounded by the hat and uniform coat of a Red Cross official. Blundell's snapshots give nothing more definite than the grace of the girl's pose in an arrested movement.

It was because of the letters that Hugh had to be told. What exactly Blundell said to Edie to persuade her to secrecy Hugh never heard. Possibly he laid the excuse on his long hours (in those early weeks he often slept at the Home Office) and on the possible confusion between private and official correspondence. But whatever he said, it was successful, and Edie's few letters were addressed to him under cover to his private secretary.

Hugh took a deep though smothered pleasure in the knowledge that here was something he could hide from Agnes. His love for Graham and the one sight he had had of Edie had been enough to vanquish any flickering doubt or possible scruple about serving him in this un−official direction.

So, when the news came from Malta it was to Hugh that the envelope containing Edie's last faintly pencilled message to Blundell was addressed by the nurse, who enclosed it in a kind, discreet official note.

"I don't quite know for whom she meant this," wrote the good woman, "but as it seems to be a quotation from the classics, I send it to you and not to Lady Holsworthy."

Hugh, setting his teeth, had offered to take Agnes to the Russian Ballet that night, and had by his assiduity during the next few days in providing amusement and distraction for her at Graham's free hours, aroused an only too readily kindled relief.

"That ridiculous boy is falling in love with me," she proclaimed, "and my dear old bear is too sure of me to be jealous, but I'm afraid I may really have to tell him in self−protection. Cæsar's wife, you know."

At the end of a week she confided to Hugh that Graham was sleeping badly.

"I am so sensitive I lie awake in the next room and feel him awake, too. I go in several times during the night to see how he is getting on, just as if he were indeed my—little—baby." It was in this way—softly and with a pause between each word—that Agnes had lately begun referring to the fact that she had for years refused to have a child.

"I am afraid he's keeping something from me," she said a day or two later. "I wish I knew what it was," and Hugh went blind for a moment with the vision of Edie's pale face and eyes as she came to him after saying good−bye to Graham the day she crossed to France.

"After all," Agnes went on in the voice he had heard at Ranmore, "I am his wife. I ought to know. But I'm sure to find out."

Then she had an idea. "I think he must be grieving for some one who's been killed in this horrible war. But he's grown very secretive. It would do him so much good to talk about it. I.shall persuade him to go to one of dear Mrs. Bartram's seances. She has been almost miraculously successful in recalling the souls of those who have passed over to console their dear ones. Indeed, dear Hugh, one of the lessons of this awful time is—don't you feel it?—that there is, there can be no death."

After this Hugh spoke to Graham. He had all the conventional young man's contempt for such experiments as were beginning to make Mrs. Bartram's Sunday evenings notorious; but there was no doubt that some queer things did happen in her drawing−room, and, if any of the tales which the most unexpected people told were true, there was ground for believing that it was possible, at any rate for the quite recently dead, to make some sign to the living who demanded it. Hugh did not like the idea, and he wouldn't have had anything to do with it for himself: but he was afraid of what might happen if Agnes, who certainly was a bit odd with her dreams and intuitions, were to put her suggestion into practice. Graham's state, too, was causing him deep anxiety, and Hugh privately agreed with Agnes that it might do him good to be made to talk.

After the first heartbreaking attempts at opening the subject had been accomplished, Graham gave way. Hugh, dumb with pity and apprehension, listened to Blundell's hungering thoughts as his desires drove him towards the very dangers against which it had been his hope to warn him.

For the first time there was open speech from Graham. Hugh had done what he was asked to do and known no more than he couldn't help seeing. Now he heard all, even the tale of the gull's nest and Edie's grey−brown frock.

"I expect it was a hideous thing really, badly made and an unbecoming colour. but wasn't it a lovely child that wore it, and for a lovely reason? She'd meet me somewhere on the moors and lie curled up in the bracken close to the path, so that I'd almost tread on her as I came, the colour hid her so. How can she be dead? She was so near to Life, not hidden away from it by herself and all the gossip and furniture that our women crowd among. You'd think nothing could quench her, she was so clear and strong. And I never told her that I'd have given her the whole world. I told her nothing. We were just together, and now I feel that I cheated her by not saying what it was her right to know. She was so—no, it isn't humble, so much interested away from herself she couldn't have guessed what she was to me—what she must have been to any man who knew her as I did. I'd spent so many years appeasing Agnes with words that meant nothing, that I wouldn't say what I was meaning, for the first time in my life, even when we said good−bye. It wasn't that I felt I had no right to tell her. I had as much right to tell her as she had to know what she was to me. If I could tell her now I would. I'd even go to that witches' kitchen in Marlborough Road if I thought it would give her one minute's joy. But she'd not come there of her own free will. And if I had the power I'd not drag her back from whatever place she is making holy now. She'd not have died if she couldn't have done without me. I've thought of it again and again. Suppose I did go? And suppose my going again let Agnes in? She'd question God, or the devil, if she thought they knew a secret that she could spread broadcast. I'm so mad I looked up the story of Saul and the witch. What do you think was the first thing the poor old spook said when she had raised him? 'Why hast thou disquieted me to bring me up?' Edie might say that. . . . There'd be no hope in Death if it were sure that we could be made to give answers out of our graves."

That night Hugh took Agnes to The Boy for the second time. "I simply scream at Berry," she said. "Thank Heaven I have a sense of humour."

When Blundell had at last freed himself from Whitehall and gone to France, and, after the fashion of desperate

men, was coming untouched through the worst fighting, Hugh began to.realise that there were others beside himself who took a grave view of the case. Sir Edward Denham, missing his astute and competent aid, muttered, "Poor fellow! Poor fellow! He will be much happier away.

When the news that Blundell had been killed during an air−raid came through it provoked references to the celibacy of the blessed from the most unexpected people. It seemed to Hugh that those who really cared for Blundell were glad he was dead.

Agnes was really overcome with grief for a week. But by the time Graham's kit reached London she was exacting daily sympathy from Hugh, and quoting the condolences he hated himself for giving to anyone who had time to listen to her. Graham had carried a pocketbook containing her photograph, and a rather large piece of white heather she had bought for him in Bond Street. In another pocket, so wrote the chaplain who was with him when he died, they found a small photograph of a gull's nest on a ledge of rock above the sea. Graham had asked for it and had scrawled some words on it when he could speak no longer:

"Hieme et aestate, et prope et procul, usque dum vivam et ultra."

"This seems to be poetry," said Agnes. "Can you explain it to me?"

"It isn't verse," said Hugh. "I expect he was delirious."

But Agnes persisted and when Hugh had translated it she was satisfied that she had Graham's dying message to herself.

"Et ultra," she said, "an injunction I dare not ignore." And then, "I cannot remember when he took that photograph, but I am sure Graham had some association with it I ought to treasure now.

I shall have it psychometrised and find out."

A fortnight later she telephoned to Hugh.

"I have something too wonderful to show you. You must come to me this evening."

In the blue−and−purple room she called her den, Agnes was sitting, pale among her gold−fringed cushions. She swept to welcome Hugh, dizzying him with a whirl of silken scarves heavy with odours.

"Dear Graham," she said. "It has been so like him to make difficulties. We have had no end of delay in getting through to him. But last night a new medium, who is perfectly marvellous with planchette, secured a control as soon as I asked for Graham. 'I am his wife,' I kept saying. 'Tell him I must know all about the sea gulls and the Latin message.' And at last I have proof that my darling has heard and is answering me. Look!"

To Hugh the wavering, serrated line that hurried down the paper she drew from her bosom seemed the very register of anguished resistance. Half−way down the page it steadied, and in a clear and legible script, a hand which he could not deny to be as nearly Graham's as any pencilled note of his he had ever seen, stood out the words:

But I am not allowed to tell anyone.

"That's what he always said just before he did tell me things," Agnes cooed.

"Now I know I shall find out so much. We are having a special private sitting here to−morrow.

It is so wonderful to have this proof that my love can reach him still."