

The Ashes of Last Night's Fire

By J. D. Beresford

Some association that he did not recognise at the moment, wonderfully stimulated and moved him. His thought flowing without resistance or distraction was less an effect of memory than of vision. Every nerve in his body was alive again.

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He went borne by 'bus and the cable tram. His pale face was still faintly pink from the hot blush of pleasure that had suffused it when the partners had made their announcement. He pitied the other passengers, the men fixed in their common routine. The usual evening papers, the usual pipes and cigarettes, the usual craning over the side as they passed the Oval, the usual remarks on the weather. . . None of them had achieved his success. And he was only twenty-eight. His whole body seemed to ring with exultation.

The glow mounted steadily. When he was home in his shabby lodgings he had hardly patience to eat his common, unappetising meal. He had always been careful, but he could leave these rooms now, at once. He would give his landlady a fortnight's notice and find something better when he came back from his holiday.

He got up and paced the mean length of the dingy room. He had done it all in nine years—lifted himself from a clerk at eighteen shillings a week to his present magnificent position as a departmental manager. The partners had had their eye on him from the first. He had always been prompt, efficient, keen. His rises had been rapid. Yesterday there were many men in the business who had been jealous of his two hundred a year.

What would they think when he came back after his holidays as a manager? They would *all* be jealous then. He had not a single friend among them. He was glad now. It was better for a manager to have no intimate relationships with his inferiors.

He was to begin on £300 a year and an overriding commission on the business done by his department, another £160 on the basis of last year's trading. His commission should be twice that next year. He knew just where that department had failed under old Price, his predecessor. This holiday was a nuisance. He wanted to begin at once. He would draw up a general scheme of organisation while he was away. Perhaps, after all, it was a good thing that he had a quiet fortnight in which to prepare. He would come back to work with his entire plan cut and dried, worked out in detail.

He knew precisely what he meant to do on broad lines. For a time his mind played efficiently with the reorganisation of his department. . . .

His only possible confidante was the landlady, and she could not be expected to share his elation. She would lose a steady, reliable lodger who had been with her for seven years. The time had gone very quickly. His life had been so full of interest. He had lived for the business. He had now become an essential part of it.

The little room cramped him. He picked up his silk hat and automatically polished it with his sleeve. In fifteen years he would be a partner. . . .

The night was very warm and still. It had been aridly hot in the City, but as he came into the wider spaces of the outer suburbs he found the relief of trees, and the air was rich with the heavy

scent of lime and poplar. He inhaled it greedily. This, too, was his, a part of his success—a promise of his fruitful life. These big detached houses with their ample gardens were no longer a mockery. Before very long he would be able to live in some such place as this.

He paused under the shadow of a row of limes that had thrust their laden branches far out over the pavement. The garden behind was hidden from him by park fencing, with a spiked coping; but he found a gap where the shingles had warped apart, and peeped in.

He was conscious of the sharp, refreshing smell of newly-cut grass; and then of the hot fragrance of syringa. It enveloped and intoxicated him. Tonight his body, his mind, his whole soul was open to new impressions. His dry veins had become miraculously fruitful of racing blood. He was a god in a wonderful garden that breathed the exquisite scent of syringa.

He heard someone coming along the pavement towards him, with a delicious tapping of high-heeled shoes. He moved away from the fence and looked up the road.

Two young women were coming, dressed in white. They had evidently been playing tennis—they were carrying their racquets; and round the neck of each racquet dangled a pair of white shoes. No doubt they had been playing at a friend's house, and had stayed on to supper.

There were two young women, and they were talking to each other as they walked, but he only saw one.

She was fair-haired with a high complexion, and she had a firm, well-developed figure. She was not more than twenty-two or twenty-three years old, and she seemed full of vigour and the joy of life. She walked as if she were excited with the splendour of living, and her little heels tapped deliciously on the stone pavement.

Yesterday she would have been far out of his reach—a daughter of the wealthier classes, a vision to be regarded with a respectful worship, an exquisite ideal of young womanhood—perfect and precious—to awaken the futile yearnings of a romantically impossible desire.

And to-night she was still an ideal of fresh beauty, enwrapped in the bewildering scent that was all about him; but he could touch the tips of her delicate fingers. She was a world above him, but he could reach out beyond the little limits of the old world he had known. . . .

She had passed and gone into the garden that had first charmed him, but he knew the house and the road; he could find out her name; he could perhaps get an introduction to her father—he could get to know her. There was nothing in the world he could not do. He was a departmental manager in a great firm. This year he would have an income of £500 at the least. In fifteen years he would be a partner.

The whole earth throbbed with the radiant perfume of syringa.

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He stirred slightly and looked up, stretched out his hand and picked up his spectacles.

His wife lay back in her chair, her eyes closed, her mouth unquestionably open. She was a big florid woman, and she had eaten more dinner than was good for her. Her fair hair was slightly disarranged, her breathing was distressed and heavy. He had meant to tell her that he had signed the partnership agreement that morning, but they had had a dispute about some trifle, and the agreement had gone out of his mind. It was not a matter of any importance. They had known the terms for six months.

He looked up at the mantelpiece and noted carelessly that someone had filled the vases with syringa.