

# The Instrument of Destiny

By J. D. Beresford

## I

Certainty had been born in him when he was only fifteen. The means of the conception was trivial: he had been praised by Ross, the head of the school. "You're a good chap, Adrian," Ross had said. "I'm really, awfully obliged to you." The subject for gratitude had been Adrian's generosity in the matter of a foolishly peculating lower-school boy. Ross implied that he was particularly glad to have avoided any scandal in his last term. Adrian had not confided the honour he had received. But the thought of it worked in him all the morning; and afterwards he walked up alone to the field, radiant with secret glory. He was the saviour of the school's reputation, the agent of a rather fine morality. He had done well and had been doubly rewarded, by splendid recognition and by this ecstatic consciousness of virtue. He saw himself, then, for the first time, as the instrument of destiny; he knew that the future promised him some strange, delicious achievement.

That certainty did not remain as a constant exhilaration to glorify the monotony of his life after he went into the bank in Lothbury. For months at a time he knew no uplifting of mind, and long intervals between his moments of realisation were filled with the common thoughts and actions of every day. To his colleagues and acquaintances he gave no confidence concerning the wonderful thing that the future held for him. To them he appeared a perfectly normal young bank clerk; a trifle reserved, perhaps; unexpansive; he had no intimate friends. And to himself, also, during the uninspired slow months of drudgery and common life, he seemed much as other men. Indeed, he suffered intolerable hours of depression in which his faith trembled, and he saw a horrible prospect of himself, managing some local branch of his bank; saw himself married and embarrassed with a toll of children.

He was over thirty, an assistant cashier in Lothbury, before he made any effort to hasten the tedious coming of destiny. The prospect of his enervated hours was becoming sharper, more detailed and less repulsive. All his life he had been continent, and when the urge within him took form in the thought of desire, his mind turned more often, now, to the contemplation of marriage with Dorothy Curtis, the daughter of one of his chiefs. It was all so possible and so expedient, and she was young and warm. She had been almost resplendent when she had looked up into his eyes, flushed and vital, after the tennis dance. He would have proposed to her that night if something that he called Fate had not intervened—a mere chance, apparently; but walking home he had been gloriously conscious once more of something that awaited him, something more wonderful than marriage with Dorothy, some high destiny of which he was to be the favoured tool.

So, although he still saw Dorothy occasionally and still permitted his mind privately to regard her beauty, he set himself quietly and with imperfect diligence to hasten the coming of his glory. He tried to write. He had never known clearly what form his power might assume. When that transcending certainty overcame him, his vision flowered in many shapes. He knew such diverse aspects of the saviour. But when he was thirty-two, he felt that his time of probation, his gathering of experience, must be nearly done; and then, in desperation, in fear of promotion and

Dorothy, he sought to hasten the miracle that he knew would presently overtake him. Literature was the nearest means to his hand.

But while he loved poetry for the colour and grace of its words, he found nothing of vision expressed in his own efforts. Now and again he brought some happy phrase to birth, but it was always irrelevant to the theme he sought to frame. And when he forsook that theme and attempted to set the precious phrase, his inspiration failed, and the single unrelated expression that had been given to him, wilted in its surroundings like a discarded flower thrown upon a disreputable heap of refuse. At such times he would sit anxiously waiting for some delicate change in the quality of his thought. It seemed to him, so often, that he was on the very edge of knowledge, and that if he remained intensely still, the new power of sight would suddenly and exquisitely irradiate the whole of his life. He tried prose, also, when the mechanical difficulties of rhyme and metre overtaxed his feeble abilities; but that, too, called for a form he was unable to satisfy.

By unnoticed degrees, he abandoned his attempts to write, and the fog of his material life began to thicken so that his vision of certainty, when it returned, shone less gloriously, and was coloured with the sadder hues of a nearer, attainable ambition. He had heard, privately, that his promotion was assured at the end of the year. Three new branches were to be opened, and one of them would almost certainly be given to him—a mark of particular favour, Mr. Curtis had said. Adrian had won the esteem and respect of his superiors. He had steadiness, it seemed, he was patient, punctual and accurate; moreover they had marked a virtue of confidence in him. That night he thought of Ross and his schoolboy commendation. Adrian could see little through the fog that was clouding his vision, but he thought that after all this might be a means. It had been ordained that he was to wait a little longer. He had not proposed to Dorothy, as yet, but in some inexplicable way a tacit understanding existed that he was only waiting for the news of his promotion to be confirmed. He was often at the Curtises' house that summer, and he and Dorothy were on the most friendly terms. Once he would certainly have kissed her, if they had not been suddenly interrupted.

## II

It was a wonderful evening in June when Adrian was called into the manager's office, and found his immediate chief there with the chairman and one of the directors. They complimented him pleasantly on his record, and reminded him of the fact that he would be the youngest of their seventy branch managers.

He left the office flattered and exalted, but instead of going to the Curtises', he got on to a motor-bus at the Mansion House and went all the way out to Richmond. And as he got further away from the dust of the City, his mind cleared to the old, wonderful vision again. Momentarily the fog had lifted, and the original ecstasy returned, the sense of power and supreme ability, the certainty that some transcendental destiny was surely reserved for him.

He did not reason with himself, to reason was to destroy his vision. He made no plans to leave the bank or to forsake the untrusted Dorothy, but all that life behind him fell into a beautiful, unreal perspective; it was all a part of some strange experience that had been necessary for him, a curious past that he had witnessed rather than lived, and that, now, seen in retrospect had a quality of romance. It was all so small and delicate, so charmingly inaccurate a miniature of the immensity he was entering. . . .

He found himself in the spaces of Richmond Park, when, for the first time in his experience, his vision contracted into an urgent desire for expression. The air was warm and very still. In the north-west, the sun, falling blood-red, had rested for an instant on the rim of earth. He seemed to be alone before the cloister of the wood; he could hear the peal of evensong, the Kyrie Eleison of some ecstatic blackbird, rippling from the high choir of those mysterious trees. And he, too, yearned fiercely for the satisfaction of his delirious eagerness.

He was thinking inexplicably of woman, but not of women, when he saw the dark silhouette of the girl between him and the brightness in the northern sky. She was coming hesitatingly towards him as if she knew that he was there, and had come, doubting, to meet him. She was only a figure to him, then, her face was dark in the shadow, and he feared her coming. If she would stay there, he thought, a few yards away from him, his mind might reach out to her and communicate the glory of his vision. Already he realised that the glory was fading, that his past was growing more definite and solid, that his promotion, Dorothy, the routine of his life were taking on the dreadful shape of reality.

He rebelled furiously against his descent. He felt that he must hold his vision at any cost, even if he were compelled to communicate it to this hesitant figure, graceful with the ease of youth, who stood still, now, her face half-turned from him, as if she, too, waited for some long-expected miracle. Doubtless, her speech would be commonplace, her face unworthy of adoration, her hands marred, and her habit banal with the dreadful convention of her class. But he could take her into the wood, he could forget that she was a shop-girl, perhaps, of doubtful morals, he could hold her in the dusk of the trees and revive his glory by a wonderful recountal of his vision.

And when he approached her, he saw that she had dark eyes, lit with fear and lust and tenderness, and that the white line of her neck was faintly warm with the rose of the afterglow.

“What are you doing out here all alone at this time?” she asked. “They’ll be shutting the gates.”

“I’ve been waiting for you,” he said. “I’ve something wonderful to tell you, only we must get further into the wood.”

She shuddered when he touched her, and then laughed.

He did not dare to think what her speech implied; he wanted only to communicate his vision in the dusk of the wood.

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He went down the hill, alone. All the ascending glory had gone, and the crowd that jostled him by the Bridge was of the same clay as himself. He was going back steadfastly into his past; to take up his promotion and to marry Dorothy, who would never know that he had been unfaithful to her. This was the world of reality in which there was no place for a man with a transcendental destiny. And yet, it might be. . . . He had always been so sure. He was confused, now; the fog had returned, denser and more obscuring than ever; but could anything rob him of that ancient certainty?

At the corner of the street, he lifted his head to look at the dim stars, and as he crossed the road, the raucously hooting motor killed him almost mercifully, so swift must have been the passage of his spirit from the mangled hulk they retchingly disentangled from spoke and axle. . . .

But a child was born of that night’s ecstasy in the dusk of the wood, and he may be the saviour of mankind, or at least a link in the long, long chain of man’s transcending destiny.