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JOHN WYNDHAM

Trouble With Lichen



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PENGUIN BOOKS
In association with Michael Joseph

THE farewell was beautiful.

The small choir, all in white, with gold nets gleaming on its hair, sang with the sweet sadness of angels forlorn.

When it finished, the crowded chapel was full of absolute silence, and through the heavy air the scent of thousands of flowers rolled in slow waves.

The coffin topped a small pyramid of close-packed blooms. At the four corners, guards in classical gowns of purple silk, gold nets on their bowed heads, gold cords crossing between their breasts, each with a gilded palm frond in her hand, stood as if carved.

The bishop crossed the floor soundlessly to ascend the four steps to the low pulpit. He laid his book carefully on the shelf before him, paused, and looked up.

'... our beloved sister, Diana ... her unfinished work which she now can never finish ... irony of fate not a proper term to apply to the will of the Lord ... He giveth; He taketh away ... if He takes away the olive tree He has given before its fruit has ripened, it is for us to accept His will ... Vessel of His inspiration ... Devotion to her aims ... Fortitude ... Change in the course of human history ... The body of Thy servant, Diana....'

The eyes of the congregation, the several hundred women with a sprinkling of men, turned to the coffin. Slowly, it started to move. A few disturbed blossoms rolled down and spilt upon the carpet. Inexorably the coffin slid on. The organ began to play softly. The voices of the choir rose again, high and clear. The curtains dragged along the sides of the coffin, and fell to behind it.

There was a sound of caught breaths, a whimper or two, a dappling of small white handkerchiefs . . .

As they left, Zephania and Richard became separated from her father. She turned, and saw him a few yards behind them. Among the press of women in the aisle he seemed taller than he was. His handsome face told nothing. It looked only tired – and unconscious of everything about him.

Outside, there were more women; hundreds of them who had not been able to get into the chapel. Many were weeping. The flowers they had brought were laid like a bright carpet on either side of the door so that those leaving had to walk between them. Someone in the crowd was holding a pole that bore a large *crux ansata*. It was made entirely of arum lilies, and crossed by a broad, black silk ribbon.

On the gravel, Zephania towed Richard clear of the stream, and stood looking at the scene. Her own eyes were moist, but, for all that, a rueful smile touched the corners of her mouth.

‘Poor darling Diana,’ she said. ‘Just think how this would have amused her.’

She produced her own handkerchief to pat it at her eyes briefly. Then, in a brisk tone, she said:

‘Come on. Let’s find Daddy, and get him out of this.’

But it was a lovely funeral.

The *News-Record* reported:

. . . Women in all walks of life, from every corner of Britain had gathered to pay their last respects. Many arrived soon after dawn to join those who had camped all night outside the cemetery gates.

When at last the long vigil was rewarded by the arrival of the slow, flowers-laden procession, the spectators pressed forward against the restraining ranks of the police, many strewing flowers before the wheels. As the cortège passed tears streamed down the faces of the mourners, and sounds of ululation* broke from the patient ranks.

Not since the funeral of Emily Davison† has London witnessed such a tribute to a woman by women.

And then, because the *News-Record* is always anxious that its readers shall understand what it has written, there were two footnotes:

* ululation – a wailing, or howling.

† The funeral of Emily Wilding Davison took place 14 June 1913. She was a member of the Women's Suffrage movement who died as a result of injuries received when she threw herself in front of the King's horse during the Derby, run on 4 June that year.

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