For Rain It Hath a Friendly Sound

by Diana Athill

Dry earth under a shower of rain: a few words on the telephone made Kate Beeston feel like that. She put the receiver down gently and went to sit on a corner of the kitchen table, her hands heavy on her knees as she stared out of the window. When Robert, her husband, went past pushing a wheelbarrow, her eyes followed him and she knew that he was engaged on the first part of his plan for the weekend which, as usual, he had written out in a special notebook on Friday evening. Her expression became neither amused nor irritated. She looked like a woman dreaming over a book, as though behind her square freckled face there moved some beloved character from pages just put aside.

The name had stabbed—"It's David Field here"—so that Kate had reached for something to lean on, but then an odd contentment had come down on her and it had been an effort to understand what he was saying. She had wanted only to listen to the sound of his voice. He had called to say that he knew the Italian girl employed by the Masons, whom he was treating for bronchitis, was unhappy with them. If Kate still needed a maid, now was the time to act. It must have been four months ago, the last time she saw him, that she had said something in his hearing about looking for a maid to live in.

"If I were twenty-five," she thought, "I would be up in my room recovering, sure that the call was an excuse to speak to me again. But I am thirty-seven and David is a kind man with a good memory, worried about that girl and pleased to think that in helping her he may also help a woman he likes, with whom he once spent a week."

The Fields lived ten miles away, in the county town, and David was not the Beestons' doctor. The paper-mill of which Robert Beeston was a direc-

tor was on the outskirts of the town, but Kate and Robert had always known more people to the north of the county: one of those with a mysterious division across it, almost like a watershed, so that people living only a few miles apart would refer to each other as being "north" or "south" as though that fully explained the lack of intimacy between them. Because of this, Kate had met David's wife no more than a score of times in twelve years.

On their few meetings during the last three of those years, Kate had watched Penelope Field across rooms, moved nearer to overhear what she spoke about. She was an odd-looking woman with a crooked mouth, well dressed, reserved, sometimes abrupt in her manner. Kate knew people who found her rude and others who said she was boring, but she herself saw Penelope in an aura of privilege and certainty and believed that to her close friends she must reveal extraordinary qualities. She knew she was imagining it when the other woman's dark eyes seemed to fix her with an attention equal to her own and that Penelope's remote manner when they spoke was her usual one, no indication that she had learnt about Kate and David.

Three years ago Robert Beeston had gone to Canada for his firm. He had gone reluctantly, disliking unknown places, but Kate had much looked forward to his journey. She had hoped that he might enjoy it and that this would make him more receptive to ideas of travel, for whenever she suggested the holidays abroad for which she longed, he countered with a walking tour in Wales. He could only imagine relaxation in walking, and then only in places hallowed by discovery during his boyhood. Year after year—on the Coué principle, she supposed—he would begin discussion of such a holiday as though she shared his enthusiasm, and year after year he would grow angry at what he considered her perversity in not sharing it. "Does he really forget?" she would wonder. "Or has he never *listened?*"

Anyway, she had felt, whether Canada worked on him or not, his absence would rest her, for they had been having some bad months. Something had rubbed a hole in Robert's extraordinary talent for not noticing the disagreeable in the familiar, he had begun to see that she was unhappy and had been in a constant temper about it. Unhappy himself, Kate had supposed, being fair: but he was so deft at turning an uncomfortable emotion

into one he could handle that it was hard for her to keep sight of his mood's origin. She had done her best to avoid quarrels. He was jealous of anything they did not have in common: her work in London before their marriage; her friends from that time, none of them businessmen or landowners; her uncertain but adventurous taste in pictures, decoration, clothes. Trying to reassure him she had given away a pair of orange slacks and often wore a light blue dress he had chosen for her, although she detested light blue with red hair; she had long stopped talking politics with him and would find a reason for drifting out of the conversation when he talked them with other people; she rarely tried to discuss the books she enjoyed; she no longer invited her old friends to stay. From good nature rather than conviction she had always tended to assume that other people were more likely to be right than she was, so that over the years it had not been hard to send many of her inclinations underground rather than contend with him as he settled in ways she had not expected. She could not see that she was grudging this more obviously than before. Their joint life was full enough with children, house, garden, the pleasures still shared, such as their feeling for animals and the country; Kate could forget her dissatisfaction for weeks on end, for as long as Robert remained unaware of it. But the accumulation of her silences must have been more eloquent than the open disagreement of their early days, and belatedly he had started to nag. "I can't see what right you've got to despise so and so," he would say, when she had in fact succeeded in persuading herself that the man was pleasant company; or, "Of course, it would be too low-brow for *you*," of some book she might well have enjoyed reading. Maddeningly he was almost always wrong in detail, but his uneasiness and resentment, unhappily she knew it, were based on the truth.

So she had looked forward to his three weeks in Canada. The children were both at school, she would go to London. She was becoming absurdly rooted, finding it increasingly hard to go away even for a night: what to do with the dogs? who would feed the children's birds? when, if not then, would she get the delphiniums staked? None of these problems was real. The Beestons employed a part-time gardener and could call on two women in the village for help in the house, but still Kate would find herself fatigued

and discouraged at the effort of departure, as though some faculty in her were becoming crippled. This time, too, the familiar impotence crept up, almost deciding her to stay. But just before he left she and Robert had skidded into an open quarrel which left her thinking, "I'm mad. I'm letting inertia trap me into lunacy. It's only a matter of making a few telephone calls, buying a railway ticket, and of course I can go." When she was a child her nannie used to scold her for coughing. "Now then, dear, stop it," she used to say. "It's all on your mind." And sure enough, once she began to act Kate found that her obligations, even the seriousness of Robert's disapproval ("But what on earth will you *do* in London for so long?"), were mostly "on her mind."

She caught the train, she stayed not with her sister, as Robert expected, but in a hotel, and she spent the best part of three sunny days neither shopping nor visiting exhibitions but lying on the grass in a park. "Why go to *London* to lie on *grass?*" Robert would have said if he had known, and how would she have explained it? "We don't have Chinese geese at home," she might have said, watching them in dignified procession by the waterside. "We don't have ragged little boys gunning for each other from behind chestnut trees, but being so patient with the baby in the pram which they have to tag along with them. We don't have old men spreading newspapers on benches and sitting on them to scold greedy pigeons who chase their hens away from breadcrumbs." Silly answers, she thought, were all she could have given Robert as she lay feeling herself flow out into every corner of her body, looking out of her eyes at things as though they were new.

On the fourth day, restored, she went gaily to a cocktail party and David Field was there, one of a few more or less familiar county faces. The Londoners made her a little shy so she crossed the room to stand beside him. Penelope was in Italy. "I couldn't get away," he said, "but Pen can't endure a summer without going abroad." He seemed to take it for granted that if someone wanted to do something he should, if possible, do it. If Kate had suggested a holiday without Robert, he would have doubted her sanity. He himself would always refuse to go to a party without her, even when they both knew that he would enjoy it and she would not: his forehead would

flush with indignation and he would say, "You want to spoil my evening." Kate remembered hearing people comment on the Fields' independence of each other. "Do you often do things separately?" she asked, not wholly disguising envy, and as they talked she understood that his attitude did not spring from indifference. It was simply that he loved his wife with generosity.

Quite soon she became frightened. It seemed to her that she *knew his face too well*. It was a familiarity unconnected with their chance meetings at home, coming ("I must be drunk," she thought) from the future. She listened attentively enough—with unusual attention, even, for she had not known that he was so amusing, so easy—but while she listened she was also watching. Half scared, half elated, she was following the line of his eyebrows as though she had often—would often—run a finger along them; was recognising the high, rather starved cheekbones, the way his mouth pulled down at the corners when he smiled. It was too improbable for serious alarm, but "That's a face I'm going to love," she knew, as though dreaming.

"You'll have dinner with me," said David, and when they were settled in a restaurant they really started to talk. It was a return to her own language after years of speaking another which, however well she knew it, had always been more of an effort than she realised. They talked about their friends and their children: ordinary things, but they could tell the truth about them, and something inside Kate relaxed, spread, glowed. It would be easy to go on talking and laughing like this for all her life. And as the evening went on she saw that this almost unknown man who showed so clearly that his life was full of satisfactions, was nevertheless prepared to look at her with pleasure and a startling intimacy. "Is he rather a devil?" she wondered, more interested than dismayed by the unexpectedness of it.

David, in London for a series of meetings, had been lent a friend's flat for a week. She went back with him for a last drink and when, halfway up the stairs, he turned in the middle of a sentence to kiss her cheek, it was almost too natural to notice.

Half an hour later she stubbed out a cigarette and said regretfully, "Oh well, I suppose I must get back to my hotel." He picked up her coat, hesi-

tated, then said: "You know, it would be much *much* nicer if you would stay here with me." Kate had begun to say, "Dear David, don't be ridiculous," when she stopped, knowing: "But that's the exact truth. It would be much *much* nicer." So she took the coat and put it slowly back on the chair from which he had lifted it. He caught her by the shoulders and they both laughed. She stayed with him all that week.

Not for one moment did Kate suppose that it would change their ways of living. David was too practised to warn her in so many words, "I love my wife," but there it was. He did. He wanted Kate with him, she soon discovered, because he hated being alone, because he liked her and found her attractive, because he was a man rational almost to ruthlessness who could see no good in being cold when he might be warm, lonely when he might be enjoying himself. Being ready to allow others their own natures, he did not hesitate to indulge his own. Kate herself was like that up to a point and, sensing it, he gave her credit (conveniently) for being more like it than she was. He assumed that she was as much in control of what she was doing as he was.

For this she knew that she might blame him in the future, but there was so much else for which she could feel only gratitude and love. Some years earlier she had become a light sleeper and had won a bed to herself. She had always treasured it. When Robert returned to his own she would have to resist a longing to get up, smooth the sheets, plump the pillows, remove all signs of its dishevelment and make it again her private territory. And now, a little awkwardly, almost like a girl, she was exploring an intimacy which only seemed delightful. She would wake in the night and move gently nearer David so that she could feel his back against her own; she would hesitate to pull her arm from under his neck when it became painful; she could even watch with pleasure a man cleaning his teeth, and was disappointed if he did not come to sit on the edge of the bath when she was in it. And she marvelled all the time that any two people could so understand each other, and that someone could be, in any degree of love, so like her own conception of being in love as David was. For those few days he gave her, in a small way, she knew, but truly, what he gave his wife: appreciation for what she was, his

pleasure in her as an individual rather than as a reflection of his wishes, the warmth of a man accustomed to loving rather than possessing.

Explanations were rarely necessary between them. "Do you ever feel guilty about this sort of thing?" she asked him once, knowing without being told that he had done it before. "No," he said. "Why should one's obsessions dominate every corner of one's life? This is real too," and that was all she needed to be told about his relations with Penelope. How could this delight and ease, however real, compete with obsession? "You and I would probably have got married," he said later, "if we had met long ago": words with which she had lived ever since, both steadied by their coldness and warmed by their comfort.

When she got home she remained happy for two days. The week just past overflowed into those days, David was in her bones, she could not feel that he was gone. Robert was not yet back, there was nothing to disturb her reliving of that week. But the pain had begun before her solitude was over.

She knew very well that David would neither write nor telephone but her body, she found, was charged with complete incredulity, responding instantly and violently to letters on the mat, the ring of the bell. This physical impact of loss horrified her. "I must control myself, I must control myself," she muttered aloud, on the third evening alone, but still her body paced backwards and forwards across her bedroom until she cried out, "But what am I going to do?" Her aching throat made her hope: "Perhaps crying will make it better?" But the tears took control, she made noises like an animal, the weeping hurt her whole body, scorched her eyes, drove her down to the kitchen in desperation to make herself tea as though she were a victim of shock. And it was worse when the tears were over. "Have a good cry," people said! The physical humiliation ebbed, and there was the grey weight of loss, untouched, undiminished.

Her sense of loss was so terrible that it eclipsed her dread of Robert's return. When a telegram came, announcing the time of his arrival, she stared at it expecting panic but found it unimportant. It was only a matter of thinking up a way to explain her haggard looks and to postpone his lovemaking.

She pleaded illness: a bilious attack which had turned out worse than

she had expected and had left her low. He found her nerviness extraordinary, quite unlike her, and made her go to the doctor. Forced, gradually, to pull herself together, she drank her tonic and thought, "Why not? Why not treat grief as an illness? There's nothing else I can do about it."

It was a question, she began to see, of dealing with symptoms as they occurred and waiting for time to pass. To be busy, to be brutal with herself: those were the only specifics. When the pain became unbearable she would allow herself a small dose of self-indulgence: as she pruned roses or polished furniture she would kill Penelope in an air-crash, bundle Robert into love with a widow who had children of her own and would not want Kate's, and then she would begin to dream times and places with David. But having shared so little with him, her resources for these dreams were limited, and her sense of their absurdity was strong. "Fool!" she would have to conclude. "He does not love you, it is not even as though he were remembering you," and to this abrasive knowledge she would cling. A loss existing only "on her mind" must surely stop torturing after a while.

Kate thought, in those first months, how mistaken were people who spoke of children as though they were everything; who would comfort themselves for some woman's loss of her husband with the words "Luckily she has the children." They might as well have said, "Luckily she has her hands." Without them God help her, certainly; but children were children and a man was a man, there could be no substitution. James and Muffie came home for the holidays as much a part of her as ever, their nonexistence unimaginable. "Of course I love them," she would have snapped at anyone who had asked, angry at the pointlessness of the question, but the things about them by which she was ridden at that time were their demands, their failings, the anxieties and chores they carried in their wake. Guiltily she recognised that she had become almost unable to take pleasure in them; and worse, she would catch herself looking at them with detachment, thinking, "And after all, why should I? James has no imagination, he will grow into a dull man, and Muffie in her present exhibitionist phase is even displeasing." She felt dry and ugly, knowing herself now a woman married to a man who often bored her, loving children who could no longer enchant her.

Robert agreed to their building out a playroom for the children, and this Kate insisted on planning and decorating herself. She worked hard. After a while she no longer had to fight against the pain's magnetism in every unoccupied moment and even began to shy away from it. When it was touched off by a word or thought she would surprise herself by thinking, "Oh God, no! I can't stand any more of that," and turning to something else. A whole morning would go by and she would realise, "I haven't thought of David since I got up." And then a whole day, and she knew that she was mastering it. But she was haunted by the knowledge that sooner or later she would come into a room and see him talking to her hostess, or run into him in the street when she was shopping in the town.

That was how it happened at last, after nearly six months of carefulness and luck. She had warning. She had taken the children to Woolworth's to do their Christmas shopping and there, studying a tray of clockwork tanks, she saw his sons. David himself was not in the shop as far as she could see, and she decided that she was probably safe. This was a mother's job, they would be with Penelope. But still it was not pure shock when she came out through the swing doors to find him sitting in his car, waiting for his family.

He got out and came to take her hand. "How nice to see you," he said. "Did you by any chance notice two of my young in that inferno?" She had told herself from time to time during her "cure" that she had built up an imaginary David and that when she met him again she would find him diminished, but no. This, she knew at once, was the face and the voice she loved.

"They're buying tanks," she answered, and already because he was there she was relaxing, spreading, glowing as she had done before. For some minutes they stood on the pavement, talking of this and that. She followed him in using the tone of old friends—closer friends than they would have been without their week together, but with no recognition of that week—and it was not only easy but pleasant. How could she have dreaded something that was all she longed for?

When David's sons came out of the shop he was angry with them because, having been given half an hour for their shopping, they had kept him

waiting. “Into the boot with all that junk,” he said severely, “and be quick about it.” But as he opened the door for them and the youngest boy bent forward to stow his parcels, he ran his hand over the child’s head. “I’m bad at discipline,” he said as the boys jostled their way into the car. “It’s the backs of their necks that undo me. When I want to be stern I always avoid looking at them from the back.”

That he should have felt and said something so unexpectedly feminine seemed to Kate like a piece of amber to be picked up on a pebbly beach. Several times, as she was driving home, she smiled at it; and that evening, when James came to show himself well bathed, she said: “Yes, you’re my clean and handsome one,” and kissed the back of his neck. Later she had to struggle against tears and could not bring herself to go into the bedroom until she was sure that Robert was asleep, but the revival of loss was accompanied by a revival of a sense of David’s existence outside her mind, and this—it was strange, she had not expected it—was warming.

Before a year had passed she had almost stopped thinking of him, but each of their few meetings she could remember down to the smallest detail of expression. In three years there had been two more encounters in town, one occasion when the Fields’ car had been parked beside the Beestons’ at a race meeting and she and David had spent twenty minutes together in the group by the water-jump, two cocktail parties and the dinner party, four months ago, at which he had heard her talking about maids. Penelope was always there as well. At one of the cocktail parties David had smiled at Kate with particular intimacy when she made a joke that no one else noticed, and at the race meeting he had referred quite naturally to an exhibition they had visited during their week; but what she brought back from the meetings was chiefly confirmation of his tenderness towards his wife. “That woman wears the trousers,” Robert remarked on one occasion, and Kate had agreed, getting some satisfaction from spitefulness, but what she really felt was: “That man knows how to love.” To see it strengthened her “cure”—and at the same time established that what had happened could not be thought away. She could stop herself—had stopped herself—from loving, but David had not changed from being a man she could love.

"I was not an hysterical fool," she said to herself now, so long after it had happened, sitting on the kitchen table after his telephone call. "I wasn't making him up because I needed to fall in love; he *is* the nicest man." That he should have thought of her, even remembered her casual words after such a long interval, made her see him as a paragon of kindness. "Of course he must really have remembered me quite often," she thought. "That week happened to him, too."

Robert shouted to her from the garden. She went out and found him on his way down to the boggy meadow which adjoined the orchard, some of which they wanted to enclose as additional vegetable garden.

"If we dug a deep ditch across the bottom," he said, prodding the ground, "and then ran two drains down there and there, it would be dry enough in no time."

They would have to get extra labour for the ditches, she said, it would be too much for him and the gardener, and he agreed. They stood together amicably in the sun, wondering whether they could have a primula garden along the deep ditch when it was dug, or whether primulas needed more shade. The grass was young and succulent, buttercups were beginning to come out, and from the hedge round the orchard the peppery smell of hawthorn came drifting. As they walked back towards the house they both paused to look up through flowering branches at the sky, so intensely blue beyond the snow of blossom.

"*Can't* we go to Spain this year?" she said.

"I don't care what you say," he answered, "it would be lunacy to take the children. That revolting food would finish me at once, so what it would do to them, God knows. It beats me how you can be so unrealistic."

"But they're not babies any more, and other people do it all the time. Anyway, what's so dreadful about a tummy upset? We could stock up with sulpha medicines and if any of us did get ill it would soon be over."

She knew, though, that he would soon come up with his walking tour—not in Wales, perhaps, this time: Scotland or the Lake District, as a concession, or even Brittany. "Poor old boy," she thought, "it would be cruel to drag him off somewhere he hated, he does work so hard all the year"—but

only twice in all the years of their marriage had she done it, while he had won again and again.

Back in the kitchen, breading the chops for lunch, she watched him through the window. He had noticed that the clothesline was beginning to sag and he was straightening the pole which held it. It always pleased Kate to watch him working with his hands, absorbed and grave, like James playing with his trains, but handsome though he was—"And he is still very good-looking," she thought with surprise—it astonished her now to remember that she had once found him physically disturbing. While as for his mind ... "He is extraordinary," she thought. "Fifteen years, and he still can't even accept that we don't always like the same things. Can he really be as impermeable as he seems, or is he a wicked old bully?" She shook her head as she worked, but although she did not know it she was smiling slightly.

After lunch she went back into the orchard alone. She pulled down a branch of an apple tree to look at the thickening green thalami, some with a few petals still adhering (one doesn't wander in one's own garden for no reason; she was estimating the year's crop, they would think). She wanted to be undisturbed for a few minutes so that she could remember David's voice on the telephone. She stood quite still, relaxed, not at all dry or ugly. "Well, anyway," she thought, "there *is* a man in the world I could love." She leant her cheek sideways so that it was brushed by leaves. "After I'm dead," she thought, "the apples will go on bearing and the hawthorn will go on flowering, year after year," and she felt so calm that it was almost happiness. Later that day she wrote to Thomas Cook's for details about travel in Spain.