

The Token

May Sinclair

Table of Contents

<u>The Token</u>	1
<u>May Sinclair</u>	2
<u>I</u>	3
<u>II</u>	5
<u>III</u>	9

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- I
- II
- III

The Token

I

I have only known one absolutely adorable woman, and that was my brother's wife, Cicely Dunbar.

Sisters-in-law do not, I think, invariably adore each other, and I am aware that my chief merit in Cicely's eyes was that I am Donald's sister; but for me there was no question of extraneous quality — it was all pure Cicely.

And how Donald — But then, like all the Dunbars, Donald suffers from being Scottish, so that, if he has a feeling, he makes it a point of honour to pretend he hasn't it. I daresay he let himself go a bit during his courtship, when he was not, strictly speaking, himself; but after he had once married her I think he would have died rather than have told Cicely in so many words that he loved her. And Cicely wanted to be told. You say she ought to have known without telling? You don't know Donald. You can't conceive the perverse ingenuity he could put into hiding his affection. He has that peculiar temper — I think it's Scottish — that delights in snubbing and fault-finding and defeating expectation. If he knows you want him to do a thing, that alone is reason enough with Donald for not doing it. And my sister, who was as transparent as white crystal, was never able to conceal a want. So that Donald could, as we said, 'have' her at every turn.

And, then, I don't think my brother really knew how ill she was. He didn't want to know.

Besides, he was so wrapt up in trying to finish his 'Development of Social Economics' (which, by the way, he hasn't finished yet) that he had no eyes to see what we all saw: that, the way her poor little heart was going, Cicely couldn't have very long to live.

Of course he understood that this was why, in those last months, they had to have separate rooms. And this in the first year of their marriage when he was still violently in love with her. I keep those two facts firmly in my mind when I try to excuse Donald; for it was the main cause of that unkindness and perversity which I find it so hard to forgive. Even now, when I think how he used to discharge it on the poor little thing, as if it had been her fault, I have to remind myself that the lamb's innocence made her a little trying.

She couldn't understand why Donald didn't want to have her with him in his library any more while he read or wrote. It seemed to her sheer cruelty to shut her out now when she was ill, seeing that, before she was ill, she had always had her chair by the fireplace, where she would sit over her book or her embroidery for hours without speaking, hardly daring to breathe lest she should interrupt him. Now was the time, she thought, when she might expect a little indulgence.

Do you suppose that Donald would give his feelings as an explanation? Not he. They were his feelings, and he wouldn't talk about them; and he never explained anything you didn't understand.

That — her wanting to sit with him in the library — was what they had the awful quarrel about, the day before she died; that and the paper-weight, the precious paper-weight that he wouldn't let anybody touch because George Meredith had given it him. It was a brass block, surmounted by a white alabaster Buddha painted and gilt. And it had an inscription: To Donald Dunbar, from George Meredith. In Affectionate Regard.

My brother was extremely attached to this paper-weight, partly, I'm afraid, because it proclaimed his intimacy with the great man. For this reason it was known in the family ironically as the Token.

It stood on Donald's writing-table at his elbow, so near the ink-pot that the white Buddha had received a splash or two. And this evening Cicely had come in to us in the library, and had annoyed Donald by staying in it when he wanted her to go. She had taken up the Token, and was cleaning it to give herself a pretext.

She died after the quarrel they had then.

It began by Donald shouting at her.

'What are you doing with that paper-weight?'

'Only getting the ink off.'

I can see her now, the darling. She had wetted the corner of her handkerchief with her little pink tongue and was rubbing the Buddha. Her hands had begun to tremble when he shouted.

'Put it down, can't you? I've told you not to touch my things.'

'You inked him,' she said. She was giving one last rub as he rose, threatening.

'Put— it—down.'

And, poor child, she did put it down. Indeed, she dropped it at his feet.

The Token

'Oh!' she cried out, and stooped quickly and picked it up. Her large tear-glassed eyes glanced at him, frightened.

'He isn't broken.'

'No thanks to you,' he growled.

'You beast! You know I'd die rather than break anything you care about.'

'It will be broken some day, if you will come meddling.'

I couldn't bear it. I said, 'You mustn't yell at her like that. You know she can't stand it. You'll make her ill again.'

That sobered him for a moment.

'I'm sorry,' he said; but he made it sound as if he wasn't.

'If you're sorry,' she persisted, 'you might let me stay with you. I'll be as quiet as a mouse.'

'No; I don't want you — I can't work with you in the room.'

'You can work with Helen.'

'You're not Helen.'

'He only means he's not in love with me, dear.'

'He means I'm no use to him. I know I'm not. I can't even sit on his manuscripts and keep them down. He cares more for that damned paper-weight than he does for me.'

'Well — George Meredith gave it me.'

'And nobody gave you me. I gave myself.'

That worked up his devil again. He had to torment her.

'It can't have cost you much,' he said. 'And I may remind you that the paper-weight has some intrinsic value.'

With that he left her.

'What's he gone out for?' she asked me.

'Because he's ashamed of himself; I suppose,' I said. 'Oh, Cicely, why will you answer him?'

You know what he is.'

'No!' she said passionately — 'that's what I don't know. I never have known.'

'At least you know he's in love with you.'

'He has a queer way of showing it, then. He never does anything but stamp and shout and find fault with me — all about an old paper-weight!'

She was caressing it as she spoke, stroking the alabaster Buddha as if it had been a live thing.

'His poor Buddha. Do you think it'll break if I stroke it? Better not. Honestly, Helen, I'd rather die than hurt anything he really cared for. Yet look how he hurts me.'

'Some men must hurt the things they care for.'

'I wouldn't mind his hurting, if only I knew he cared. Helen I'd give anything to know.'

'I think you might know.' 'I don't! I don't!' 'Well, you'll know some day.' 'Never! He won't tell me.'

'He's Scotch, my dear. It would kill him to tell you.'

'Then how'm I to know! If I died to-morrow I should die not knowing.'

And that night, not knowing, she died.

She died because she had never really known.

The Token

II

We never talked about her. It was not my brother's way. Words hurt him, to speak or to hear them.

He had become more morose than ever, but less irritable, the source of his irritation being gone. Though he plunged into work as another man might have plunged into dissipation, to drown the thought of her, you could see that he had no longer any interest in it; he no longer loved it. He attacked it with a fury that had more hate in it than love. He would spend the greater part of the day and long evenings at nights shut up in his library, only going out for a short walk an hour before dinner. You could see that soon all spontaneous impulses would be checked in him and he would become the creature of habit and routine.

I tried to rouse him, to shake him up out of his deadly groove; but it was no use. The first effort — for he did make efforts — exhausted him, and he sank back into it again.

But he liked to have me with him, and all the time that I could spare from my housekeeping and gardening I spent in the library. I think he didn't like to be left alone there in the place where they had the quarrel that killed her; and I noticed that the cause of it, the Token, had disappeared from his table.

And all her things, everything that could remind him of her, had been put away. It was the dead burying its dead.

Only the chair she had loved remained in its place by the side of the hearth — her chair, if you could call it hers when she wasn't allowed to sit in it. It was always empty, for by tacit consent we both avoided it.

We would sit there for hours at a time without speaking, while he worked and I read or sewed.

I never dared to ask him whether he sometimes had, as I had, the sense of Cicely's presence there, in that room which she had so longed to enter, from which she had been so cruelly shut out. You couldn't tell what he felt or didn't feel. My brother's face was a heavy, sombre mask; his back, bent over the writing-table, a wall behind which he hid himself.

You must know that twice in my life I have more than felt these presences; I have seen them.

This may be because I am on both sides a Highland Celt, and my mother had the same uncanny gift. I had never spoken of these appearances to Donald because he would have put it all down to what he calls my hysterical fancy. And I am sure that if he ever felt or saw anything himself he would never own it.

I ought to explain that each time the vision was premonitory of a death (in Cicely's case I had no such warning), and each time it only lasted for a second; also that, though I am certain I was wide awake each time, it is open to anybody to say I was asleep and dreamed it. The queer thing was that I was neither frightened nor surprised.

And so I was neither surprised nor frightened now, the first evening that I saw her.

It was in the early autumn twilight, about six o'clock. I was sitting in my place in front of the fireplace; Donald was in his armchair on my left, smoking a pipe, as usual, before the lamplight drove him out of doors into the dark.

I had had so strong a sense of Cicely's being there in the room that I felt nothing but a sudden sacred pang that was half joy when I looked up and saw her sitting in her chair on my right.

The phantasm was perfect and vivid, as if it had been flesh and blood. I should have thought that it was Cicely herself if I hadn't known that she was dead. She wasn't looking at me; her face was turned to Donald with that longing, wondering look it used to have, searching his face for the secret that he kept from her.

I looked at Donald. His chin was sunk a little, the pipe drooping from the corner of his mouth.

He was heavy, absorbed in his smoking. It was clear that he did not see what I saw.

And whereas those other phantasms that I told you about disappeared at once, this lasted some little time, and always with its eyes fixed on Donald. It even lasted while Donald stirred, while he stooped forward, knocking the ashes out of his pipe against the hob, while he sighed, stretched himself, turned, and left the room. Then, as the door shut behind him, the whole figure went out suddenly — not flickering, but like a light you switch off.

I saw it again the next evening and the next, at the same time and in the same place, and with the same look turned towards Donald. And again I was sure that he did not see it. But I thought, from his uneasy sighing and stretching, that he had some sense of something there.

No; I was not frightened. I was glad. You see, I loved Cicely. I remember thinking, 'At last, at last, you poor

The Token

darling, you've got in. And you can stay as long as you like now. He can't turn you away.'

The first few times I saw her just as I have said. I would look up and find the phantasm there, sitting in her chair. And it would disappear suddenly when Donald left the room. Then I knew I was alone.

But as I grew used to its presence, or perhaps as it grew used to mine and found out that I was not afraid of it, that indeed I loved to have it there, it came, I think, to trust me, so that I was made aware of all its movements. I would see it coming across the room from the doorway, making straight for its desired place, and settling in a little curled-up posture of satisfaction, appeased, as if it had expected opposition that it no longer found. Yet that it was not happy, I could still see by its look at Donald. That never changed. It was as uncertain of him now as she had been in her lifetime.

Up till now, the sixth or seventh time I had seen it, I had no clue to the secret of its appearance; and its movements seemed to me mysterious and without purpose. Only two things were clear: it was Donald that it came for — the instant he went it disappeared; and I never once saw it when I was alone. And always it chose this room and this hour before the lights came, when he sat doing nothing. It was clear also that he never saw it.

But that it was there with him sometimes when I was not I knew; for, more than once, things on Donald's writing-table, books or papers, would be moved out of their places, though never beyond reach; and he would ask me whether I had touched them.

'Either you lie,' he would say, 'or I'm mistaken. I could have sworn I put those notes on the left-hand side; and they aren't there now.' And once — that was wonderful — I saw, yes, I saw her come and push the lost thing under his hand. And all he said was, 'Well, I'm — I could have sworn —'

For whether it had gained a sense of security, or whether its purpose was now finally fixed, it began to move regularly about the room, and its movements had evidently a reason and an aim.

It was looking for something.

One evening we were all there in our places, Donald silent in his chair and I in mine, and it seated in its attitude of wonder and of waiting, when suddenly I saw Donald looking at me.

'Helen,' he said, 'what are you staring for like that?'

I started. I had forgotten that the direction of my eyes would be bound, sooner or later, to betray me.

I heard myself stammer, 'W — w — was I staring?'

'Yes. I wish you wouldn't.'

I knew what he meant. He didn't want me to keep on looking at that chair; he didn't want to know that I was thinking of her. I bent my head closer over my sewing, so that I no longer had the phantasm in sight.

It was then I was aware that it had risen and was crossing the hearthrug. It stopped at Donald's knees, and stood there, gazing at him with a look so intent and fixed that I could not doubt that this had some significance. I saw it put out its hand and touch him; and, though Donald sighed and shifted his position, I could tell that he had neither seen nor felt anything.

It turned to me then — and this was the first time it had given any sign that it was conscious of my presence — it turned on me a look of supplication, such supplication as I had seen on my sister's face in her lifetime, when she could do nothing with him and implored me to intercede.

At the same time three words formed themselves in my brain with a sudden, quick impulsion, as if I had heard them cried.

'Speak to him — speak to him!'

I knew now what it wanted. It was trying to make itself seen by him, to make itself felt, and it was in anguish at finding that it could not. It knew then that I saw it, and the idea had come to it that it could make use of me to get through to him. I think I must have guessed even then what it had come for.

I said, 'You asked me what I was staring at, and I lied. I was looking at Cicely's chair.'

I saw him wince at the name.

'Because,' I went on, 'I don't know how you feel, but I always feel as if she were there.'

He said nothing; but he got up, as though to shake off the oppression of the memory I had evoked, and stood leaning on the chimney-piece with his back to me.

The phantasm retreated to its place, where it kept its eyes fixed on him as before.

I was determined to break down his defences, to make him say something it might hear, give some sign that it would understand.

The Token

'Donald, do you think it's a good thing, a kind thing, never to talk about her?'

'Kind? Kind to whom?'

'To yourself, first of all.'

'You can leave me out of it.'

'To me, then.'

'What's it got to do with you?' His voice was as hard and cutting as he could make it.

'Everything,' I said. 'You forget, I loved her.' He was silent. He did at least respect my love for her. 'But that wasn't what she wanted.'

That hurt him. I could feel him stiffen under it.

'You see, Donald,' I persisted, 'I like thinking about her.' It was cruel of me; but I had to break him.

'You can think as much as you like,' he said, 'provided you stop talking.'

'All the same, it's as bad for you,' I said, 'as it is for me, not talking.'

'I don't care if it is bad for me. I can't talk about her, Helen. I don't want to.'

'How do you know,' I said, 'it isn't bad for her?'

'For her?'

I could see I had roused him.

'Yes. If she really is there, all the time.'

'How d'you mean, there?'

'Here — in this room. I tell you I can't get over that feeling that she's here.'

'Oh, feel, feel,' he said; 'but don't talk to me about it!'

And he left the room, flinging himself out in anger. And instantly her flame went out.

I thought, 'How he must have hurt her!' It was the old thing over again: I trying to break him down, to make him show her; he beating us both off, punishing us both. You see, I knew now what she had come back for: she had come back to find out whether he loved her. With a longing unquenched by death, she had come back for certainty. And now, as always, my clumsy interference had only made him more hard, more obstinate. I thought, 'If only he could see her!'

But as long as he beats her off he never will.'

Still, if I could once get him to believe that she was there — I made up my mind that the next time I saw the phantasm I would tell him.

The next evening and the next its chair was empty, and I judged that it was keeping away, hurt by what it had heard the last time.

But the third evening we were hardly seated before I saw it.

It was sitting up, alert and observant, not staring at Donald as it used to, but looking round the room, as if searching for something that it missed.

'Donald,' I said, 'if I told you that Cicely is in the room now, I suppose you wouldn't believe me?'

'Is it likely?'

'No. All the same, I see her as plainly as I see you.'

The phantasm rose and moved to his side.

'She's standing close beside you.'

And now it moved and went to the writing-table. I turned and followed its movements. It slid its open hands over the table, touching everything, unmistakably feeling for something it believed to be there.

I went on. 'She's at the writing-table now. She's looking for something.'

It stood back, baffled and distressed. Then suddenly it began opening and shutting the drawers, without a sound, searching each one in turn.

I said, 'Oh, she's trying the drawers now!'

Donald stood up. He was not looking at the place where it was. He was looking hard at me, in anxiety and a sort of fright. I suppose that was why he remained unaware of the opening and shutting of the drawers.

It continued its desperate searching.

The bottom drawer stuck fast. I saw it pull and shake it, and stand back again, baffled.

'It's locked,' I said.

'What's locked?'

The Token

'That bottom drawer.'

'Nonsense! It's nothing of the kind.'

'It is, I tell you. Give me the key. Oh, Donald, give it me!'

He shrugged his shoulders; but all the same he felt in his pockets for the key, which he gave me with a little teasing gesture, as if he humoured a child.

I unlocked the drawer, pulled it out to its full length, and there, thrust away at the back, out of sight, I found the Token.

I had not seen it since the day of Cicely's death.

'Who put it there?' I asked.

'I did.'

'Well, that's what she was looking for,' I said.

I held out the Token to him on the palm of my hand, as if it were the proof that I had seen her.

'Helen,' he said gravely, 'I think you must be ill.'

'You think so? I'm not so ill that I don't know what you put it away for,' I said. 'It was because she thought you cared for it more than you did for her.'

'You can remind me of that? There must be something very badly wrong with you, Helen,' he said.

'Perhaps. Perhaps I only want to know what she wanted. . . You did care for her, Donald?'

I couldn't see the phantasm now, but I could feel it, close, close, vibrating, palpitating, as I drove him.

'Care?' he cried. 'I was mad with caring for her! And she knew it.'

'She didn't. She wouldn't be here now if she knew.'

At that he turned from me to his station by the chimney-piece. I followed him there.

'What are you going to do about it?' I said.

'Do about it?'

'What are you going to do with this?'

I thrust the Token close towards him. He drew back, staring at it with a look of concentrated hate and loathing.

'Do with it?' he said. 'The damned thing killed her! This is what I'm going to do with it —'

He snatched it from my hand and hurled it with all his force against the bars of the grate. The Buddha fell, broken to bits, among the ashes.

Then I heard him give a short, groaning cry. He stepped forward, opening his arms, and I saw the phantasm slide between them. For a second it stood there, folded to his breast; then suddenly, before our eyes, it collapsed in a shining heap, a flicker of light on the floor, at his feet.

Then that went out too.

The Token

III

I never saw it again.

Neither did my brother. But I didn't know this till some time afterwards; for, somehow, we hadn't cared to speak about it. And in the end it was he who spoke first.

We were sitting together in that room, one evening in November, when he said, suddenly and irrelevantly: 'Helen — do you never see her now?'

'No,' I said—'Never!'

'Do you think, then, she doesn't come?'

'Why should she?' I said. 'She found what she came for. She knows what she wanted to know.'

'And that — was what?'

'Why, that you loved her.'

His eyes had a queer, submissive, wistful look.

'You think that was why she came back?' he said.