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After Such Kindness

Written by Gaynor Arnold

Published by Tindal Street Press

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After Such Kindness

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Tindal
Street
Press

First published in 2012
by Tindal Street Press Ltd
217 The Custard Factory, Gibb Street, Birmingham, B9 4AA
www.tindalstreet.co.uk

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A CIP catalogue reference for this book is available
from the British Library

ISBN: 978 1 906994 37 2
Export ISBN: 978 1 906994 94 5

Typeset by Tetragon

Printed and bound in Great Britain
by CPI Mackays, Chatham, ME5 8TD

My father was standing in the centre of the drawing room and when we were all assembled, he addressed us as if he were in his pulpit, although smiling a good deal more. 'Our dear little Daisy is eleven years old today, and we are celebrating her birthday in a way in which I hope she – and all of us – will remember for many years to come. And now, a small gift to commemorate the occasion.' And he took a rectangular parcel down from the top of the piano and presented it to me. 'From your loving parents. We hope you will make good use of it.'

'Thank you, Papa. And Mama.' I kissed them both, then pulled the pretty wrapping open very carefully. I knew it was a book, a very heavy one, and was excited to think which of my favourite stories it would be – or indeed if it would be a new one I'd never read. It was a handsome red and gold volume, but it had no title and, when I opened the cover, I discovered all the pages were blank, except for the faint, ruled lines clearly waiting to be filled. I wanted to weep with disappointment, but held my chin firm.

'It's a journal, Daisy,' said my father, in explanation. 'And, as its name suggests, it is for daily use. It is never too early to learn habits of reflection and contemplation and, as such, it is an invaluable aid for recording the successes and failures of one's battle towards self-improvement in this life.'

My sisters smiled brightly at me, as if echoing these sentiments. I couldn't recall whether they themselves had been given journals for their eleventh birthdays and, if so, whether they had taken the trouble to write in them daily. Since they had moved out of the nursery years before I knew little of what went on in their lives. They had their meals downstairs, and no longer shared the services of Nettie; Hannah now seeing to their clothes and hair. However, Mama could see I was dismayed, and touched my hand, adding, 'You're so very good at reading, Daisy, and although your spelling can be a little uncertain, Miss

Prentiss says all your essays show great imagination and have such excellent punctuation! We thought it would be nice for you to have somewhere to write down whatever you pleased. You could record all about the picnic, for example.'

'Yes, Mama,' I said, rather more dully than I intended, disappointment stinging in my throat. When I looked up, I caught Mr Jameson's eye, and I thought he gave me a sympathetic glance, but he looked away so quickly I couldn't tell.

Christiana and Sarah then presented me with a set of six fine cotton handkerchiefs, on each of which they had embroidered the letter *D* intertwined with a daisy flower. 'So you won't lose them and have to borrow ours,' they said, laughing. I couldn't help wondering why everyone was under the impression I would lose things. I considered I was very careful with all my belongings. I had once – *once* – lost my hair ribbon when playing blindman's buff, but Hannah had found it under the piano the next day so it wasn't really lost.

Then, just as Papa began to look at the clock and fret, saying he hoped that my little friends would not be late, Mr Jameson darted out with a long, thin object in his hand and said in his stammering way that he hoped he would be permitted to offer his own small gift. He thrust the parcel into my hands awkwardly, and retired to his habitual spot behind Mama's chair. I was very surprised, and my parents looked quickly at each other, as if it were an unexpected turn of events for them, too. I stood there with the object in my hands, not quite sure what to say.

'Say thank you, Daisy,' said Mama quickly. 'Really, Mr Jameson, there was no need to have gone to such trouble.'

'Thank you,' I said automatically, and I heard him murmur that it had been no trouble at all.

The gift was wrapped in a good deal of brown paper which, once unfixed, came off in a long spiral, and I could see that it

was printed with the name of the umbrella shop in the High. Had Mr Jameson given me an umbrella? As the paper fell away, I saw it was in fact a parasol. A most beautiful parasol in fine stripes of white and cream, with a frill all round the edge and a bow at the top. A most grown-up parasol, quite as nice as Mama's, only smaller. I remember feeling pink with delight, the memory of the wretched journal quite erased. Mama, Papa, Nettie and my sisters all stared as I went to put it up.

'Not in the house, miss,' said Nettie in alarm. 'That's bad luck. Wait until you're outside.'

But, headstrong as I was, I couldn't wait. 'That's just a superstition, Nettie,' I said as I pushed up the lever, and Nettie said nothing more. The parasol opened as smooth as oiled silk. I held it over my head and then rested it on my shoulder and twirled it around as I'd seen young ladies do as they walked with their beaux in the park. 'Oh, thank you, Mr Jameson,' I said, this time with true feeling, and half wanting to embrace him as he stood, cramped and awkward, in the corner. He just nodded his head and smiled quietly to himself.

'How extraordinarily generous,' said my mother with a strange note in her voice. 'You must be careful not to turn her head, Mr Jameson. She is only eleven, after all.'

I thought for a moment she might take the precious thing from me and insist on keeping it until I was older, but at exactly that moment my friends turned through the front gate with Annie's nurse Deedee in charge, and Papa sprang to his feet, saying it was time to be off. They were carrying presents, however, and were anxious that I should open them, which I did as quickly as I could. Emma had brought a jigsaw puzzle of the Crystal Palace in two hundred pieces, Annie a game of Ludo decorated with birds and flowers, and Enid a copy of *Robinson Crusoe* with coloured illustrations. Normally, I would have been delighted at such gifts, but my mind was full of the parasol.

On the walk to the landing stage, Papa took the lead with Mama, and the rest of us followed, crocodile-style, Nettie bringing up the rear with Benjy in her arms and carrying a large cloth bag of nursery supplies. She had taken off her apron in honour of the occasion, although I could see she would have felt more comfortable with it on. She'd put Benjy in a cotton bonnet as a precaution against the sun, and he was squirming about all the time, trying to remove it. Mr Jameson walked ahead of my sisters, wheeling a small cart in which there was a heavy object covered in canvas, which he said he had to be very careful with. Matthews and the garden boy carried the wicker luncheon hamper between them. Hannah carried the summerhouse cushions and a folded rug. I walked along proudly with my parasol, and my friends took it in turns to come under its shade, linking arms with me and squeezing close. From time to time I threw a glance at Mr Jameson. His generosity had suddenly cast him in a much more interesting light and I thought I should try a little harder to be nice to him.

My father, as had been arranged, was to be in charge of one punt and Mr Jameson the other. Papa insisted that Benjy and Nettie should be of the party with himself, Mama and my sisters, and that Mr Jameson would take us four younger girls, as we were light, and Mr Jameson's mysterious canvas object and the luncheon hamper were both heavy. Mama feared Mr Jameson would be too busy managing the pole to pay us children attention, but Father said that we were sensible girls and he trusted us to behave ourselves and not stand up or walk about. 'And we shall be in sight of each other all the way,' he said. 'Nothing can go wrong.'

And so we got in and prepared to set off. Mr Jameson had taken off his dark jacket and rolled up his sleeves and, in spite of his thin build, he had us out into the middle of the river in no time, setting a straight course upstream. Papa was quite left

behind, having become entangled with a punt full of undergraduates who were going in the opposite direction, heading for the Thames. He called out, 'Jameson, you wretch, wait for us!' and Mr Jameson pulled up his pole and let the punt drift while Father pushed out from the bank and set off after us with energetic strokes.

Enid and I lay back on the cushions with the parasol above our heads and with Mr Jameson directly in our line of sight. He kept the punt moving at a steady pace apparently without effort, whereas I could see Papa behind him making much heavier weather, with a lot of water splashing up as he lifted the pole. Mama must have been surprised too, as when their punt came up alongside, she called across saying, 'You are an excellent punter, Mr Jameson. And a dark horse, too; I had never taken you for an athlete.'

'I'm not, Mrs B-Baxter. It's not so much strength you need, as p-precision. I'm no oarsman, unlike the vicar.' He was somewhat breathless, and he stammered as usual, but I thought his voice by no means as squeaky as it had previously seemed. I felt he might be quite nice, deep down, and that was why my father liked him so much. As the journey progressed, he certainly ensured that we four girls were well-entertained. Sometimes he pointed out wild flowers growing on the river edge, or a water vole running along the bank, or a shoal of little fish in the water – and after a while he encouraged us to sing songs or recite poetry.

'Daisy has a poem she can recite,' he said at one time, making me blush. 'How does it go now? *How doth the little crocodile*?' and we all chorused, '*Busy Bee*! It's the *Busy Bee*!' He laughed at that and said he didn't know how he'd made that mistake and were we *absolutely* sure we didn't know the one about the crocodile? And we said we were sure. 'Or the lobster?' he said. 'I am *sure* you know the one about the lobster.' And we said we were sure about that, too. And then he said, 'Dear, dear!

Education is not what it was. I shall have to have a word with Miss Prentiss. In the meantime I shall teach it to you.' And he began to recite:

Said the Stork to the Lobster, 'I'm quite a fair man.
I'll give you a penny; you give me a ham.'
Said the Lobster, in dudgeon, 'It's worth so much more,
I'd rather quite frankly it went to the Poor.'
'Then I'll give you a shilling,' replied the Old Stork.
'As long as you throw in a knife and a fork.'

We all laughed and he made us recite it with him until we had learned it too. Then he recited some Wordsworth, but again that was all wrong and I hoped Mama could not hear as she was very fond of Wordsworth. What I particularly remember, though, was how delightful he seemed to find the four of us as we chatted and laughed and contradicted him.

It took us two hours before we arrived at our destination. The first stretch of river was shallow and overhung with willows, but once we had passed the bathing pond, the river was deeper and more open. Here, strength was more advantageous than style, and my father shot ahead. I could see that he hadn't been pleased that Mr Jameson had demonstrated such prowess at the start, and was anxious to show off his skills. I remember wondering, as I watched his smiling face, whether Papa ever recorded the sin of pride in a journal of his own.

The chosen picnic spot was on a sloping bank and we could see the roof and upper windows of a big house just beyond the trees. We were far upstream, well beyond the range of undergraduate punters and oarsmen, and the river was quiet. It was ten minutes past midday, so there was hardly any shade to be had, but Papa said the sun would soon come round, and in the meantime we ladies were all to keep on our straw bonnets

and make use of our parasols – 'Those that have them,' he said laughingly. He and Mr Jameson drew the punts into the bank and secured them with the poles, skewering them deep into the Cherwell mud and gravel. Then Papa helped us all disembark, and Mr Jameson brought the cushions and rugs for us to sit on, laying them out at the top of the slope so we could view the river and the countryside beyond. It was the best prospect along the whole river, said Papa. Then he and Mr Jameson struggled to lift the hamper from the punt. Papa took the strain, and with a great effort they brought the hamper onto the bank. 'Rowing muscles, you see, Jameson,' Papa said with a laugh, and I thought of all the caps and trophies in his study, and the great brown oar that hung over the mantelpiece.

Mama sat Benjy next to her and held him under her parasol while Nettie unpacked the hamper, starting with the cloth, then the plates, cups and cutlery as well as glasses for our lemonade. Cook had packed the bottles in ice and the lemonade was very cold, so we asked if we could drink it immediately, and Papa agreed. Cook, at Mama's request, had packed several bottles of ale for Papa and Mr Jameson, but Mr Jameson said he would prefer the lemonade, and drank a great deal of it all in one draught, which made me worry that we would not have enough left. He assisted Nettie in taking the items from the basket and setting them out on the tablecloth: poached salmon on a plate, little jars of shrimps and potted meats all sealed with oiled paper, dainty white sandwiches of egg and cress, and others of cucumber, soft bread rolls with curls of butter in a cold dish with the water still glistening on them, two cold fowls divided into portions, a bacon and egg pie, asparagus tops, and a half of very best game pie for the gentlemen.

Benjy was most taken with the game pie, and my mother had difficulty preventing him from helping himself. 'Do take him now, and give him something suitable to eat, Nurse, or he'll be

crawling all over the tablecloth. Cook's minced him some lamb and potato, and there's a rice pudding for afterwards.' So poor Nettie had to sit and feed Benjy while the rest of us tucked into the delicacies before us, and I began to wonder why Papa had insisted that they come on the outing. Benjy would have been none the wiser as to what he had missed.

We had jellies afterwards, and then some cake. We all felt rather dozy after all the food, and Benjy fell fast asleep in Nettie's lap while Mama lay back under a tree. My sisters went off with Papa in search of insects for his collection, but my friends and I lay in a heap under the parasol. Annie's sister was shortly to be married, and Annie was to be a bridesmaid, so we had to hear all about the preparations and the immense dullness (so she said) of the fiancé. Then we turned our attention to Miss Prentiss and her shortcomings. 'Everything she teaches us is dull,' said Emma, plucking a stem of grass and chewing it. 'All she says is, *Look up, speak nicely, and don't twiddle your fingers all the time!*'

After a while I noticed that Mr Jameson had taken out a sketch pad and was drawing us. He was watching us very intently and had a smile on his face. 'You young ladies find everything remarkably dull,' he said. 'You are like the four sisters in the story.'

'What four sisters?' asked Annie, who was always bold and didn't seem to mind addressing Mr Jameson in spite of not knowing him at all. 'I haven't heard that story.'

'Why, the four sisters who lived in a well,' he said.

'In a well? Why would they live in a well? That's silly!' she said, pouting.

'On the contrary, it's very *sensible*,' he said. 'They lived in a well so they could learn to draw.'

'But how can you learn to draw in a well?' said Enid, in her tiny, breathy voice. 'It would be dark and wet and you wouldn't be able to see. And what would there be to draw?'

'Water, of course, Miss Enid. These four sisters became very good at it and drew water all day long. Of course, water is a very *dull* thing to draw and they complained and complained, saying how they wished they could be drawing breath or money from the bank instead.'

I laughed, thinking again that Mr Jameson was really a lot funnier than he looked. And I noticed that while he was talking to us his stammer had almost disappeared. But Annie interrupted. 'Are you drawing *us*?' she said eagerly.

'Indeed not. The four young ladies in *this* picture are busy killing time and I'm sure that none of you well-brought-up children would dream of such an act of homicide.'

'But "killing time" is a metaphor,' I told him, pleased to be able to show off my knowledge. 'Or maybe it's just an expression. At any rate, you can't *really* do it.'

He raised his eyebrows. 'Can't you?' he said. 'Maybe you've never tried hard enough. Supposing Time was stopped in his tracks right this minute? Just think – you'd never have to go to Miss Prentiss's lessons ever again or learn about simile or syntax, précis or parsing, superlatives or subjunctives, let alone the capital of Hindustan and the theorem of Pythagoras.'

'Well,' I said. 'I suppose it would be nice.' Although, secretly, I liked school and learning all about history and geography.

'But on the other hand,' he said, 'it would always be your birthday, which might not be so nice.'

'I think that would be *very* nice,' Annie said, butting in as usual. 'I like birthdays.'

'You wouldn't like them so much if you had one every day,' he said. 'Just think – you'd have to eat that immense picnic luncheon over and over again, starting with the sandwiches and chicken; and working through the salmon and shrimps. And then, as soon as you finish with the jellies and cake, you have to start again with the sandwiches, and so ad infinitum.'

'We'd be sick,' said Emma, making a face. 'My brother Ralph was horribly sick after eating too much at his birthday party.'

'But he's a little boy,' said Mr Jameson with a shudder. 'And boys are full of snips and snails as you very well know.'

'What are little girls full of, then?' Enid asked shyly.

'Well, don't you know the song? *Sugar and spice and all things nice*?' he said, smiling at her. 'I wouldn't wish you to get swell-headed, little Enid, because it would hurt too much – but girls, in my opinion, are the most delightful creatures in the world.'

'Not always, Jameson.' My father came up behind us. 'Girls always have a lot to say for themselves.'

'Well, it would be strange if they had a lot to say for *other people*.' Mr Jameson laughed.

'Yes,' said Annie. 'Because you'd have to get inside other people's brains first. You'd have to coil up really small, and be squashed against the sides of their heads.'

'Ugh, that's horrid,' said Emma.

'Quite horrid. But there's no need for such bodily contortions,' said Mr Jameson. 'Try using your imagination, little ladies. That's the best way to get into someone else's head. There's space for everything there – whole countries and universes if you have a mind to it.'

I couldn't help thinking about this, and how you can carry so many pictures in your mind even though your actual head is so small in size, and I thought Mr Jameson was very clever and not at all like the rest of the grown-up people I knew.