Philpotts Finds Himself

Beatrice Redpath

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Philpotts finds Himself

After a Day at the Beach this Man
Returns Home a Hero, Wondering
How It All Happened

By BEATRICE REDPATH

Illustrations by E. J. Dinsmore

Evelyn as usual was sitting at the piano, making little runs and trills, her fingers fluttering like white butterflies over the keys. Adele had thrown herself negligently down on the broad couch, her long neck dropping gracefully as she rested her small pointed chin in one hand. Charlotte was sitting at the writing-table, making out a list of the guests who were to be invited. Her head was very erect beneath her pyramid of gray curls, the inevitable black ribbon around her throat.

"And you think that Friday will be quite the best day to invite them?"

A little rush of light notes, and then Evelyn's slightly drawling tones.

"Yes, of course it is. A holiday is always so dreadful unless there is something very special to do."

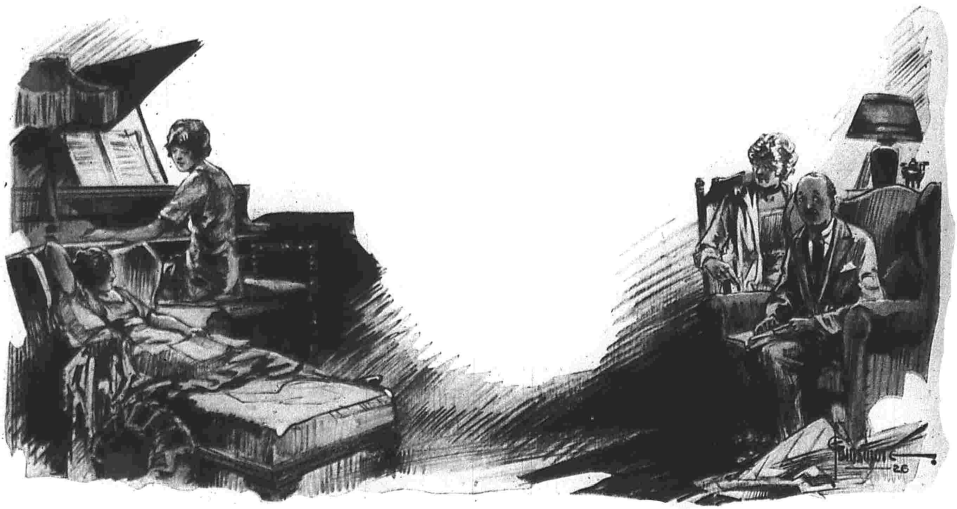
"I don't see any sense in holidays at all," remarked Adele languidly.

Mr. Philpotts stirred uneasily in his chair beside the window. He was a small man with a round face and a naïve expression. His hair was thin, and he made an effort to brush it so as to give no appearance of baldness. He had an instinctive feeling that Charlotte and the girls did not like bald-headed men.

He fluttered the pages of the book, gave a nervous cough and laid the book on his knee, abandoning the pretence of reading. The movement seemed to recall the fact of his existence to Charlotte. She swept him with a cool indifferent glance.

"I suppose you won't be taking a holiday on Friday, Norman?"

"Well, I was thinking of it," he faltered. "I rather thought I'd paint the window frames. I've been wanting to do it for some time, and Friday seemed to be a good day."



Mr. Philpotts laid the book on his knee. "I rather thought I'd paint the window frames. I've been wanting to do it for some time, and Friday seemed to be a good day."

"Oh, well, of course you couldn't possibly do that when the girls are having a party. We couldn't have the smell of paint in the house. I shouldn't think it was very necessary for you to take a holiday with Saturday and Sunday coming directly afterwards."

"The office will be closed," he said, fingering the leaves of his book; "but of course I could do something else."

"Yes, of course," put in Adele, "Why don't you take a day in the country? That would be nice for you."

Her tone sounded as though she were giving him a large and beautiful present.

There was a pause. Mr. Philpotts felt as though Adele were waiting for him to thank her for her generosity. Charlotte tapped her list with the point of her pencil. It was quite apparent that she was impatient that the question of how he should be disposed of for the day should be decided instantly.

"I believe that there's to be a regatta at Port Burleigh on Friday," Evelyn said from the piano, "that would be just the thing for father."

"Why, yes, you'd enjoy that, I'm sure," Charlotte said with quick relief. "You could leave here early in the morning and spend the whole day on the

sands. Just the very thing," she repeated, her narrow lips closing with a snap.

So that was settled. Mr. Philpotts gave a faint sigh and picked up his book again. But instead of the print on the page he saw hot yellow sands, little sail-boats dotted meaninglessly about on the glazed blue water, crowds eating popcorn, chewing gum, drinking ginger ale out of bottles, people throwing orange peel and banana skins everywhere, greasy meals in second-rate hotels, trains loaded with sweating humanity, screaming children and tired women—everyone thrusting and pushing him about.

He sighed again. He had looked forward to quite a different sort of holiday, but of course if the girls were giving a party he would have to be out of the way.

"I'm sorry about the window frames," he said with a note of regret in his voice. "It would have been such a good chance to paint them. I could have given them a second coat on Saturday."

He saw their look of disdain and retired hastily into his book. He felt a shade embarrassed that he should have spoken about anything so commonplace as window frames. An apologetic expression came over his round face, and he looked from one to the other a little wistfully. He wanted so much to please them. He was so proud of them all. Evelyn, who could play such delicious notes on the piano, fantastic arias, and light tripping mazurkas, with such ease and deftness; Adele, who had such a concise way of speaking, clipping her words as though they were bright bits of silk snipped off with a pair of sharp scissors; Charlotte, whose frosty manner and erect carriage he felt sure had been handed down to her as a heritage through successive generations. He was tremendously proud of them. Charlotte and the girls always seemed to him like beautiful white swans, floating so leisurely down the smooth clear stream of their lives. He quite recognized that it was a privilege to belong to them. But he often wished that he didn't feel so hopelessly inferior.

He knew that you only had to fling a glance in his direction to see just what he was. There were many dozens like him. They filled the street cars, crowded into the trains, came tumbling out of offices—short men with receding hair and a steadily increasing waistband.

He could scarcely expect Charlotte and the girls to look up to him, to ask his opinion or take his advice. It would seem quite absurd if Charlotte with her forceful character were ever to appeal to him. She was so self-sufficient, so adamant. He could never imagine her asking either for his love or his

pity. All he could ever give her was his admiration and respect. That was all she wanted from him.

* * * * *

Friday, and the sun beating down from the sky that was without fleck or cloud. Mr. Philpotts thought of those white hot rays beating down on the wide surface of water, and his flesh shrivelled.

"It's a wonderful day for a holiday," Evelyn cried as they left the breakfast table: "You'll have a perfectly splendid time."

"Splendid," echoed Adele.

"You really should start at once, Norman," Charlotte's tone was flurried. "You don't want to miss your train."

Mr. Philpotts glanced at the clock, which was ticking away so industriously, as though it were in league with them to dispatch him on his way with the greatest possible speed.

"I'm just starting," he said in a flat dull tone.

It was a pity, he thought, as he passed the front room, which was already filled with little tables, that he should be so fond of his own home. So many men were only too glad to escape from their homes and families. But he liked nothing better than to potter around the house with a paint brush or a hammer.

Charlotte followed him to the door to see that he got off, brushing his cheek lightly with her lips.

"Have a good time," she said absently, "but don't do anything foolish."

"Hang your clothes on a hickory limb, but don't go near the water," ran absurdly through his mind at the intonation of her voice. But he immediately made a mental apology to Charlotte. She hadn't intended her tone to sound like that. It was just that she was anxious to see him started so that she could attend to her preparations for the party.

His new tan shoes squeaked abominably as he walked down the street, which added to his feeling of discomfort as he thought of the day that was before him. It was going to be one of those blistering days on the sands. The air was already heavy and thick. He ran his finger around the edge of his collar where it pressed moist and tight against his neck, and thought of the

cool fragrance of the house, with its large dim rooms filled with vases of flowers, its awnings over every window to shut out the cruel glare.

The trains were crowded, as he had expected. So many people leaving their cool houses to swelter in this heat! He wondered if, like himself, they were forced to go. He couldn't imagine any one crowding into these suffocating trains otherwise. He managed to find a seat beside a woman with a wailing baby in her arms. He felt so sorry for the red-faced scrap of humanity that he forgot for a time his own physical discomfort.

He couldn't escape from the crowds. The sands swarmed with human beings. No one seemed to object to the scorching rays of the sun beating down on the water; no one except himself.

He stood watching the crowds with a sensation of helplessness. Half a mile from the shore small sail-boats were staggering about in a sluggish wind. He started to walk along the shore, determined, if he could, to escape from all these people.

He spent the entire morning walking about the sands.

"I guess you're having a fine holiday," a weary looking woman remarked to him as he sat wedged in between her and a fat man in a long crowded dining-room.

He assented weakly.

"There are a great number of people here today."

"Yes. Ain't it grand?"

In the afternoon he managed to find a secluded corner beneath a sheer cliff. Sharp rocks rose out of the sand, affording small spots of shade. He took out his pipe and leaned against the rock, the bright blaze of the water, and the blue shine of the sky forcing him to close his eyes. A gradual drowsiness stole over him.

He was awakened by the sound of shrill voices near him. People were running past him along the sands. He could hear shouts from a short distance away. He raised himself on his elbow and listened. Something had happened. Perhaps someone was drowning out there on that clear blue water.

He got up and slipped his pipe into his pocket, starting towards where he could see a large crowd gathered. They were all staring up at the cliffs, and as he came nearer he could make out a small white object hanging a short distance from the top.

"It's a little girl," screamed a woman beside him, "it's a dear little girl."

"Why don't they get ropes?"

"They can't get around to the top. It's a mile to the road."

"I saw her tumble over the edge."

"She's caught by her frock."

"Oh, she'll be killed—she'll be killed."

Mr. Philpotts stared up the cliffs at that small scrap of white, while a sick shudder went through him. Any moment she might fall the rest of the way. Apparently no one from the top of the cliffs had noticed what had happened. The child had probably wandered from one of the farmhouses on the road that skirted the cliffs. He looked at the sharp pointed rocks around him and his hands clenched until the nails bit into his flesh. Charlotte had always told him that he was sentimentally foolish where children were concerned. Their little hands had a way of squeezing his heart.

The crowd stood and gaped. Some of the men were running around calling distractedly for ropes.

"What will they do with their silly old ropes? Oh, she'll fall, she'll fall," the woman beside Mr. Philpotts screamed shrilly. "Let them go 'round—let them go 'round to the top—"

"She'll fall before they could get there, auntie," said the girl with her.

"Oh, why don't they do something!" the woman cried in anguish.

Mr. Philpotts stopped and unlaced his new tan shoes, laying them methodically side by side on the sand. He slipped off his coat and dropped it over them. Then he made a run at the low bank of sand at the foot of the cliff. A shout went up from the crowd. He fell back, his hands and feet slipping over the loose sand. He made another attempt, grasped a jutting rock, and slowly drew himself, up out of the sliding sand.

He stared up the straight wall of rock above, and something hardened in him. He had lived by the sea as a boy and had climbed many a cliff looking for sea-birds' eggs. In those days he would not have considered this such an impossible climb. But he had been young then and agile. Now it would be a fight against the years of easy living. He was breathing heavily even after the run up the sand bank. And that was nothing at all.

He looked with a practised eye at the sheer wall and noted tiny crevices, small ledges where he could place his fingers and toes. There were tufts of

grass where he could pause to rest, if they could afford him a foothold.

A sharp rock cut through his sock, burning the skin from his foot. The sickening pain almost made him cry out. Sweat poured down his face. He found a crevice and closed his eyes for an instant, resting motionless.

At the thought of failures, agony twisted his insides. He knew that in all his life he never wanted to do anything as much as to reach that child. For the first time in all the years he could remember, someone depended on him, and on him alone. If he failed there would be no time for anyone else to make a second effort. If he failed— —

He glanced up at the little speck of white, like a cloud against the sky, determination hardening his muscles. As long as that spur of rock held, she was safe. Fortunately she wasn't struggling. Probably she had been stunned by the fall. He must reach her before she regained consciousness.

He saw the way that he must take as he went slowly ziz-zagging tip the face of the cliff. The child was not far from the top, and from there he remembered the cliff receded. That would be their salvation. If the cliff had been sheer to the top he knew that he could never have hoped to rescue her.

At moments the rock crumbled under him. He could hear the broken fragments falling—falling—and then silence. Just as he would fall if his foot slipped, if his hands let go! He trembled with exhaustion. A gull rose screaming from its nest among the rocks, then mounted steadily in the clear air, mocking him with its easy, swinging flight.

A low murmur rose from the crowds as they saw him cling for an instant by one hand, and then pull himself up to a higher spur of rock. The little boats in the bay had crept close to the shore, drifting with flapping sails, while the men watched the progress of that mannikin climbing the cliffs.

Mr. Philpotts had forgotten everything but the child. He was conscious of a great stillness, as though all sound had stopped, as though nature stood by breathless.

And as he climbed the beating of his heart sounded in his ears like great strong chords struck from an instrument by infinite hands. He forgot the pain that was his feet, the agony that was his hands, the sweat that poured down his face like rain. A sob rose in his throat, and a great fullness swelled in him, giving courage to his bleeding feet, strength and power to his tortured arms. He was climbing now, fearlessly, from crumbling ledge to slipping boulder, with a wild clear joy within him.

At length he reached the child. As he drew her into his arms, the silence around him lifted. It was as if all the wheels of the world now began slowly to revolve again after being stopped for a time. There was no longer that tenseness in the air. Everything in nature had relaxed. He could hear the soft, slow lapping of the water on the sands, the buzz of an insect's wings, the clear note of a bird overhead. The sound of the breeze in his ears was like a long-drawn sigh.

The child weighed heavily in his wearied arms. With a gasp of relief he realized that between them and the top was merely a sloping bank. He looked down and saw the curve of a baby check, the soft silken, yellow of her hair as she lay limply against his breast.



He was intolerably weary, and it seemed to him an age before he grasped at an overhanging root.

He was intolerably weary, and it seemed to him an age before he grasped at an overhanging root. With a last desperate effort, he lifted the child and thrust her to safety.

The air around him split with a long, ringing sound. It was as though all the seas of the world had burst their silver boundaries and escaped, foaming

over the earth. It was like nothing he had ever heard before, a long loud roar, increasing and increasing in volume. The earth shivered beneath him.

He was dazed, puzzled at first, while he still clung to the overhanging root. Then, slowly, he dragged himself up and crawled over the edge, to lie exhausted on the grass beside the child.

Still the loud roar increased. He began to realize that it was the sound of cheering—crowds shouting as he had never heard them shout before. The shout of a people whose hearts had been wrung with a great emotion.

He peered over the edge and saw the lifted faces of the crowd. At the sight of him the cheers broke out louder than before. Men frantically waved their hats. Women fluttered handkerchiefs and sobbed in hysterical relief.

Why, he had done nothing to merit this. He had only done what anyone else would have done if he had thought of it in time. It wasn't possible to do anything and leave that little child to fall on those hideous rocks. It had been his idea to see that she didn't—so little and weak and soft as she was.

The cheering was dying down. He was thankful that he wouldn't have to face that excited crowd. He would take the little frightened child home, and when the beach was deserted he could recover his clothes. He was thankful, too, when he got home, that Charlotte and the girls were asleep, and he was able to slip quietly off to bed.

* * * * *

"Whatever have you done to your hands?" Evelyn exclaimed, as Mr. Philpotts helped himself to a slice of toast at breakfast next morning.

Mr. Philpotts flushed.

"I hurt them yesterday," he said quietly.

"I should think you did," Adele remarked crisply, "they look simply too awful."

"Listen to this," Evelyn broke in as she pored over the morning paper between sips of coffee. "Here's something about a man at the Regatta yesterday who climbed one of those terrible cliffs to save a child's life. It says it was the most wonderful exhibition of courage. And this is funny—they can't find out who he was. When they looked for him he had disappeared."

"Why didn't you tell us about it?" Adele inquired.

"Didn't you see it? Weren't you there?"

"Yes, oh, yes."

"Here's some more about him on this page. Well, I must say I call it rather splendid. He must have been a brave man to climb those cliffs. It says that the crowd expected to see him fall and be killed every instant. And all for a child he had never seen before. It's wonderful to think of a man doing a thing like that."

"Yes, indeed it is," put in Charlotte, "most men are so selfish."

"They are trying to find out his name. They want to give him a medal for life-saving."

"Tell us all about it," demanded Adele, "didn't you see him? What was he like? Young and good-looking?"

A slow painful color burned in his face. He felt as though his voice had died in him. So they really thought him brave? Thought that he had done something splendid? But he knew it wasn't so. He was glad, though, that they thought he had done something worth while.

The room grew blurred before him and the pattern on his plate became just blobs of color. He was so glad they were pleased with what he had done.

"Well, you see," he said breathing with difficulty, "it was—why, it was, myself."

There was a breathless pause. He lifted his eyes from his plate And could see them all looking from one to the other, with queer startled expressions. He looked across the table at Charlotte and gave a faint smile, hoping that he wasn't appearing self conscious and silly. Charlotte's eyes were fixed on him with an expression he couldn't make out. He was puzzled and at a loss to understand it.

"You mean, Norman, that you actually climbed those dreadful cliffs at your age to save that child?"

Her voice cut through the stillness of the room.

He nodded, and looked back at his plate. His hands twisted with nervousness.

"Well, I never heard of such a thing in my life. Of all the dreadful selfishness——."

"Do you mean to say, father, that you never thought of us?"

“Don’t you know that if you had been killed we would only have had your wretched insurance to live on?”

“Imagine!” Charlotte’s voice was like ice. “We would have been simply paupers.”

Reproach was in every word, in every tone of their voices. He sat back, crushed, while they stared at him with cold angry eyes.

Selfish! Why, of course he had been selfish. He had never thought of that while climbing the cliffs. Instead he had been full of a curious exhilaration. He had completely forgotten them; he had forgotten himself; he had forgotten the smooth clear streams down which their lives must flow. A man had no right to risk his life when he had a family to support. They were quite right. He should have remembered them. He had been wantonly selfish.

But as he sat in silence, his eyes fixed on his plate, he felt suddenly, to his absolute bewilderment, for some reason that he could not altogether fathom, so sorry for Charlotte, for Adele and Evelyn—so bitterly sorry for them all.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Philpotts Finds Himself* by Beatrice Redpath]