

# THE LOST DAHLIA

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**Free**editorial 

If to have "had losses" be, as affirmed by Dogberry in one of Shakspeare's most charming plays, and corroborated by Sir Walter Scott in one of his most charming romances—(those two names do well in juxtaposition, the great Englishman! the great Scotsman!)—If to have "had losses" be a main proof of credit and respectability, then am I one of the most responsible persons in the whole county of Berks. To say nothing of the graver matters which figure in a banker's book, and make, in these days of pounds, shillings, and pence, so large a part of the domestic tragedy of life—putting wholly aside all the grander transitions of property in house and land, of money on mortgage, and money in the funds—(and yet I might put in my claim to no trifling amount of ill luck in that way also, if I had a mind to try my hand at a dismal story)—counting for nought all weightier grievances, there is not a lady within twenty miles who can produce so large a list of small losses as my unfortunate self.

From the day when, a tiny damsel of some four years old, I first had a pocket-handkerchief to lose, down to this very night—I will not say how many years after—when, as I have just discovered, I have most certainly lost from my pocket the new cambric kerchief which I deposited therein a little before dinner, scarcely a week has passed without some part of my goods and chattels being returned missing. Gloves, muffs, parasols, reticules, have each of them a provoking knack of falling from my hands; boas glide from my neck, rings slip from my fingers, the bow has vanished from my cap, the veil from my bonnet, the sandal from my foot, the brooch from my collar, and the collar from my brooch. The trinket which I liked best, a jewelled pin, the first gift of a dear friend, (luckily the friendship is not necessarily appended to the token,) dropped from my shawl in the midst of the high road; and of shawls themselves, there is no end to the loss. The two prettiest that ever I had in my life, one a splendid specimen of Glasgow manufacture—a scarlet hardly to be distinguished from Cashmere—the other a lighter and cheaper fabric, white in the centre, with a delicate sprig, and a border harmoniously compounded of the deepest blue, the brightest orange, and the richest brown, disappeared in two successive summers and winters, in the very bloom of their novelty, from the folds of the phaeton, in which they had been deposited for safety—fairly blown overboard! If I left things about, they were lost. If I put them away, they were lost. They were lost in the drawers—they were lost out And if for a miracle I had them safe under lock and key, why, then, I lost my keys! I was certainly the most unlucky person under the sun. If there was nothing else to lose, I was fain to lose myself—I mean my way; bewildered in these Aberleigh lanes of ours, or in the woodland recesses of the Penge, as if haunted by that fairy, Robin Good-fellow, who led Hermia and Helena such a dance in the Midsummer Night's Dream. Alas! that there should be no Fairies now-a-days, or rather no true believers in Fairies, to help us to bear the burthen of our own mortal carelessness.

It was not quite all carelessness, though! Some ill luck did mingle with a great deal of mismanagement, as the "one poor happ'orth of bread" with the huge gallon of sack in the bill of which Poin picked Falstaff's pocket when he was asleep behind the arras. Things belonging to me, or things that I cared for, did contrive to

get lost, without my having any hand in the matter. For instance, if out of the variety of "talking birds," starlings, jackdaws, and magpies, which my father delights to entertain, any one particularly diverting or accomplished, more than usually coaxing and mischievous, happened to attract my attention, and to pay me the compliment of following at my heels, or perching upon my shoulder, the gentleman was sure to hop off. My favourite mare, Pearl, the pretty docile creature which draws my little phaeton, has such a talent for leaping, that she is no sooner turned out in either of our meadows, than she disappears. And Dash himself, paragon of spaniels, pet of pets, beauty of beauties, has only one shade of imperfection—would be thoroughly faultless, if it were not for a slight tendency to run away. He is regularly lost four or five times every winter, and has been oftener cried through the streets of Belford, and advertised in the county newspapers, than comports with a dog of his dignity. Now, these mischances clearly belong to that class of accidents commonly called casualties, and are quite unconnected with any infirmity of temperament on my part I cannot help Pearl's proficiency in jumping, nor Dash's propensity to wander through the country; neither had I any hand in the loss which has given its title to this paper, and which, after so much previous dallying, I am at length about to narrate.

The autumn before last, that is to say, above a year ago, the boast and glory of my little garden was a dahlia called the Phoebus. How it came there, nobody very distinctly knew, nor where it came from, nor how we came by it, nor how it came by its own most appropriate name. Neither the lad who tends our flowers, nor my father, the person chiefly concerned in procuring them, nor I myself, who more even than my father or John take delight and pride in their beauty, could recollect who gave us this most splendid plant, or who first instructed us as to the style and title by which it was known. Certes never was blossom fitlier named. Regular as the sun's face in an almanack, it had a tint of golden scarlet, of ruddy yellow, which realised Shakspeare's gorgeous expression of "flame-coloured." The sky at sunset sometimes puts on such a hue, or a fire at Christmas when it burns red as well as bright. The blossom was dazzling to look upon. It seemed as if there were light in the leaves, like that coloured-lamp of a flower, the Oriental Poppy. Phoebus was not too glorious a name for that dahlia. The Golden-haired Apollo might be proud of such an emblem. It was worthy of the god of day; a very Phoenix of floral beauty.

Every dahlia fancier who came into our garden or who had an opportunity of seeing a bloom elsewhere; and, sooth to say, we were rather ostentatious in our display; John put it into stands, and jars, and baskets, and dishes; Dick stuck it into Dash's collar, his own button-hole, and Pearl's bridle; my father presented it to such lady visitors as he delighted to honour; and I, who have the habit of dangling a flower, generally a sweet one, caught myself more than once rejecting the spicy clove and the starry jessamine, the blossomed myrtle and the tuberose, my old fragrant favourites, for this scentless (but triumphant) beauty; everybody who beheld the Phoebus begged for a plant or a cutting; and we, generous in our ostentation, willing to redeem the vice by the virtue, promised as many plants and cuttings as we could reasonably imagine the root might be made to produce\*—perhaps rather more; and half the dahlia growers round rejoiced over the glories of

the gorgeous flower, and speculated, as the wont is now, upon seedling after seedling to the twentieth generation.

*\* It is wonderful how many plants may, by dint of forcing, and cutting and forcing again, be extracted from one root. But the experiment is not always safe. Nature sometimes avenges herself for the encroachments of art, by weakening the progeny. The Napoleon Dahlia, for instance, the finest of last year's seedlings, being over-propagated, this season has hardly produced one perfect bloom, even in the hands of the most skilful cultivators.*

Alas for the vanity of human expectations! February came, the twenty-second of February, the very St. Valentine of dahlias, when the roots which have been buried in the ground during the winter are disinterred, and placed in a hotbed to put forth their first shoots previous to the grand operations of potting and dividing them. Of course the first object of search in the choicest corner of the nicely labelled hoard, was the Phoebus: but no Phoebus was forthcoming; root and label had vanished bodily! There was, to be sure, a dahlia without a label, which we would gladly have transformed into the missing treasure; but as we speedily discovered a label without a dahlia, it was but too obvious that they belonged to each other. Until last year we might have had plenty of the consolation which results from such divorces of the name from the thing; for our labels, sometimes written upon parchment, sometimes upon leather, sometimes upon wood, as each material happened to be recommended by gardening authorities, and fastened on with packthread, or whipcord, or silk twist, had generally parted company from the roots, and frequently become utterly illegible, producing a state of confusion which most undoubtedly we never expected to regret: but this year we had followed the one perfect system of labels of unglazed china, highly varnished after writing on them, and fastened on by wire; and it had answered so completely, that one, and one only, had broken from its moorings. No hope could be gathered from that quarter. The Phoebus was gone. So much was clear; and our loss being fully ascertained, we all began, as the custom is, to divert our grief and exercise our ingenuity by different guesses as to the fate of the vanished treasure.

My father, although certain that he had written the label, and wired the root, had his misgivings about the place in which it had been deposited, and half suspected that it had slipt in amongst a basket which we had sent as a present to Ireland; I myself, judging from a similar accident which had once happened to a choice hyacinth bulb, partly thought that one or other of us might have put it for care and safety in some such very snug corner, that it would be six months or more before it turned up; John, impressed with a high notion of the money-value of the property and estimating it something as a keeper of the regalia might estimate the most precious of the crown jewels, boldly affirmed that it was stolen; and Dick, who had just had a *démêlé* with the cook, upon the score of her refusal to dress a beef-steak for a sick greyhound, asserted, between jest and earnest, that that hard-hearted official had either ignorantly or maliciously boiled the root for a Jerusalem artichoke, and that we, who stood lamenting over our regretted Phoebus, had actually eaten it, dished up with white sauce. John turned pale at the thought. The beautiful story of the Falcon, in Boccaccio, which the young knight killed to regale

his mistress, or the still more tragical history of Couci, who minced his rival's heart, and served it up to his wife, could not have affected him more deeply. We grieved over our lost dahlia, as if it had been a thing of life.

Grieving, however, would not repair our loss; and we determined, as the only chance of becoming again possessed of this beautiful flower, to visit, as soon as the dahlia season began, all the celebrated collections in the neighbourhood, especially all those from which there was any chance of our having procured the root which had so mysteriously vanished.

Early in September, I set forth on my voyage of discovery—my voyages, I ought to say; for every day I and my pony-phaeton made our way to whatever garden within our reach bore a sufficiently high character to be suspected of harbouring the good Dahlia Phoebus.

Monday we called at Lady A.'s; Tuesday at General B's; Wednesday at Sir John C's; Thursday at Mrs. D's; Friday at Lord E's; and Saturday at Mr. F.'s. We might as well have staid at home; not a Phoebus had they, or anything like one.

We then visited the nurseries, from Brown's, at Slough, a princely establishment, worthy of its regal neighbourhood, to the pretty rural gardens at South Warnborough, not forgetting our own most intelligent and obliging nurseryman, Mr. Sutton of Reading—(Belford Regis, I mean)—whose collection of flowers of all sorts is amongst the most choice and select that I have ever known. Hundreds of magnificent blossoms did we see in our progress, but not the blossom we wanted.

There was no lack, heaven knows, of dahlias of the desired colour. Besides a score of "Orange Perfections," bearing the names of their respective growers, we were introduced to four Princes of Orange, three Kings of Holland, two Williams the Third, and one Lord Roden.\*

*\* The nomenclature of dahlias is a curious sign of the times. It rivals in oddity that of the Racing Calendar. Next to the peerage, Shakspeare and Homer seem to be the chief sources whence they have derived their appellations. Thus we have Hectors and Dioedes of all colours, a very black Othello, and a very fair Desdemona. One beautiful blossom, which seems like a white ground thickly rouged with carmine, is called "the Honourable Mrs. Harris;" and it is droll to observe how punctiliously the working gardeners retain the dignified prefix in speaking of the flower. I heard the other day of a serious dahlia grower who had called his seedlings after his favourite preachers, so that we shall have the Reverend Edward So-and-so, and the Reverend John Such-an-one, fraternising with the profane Ariels and Imogenes, the Giaours and Me-doras of the old catalogue. So much the better. Floriculture is amongst the most innocent and humanising of all pleasures, and everything which tends to diffuse such pursuits amongst those who have too few amusements, is a point gained for happiness and for virtue.*

We were even shown a bloom called the Phoebus, about as like to our Phoebus "as I to Hercules." But the true Phoebus, "the real Simon Pure," was as far to seek as ever.

Learnedly did I descant with the learned in dahlias over the merits of my lost beauty. "It was a cupped flower, Mr. Sutton," quoth I, to my agreeable and sympathising listener; (gardeners *are* a most cultivated and gentlemanly race;) "a cupped dahlia, of the genuine metropolitan shape; large as the Criterion, regular as the Springfield Rival, perfect as Dodd's Mary, with a long bloom stalk like those good old flowers, the Countess of Liverpool and the Widnall's Perfection. And such a free blower, and so true! I am quite sure that there is not so good a dahlia this year. I prefer it to 'Corinne,' over and over." And Mr. Sutton assented and condoled, and I was as near to being comforted as anybody could be, who had lost such a flower as the Phoebus.

After so many vain researches, most persons would have abandoned the pursuit in despair. But despair is not in my nature. I have a comfortable share of the quality which the possessor is wont to call perseverance—whilst the uncivil world is apt to designate it by the name of obstinacy—and do not easily give in. Then the chase, however fruitless, led, like other chases, into beautiful scenery, and formed an excuse for my visiting or revisiting many of the prettiest places in the county.

Two of the most remarkable spots in the neighbourhood are, as it happens, famous for their collections of dahlias—Strathfield-saye, the seat of the Duke of Wellington, and the ruins of Reading Abbey.

Nothing can well be prettier than the drive to Strathfield-saye, passing, as we do, through a great part of Heckfield Heath,\* a tract of wild woodland, a forest, or rather a chase, full of fine sylvan beauty—thickets of fern and holly, and hawthorn and birch, surmounted by oaks and beeches, and interspersed with lawny glades and deep pools, letting light into the picture. Nothing can be prettier than the approach to the duke's lodge. And the entrance to the demesne, through a deep dell dark with magnificent firs, from which we emerge into a finely wooded park of the richest verdure, is also striking and impressive. But the distinctive feature of the place (for the mansion, merely a comfortable and convenient nobleman's house, hardly responds to the fame of its owner) is the grand avenue of noble elms, three quarters of a mile long, which leads to the front door.

*\* It may be interesting to the lovers of literature to hear that my accomplished friend Mrs. Trollope was "raised," as her friends the Americans would say, upon this spot. Her father, the Rev. William Milton, himself a very clever man, and an able mechanician and engineer, held the living of Heckfield for many years.*

It is difficult to imagine anything which more completely realises the poetical fancy, that the pillars and arches of a Gothic cathedral were borrowed from the interlacing of the branches of trees planted at stated intervals, than this avenue, in which Nature has so completely succeeded in outrivalling her handmaiden Art, that not a single trunk, hardly even a bough or a twig, appears to mar the grand regularity of the design as a piece of perspective. No cathedral aisle was ever more perfect; and the effect, under every variety of aspect, the magical light and shadow of the cold white moonshine, the cool green light of a cloudy day, and the glancing sunbeams which pierce through the leafy umbrage in the bright summer noon, are such as no words can convey. Separately considered, each tree (and the north of

Hampshire is celebrated for the size and shape of its elms) is a model of stately growth, and they are now just at perfection, probably about a hundred and thirty years old. There is scarcely perhaps in the kingdom such another avenue.

On one side of this noble approach is the garden, where, under the care of the skilful and excellent gardener, Mr. Cooper, so many magnificent dahlias are raised, but where, alas! the Phoebus was not; and between that and the mansion is the sunny, shady paddock, with its rich pasture and its roomy stable, where, for so many years, Copenhagen, the charger who carried the Duke at Waterloo, formed so great an object of attraction to the visitors of Strathfield-saye.\* Then came the house itself and then I returned home. Well! this was one beautiful and fruitless drive. The ruins of Reading Abbey formed another as fruitless, and still more beautiful.

*\* Copenhagen—(I had the honour of naming one of Mr. Cooper's dahlias after him—a sort of bay dahlia, if I may be permitted the expression)—Copenhagen was a most interesting horse. He died last year at the age of twenty-seven. He was therefore in his prime on the day of Waterloo, when the duke (then and still a man of iron) rode him for seventeen hours and a half, without dismounting. When his Grace got off, he patted him, and the horse kicked, to the great delight of his brave rider, as it proved that he was not beaten by that tremendous day's work. After his return, this paddock was assigned to him, in which he passed the rest of his life in the most perfect comfort that can be imagined; fed twice a-day, (latterly upon oats broken for him,) with a comfortable stable to retire to, and a rich pasture in which to range. The late amiable duchess used regularly to feed him with bread, and this kindness had given him the habit, (especially after her death,) of approaching every lady with the most confiding familiarity. He had been a fine animal, of middle size and a chestnut colour, but latterly he exhibited an interesting specimen of natural decay, in a state as nearly that of nature as can well be found in a civilised country. He had lost an eye from age, and had become lean and feeble, and, in the manner in which he approached even a casual visiter, there was something of the demand of sympathy, the appeal to human kindness, which one has so often observed from a very old dog towards his master. Poor Copenhagen, who, when alive, furnished so many reliques from his mane and tail to enthusiastic young ladies, who had his hair set in brooches and rings, was, after being interred with military honours, dug up by some miscreant, (never, I believe, discovered,) and one of his hoofs cut off, it is to be presumed, for a memorial, although one that would hardly go in the compass of a ring. A very fine portrait of Copenhagen has been executed by my young friend Edmund H a veil, a youth of seventeen, whose genius as an animal painter, will certainly place him second only to Landseer.*

Whether in the "palmy state" of the faith of Rome, the pillared aisles of the Abbey church might have vied in grandeur with the avenue at Strathfield-saye, I can hardly say; but certainly, as they stand, the venerable arched gateway, the rock-like masses of wall, the crumbling cloisters, and the exquisite finish of the surbases of the columns and other fragments, fresh as if chiselled yesterday, which are re-appearing in the excavations now making, there is an interest which leaves the grandeur of life, palaces and their pageantry, parks and their adornments, all grandeur except the indestructible grandeur of nature, at an immeasurable distance. The place was a history. Centuries passed before us as we thought of the magnificent monastery, the third in size and splendour in England, with its area of thirty acres between the walls—and gazed upon it now!

And yet, even now, how beautiful! Trees of every growth mingling with those grey ruins, creepers wreathing their fantastic garlands around the mouldering arches, gorgeous flowers flourishing in the midst of that decay! I almost forgot my search for the dear Phoebus, as I rambled with my friend Mr. Malone, the gardener, a man who would in any station be remarkable for acuteness and acquirement, amongst the august remains of the venerable abbey, with the history of which he was as conversant as with his own immediate profession. There was no speaking of smaller objects in the presence of the mighty past!

Gradually chilled by so much unsuccess, the ardour of my pursuit began to abate. I began to admit the merits of other dahlias of divers colours, and actually caught myself committing the inconstancy of considering which of the four Princes of Orange I should bespeak for next year. Time, in short, was beginning to play his part as the great comforter of human afflictions, and the poor Phoebus seemed as likely to be forgotten as a last year's bonnet, or a last week's newspaper—when, happening to walk with my father to look at a field of his, a pretty bit of upland pasture about a mile off, I was struck, in one corner where the manure for dressing had been deposited, and a heap of earth and dung still remained, to be spread, I suppose, next spring, with some tall plant surmounted with bright flowers. Could it be?—was it possible?—did my eyes play me false?—No; there it was, upon a dunghill—the object of all my researches and lamentations, the identical Phoebus! the lost dahlia!