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MUCH DARKER
DAYS

Andrew Lang
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PREFACE

A belief that modern Christmas fiction is too cheerful in tone, too artistic in construction, and too original in motive, has inspired the author of this tale of middle-class life. He trusts that he has escaped, at least, the errors he deplures, and has set an example of a more seasonable and sensational style of narrative.

CHAPTER I. – The Curse (Registered)

WHEN this story of my life, or of such parts of it as are not deemed wholly unfit for publication, is read (and, no doubt, a public which devoured ‘Scrawled Black’ will stand almost anything), it will be found that I have sometimes acted without prim cautiousness – that I have, in fact, wallowed in crime. Stillicide and Mayhem I (rare old crimes!) are child’s play to *me*, who have been an ‘accessory after the fact!’ In excuse, I can but plead two things—the excellence of the opportunity to do so, and the weakness of the resistance which my victim offered.

If you cannot allow for these, throw the book out of the railway-carriage window! You have paid your money, and to the verdict of your pale morality or absurd sense of art in fiction I am therefore absolutely indifferent. You are too angelic for me; I am too fiendish for you. Let us agree to differ. I say nothing about my boyhood. Twenty-five years ago a poor boy—but no matter. *I* was that boy! I hurry on to the soaring period of manhood, ‘when the strength, the nerve, the intellect is or should be at its height,’ or *are* or should be at *their* height, if you *must* have grammar in a Christmas Annual. *My* nerve was at its height: I was thirty.

Yet, what was I then? A miserable moonstruck mortal, duly entitled to write M.D. (of Tarrytown College, Alaska) after my

name – for the title of Doctor is useful in the profession – but with no other source of enjoyment or emotional recreation in a cold, casual world. Often and often have I written M.D. after my name, till the glowing pleasure palled, and I have sunk back asking, ‘Has life, then, no more than this to offer?’

Bear with me if I write like this for ever so many pages; bear with me, it is such easy writing, and only thus can I hope to make you understand my subsequent and slightly peculiar conduct.

How rare was hers, the loveliness of the woman I lost – of her whose loss brought me down to the condition I attempt to depict!

How strange was her rich beauty! She was at once dark and fair —*la blonde et la brune!* How different from the Spotted Girls and Two-headed Nightingales whom I have often seen exhibited, and drawing money too, as the types of physical imperfections! Warm Southern blood glowed darkly in one of Philippa’s cheeks – the left; pale Teutonic grace smiled in the other – the right. Her mother was a fair blonde Englishwoman, but it was Old Calabar that gave her daughter those curls of sable wool, contrasting so exquisitely with her silken-golden tresses. Her English mother may have lent Philippa many exquisite graces, but it was from her father, a pure-blooded negro, that she inherited her classic outline of profile.

Philippa, in fact, was a natural arrangement in black and white. Viewed from one side she appeared the Venus of the Gold Coast, from the other she outshone the Hellenic Aphrodite. From any point of view she was an extraordinarily attractive addition

to the Exhibition and Menagerie which at that time I was running in the Midland Counties.

Her father, the nature of whose avocation I never thought it necessary to inquire into, was a sea cook on board a Peninsular and Oriental steamer. His profession thus prevented him from being a permanent resident in this, or indeed in any other country.

Our first meeting was brought about in a most prosaic way. Her mother consulted me professionally about Philippa's prospects. We did not at that time come to terms. I thought I might conclude a more advantageous arrangement if Philippa's *heart* was touched, if she would be mine. But she did not love me. Moreover, she was ambitious; she knew, small blame to her, how unique she was.

'The fact is,' she would observe when I pressed my suit, 'the fact is I look higher than a mere showman, even if he can write M.D. after his name.' Philippa soon left the circuit 'to better herself.'

In a short time a telegram from her apprised me that she was an orphan. I flew to where she lodged, in a quiet, respectable street, near Ratcliff Highway. She expressed her intention of staying here for some time.

'But alone, Philippa?'

(She was but eight-and-thirty).

'Not so much alone as you suppose,' she replied archly.

This should have warned me, but again I passionately urged

my plea. I offered most attractive inducements. A line to herself in the bills! Everything found!

‘Basil,’ she observed, blushing in her usual partial manner, ‘you are a day after the fair.’

‘But there are plenty of fairs,’ I cried, ‘all of which we attend regularly. What can you mean? Has another – ’

‘He hev,’ said Philippa, demurely but decidedly.

‘You are engaged?’ She raised her lovely hand, and was showing me a gold wedding circlet, when the door opened, and a strikingly handsome man of some forty summers entered.

There was something written in his face (a dark contusion, in fact, under the left eye) which told me that he could not be a pure and high-souled Christian gentleman.

‘Basil South, M.D.’ said Philippa, introducing us. ‘Mr. Baby Farmer’ (obviously a name of endearment), and again a rosy blush crept round her neck in the usual partial manner, which made one of her most peculiar charms.

I bowed mechanically, and, amid a few dishevelled remarks on the weather, left the house the most disappointed showman in England.

‘Cur, sneak, coward, villain!’ I hissed when I felt sure I was well out of hearing. ‘Farewell, farewell, Philippa!’

To drown remembrance and regret, I remained in town, striving in a course of what moralists call ‘gaiety’ to forget what I had lost.

How many try the same prescription, and seem rather to like

it! I often met my fellow-patients.

One day, on the steps of the Aquarium, I saw the man whom I suspected of not being Philippa's husband.

'Who is that cove?' I asked.

'Him with the gardenia?' replied a friend, idiomatically. 'That is Sir Runan Errand, the amateur showman – him that runs the Live Mermaid, the Missing Link, and Koot Hoomi, the Mahatma of the Mountain.'

'What kind of man is he?'

'Just about the usual kind of man you see generally here. Just about as hot as they make them. Mad about having a show of his own; crazed on two-headed calves.'

'Is he married?'

'If every lady who calls herself Lady Errand had a legal title to do so, the "Baronetage" would have to be extended to several supplementary volumes.'

And this was Philippa's husband!

What was she among so many?

My impulse was to demand an explanation from the baronet, but for reasons not wholly unconnected with my height and fighting weight, I abstained.

I did better. I went to my hotel, called for the hotel book, and registered an oath, which is, therefore, copyright. I swore that in twenty-five years I would be even with him I hated. I prayed, rather inconsistently, that honour and happiness might be the lot of her I had lost. After that I felt better.

CHAPTER II. – A Villain's By-Blow

PHILIPPA was another's! Life was no longer worth living. Hope was evaluated; ambition was blunted. The interest which I had hitherto felt in my profession vanished. All the spring, the elasticity seemed taken out of my two Bounding Brothers from the Gutta Percha coast. For months I did my work in a perfunctory manner. I added a Tattooed Man to my exhibition and a Two-headed Snake, also a White-eyed Botocudo, who played the guitar, and a pair of Siamese Twins, who were fired out of a double-barrelled cannon, and then did the lofty trapeze business. They drew, but success gave me no pleasure. So long as I made money enough for my daily needs (and whisky was cheap), what recked I? My mood was none of the sweetest. My friends fell off from me; ay, they fell like nine-pins whenever I could get within reach of them. I was alone in the world.

You will not be surprised to hear it; the wretched have no friends. So things went on for a year. I became worse instead of better. My gloom deepened, my liver grew more and more confirmed in its morbid inaction. These are not lover's rhapsodies, they merely show the state of my body and mind, and explain what purists may condemn. In this condition I heard without hypocritical regret that a distant relative (a long-lost uncle) had conveniently left me his vast property. I cared only because it enabled me to withdraw from the profession.

I disposed of my exhibition, or rather I let it go for a song. I simply handed over the Tattooed Man, the Artillery Twins, and the Double-headed Serpent to the first-comer, who happened to be a rural dean. Far in the deeps of the country, near the little town of Roding, on a lonely highway, where no man ever came, I took a 'pike. Here I dwelt like a hermit, refusing to give change to the rare passers-by in carts and gigs, and attended by a handy fellow, William Evans, stolid as the Sphynx, which word, for reasons that may or may not appear later in this narrative, I prefer to spell with a y, contrary to the best authorities and usual custom.

It was midwinter, and midnight. My room lay in darkness. Heavy snow was falling. I went to the window and flattened my nose against the pane.

'What,' I asked myself, 'is most like a cat looking out of a window?'

'A cat looking in at a window,' answered a silvery voice from the darkness.

Flattened against the self-same pane was another nose, a woman's. It was the lovely organ of mixed architecture belonging to Philippa! With a low cry of amazement, I broke the pane: it was no idle vision, no case of the 'horrors;' the cold, cold nose of my Philippa encountered my own. The ice was now broken; she swept into my chamber, lovelier than ever in her strange unearthly beauty, and a new sealskin coat. Then she seated herself with careless grace, tilting back her chair, and resting her feet on the chimney-piece.

‘Dear Philippa,’ I exclaimed politely, ‘how is your husband?’

‘Husband! I have none,’ she hissed. ‘Tell me, Basil, did you ever hate a fellow no end?’

‘Yes,’ I answered, truly; for, like Mr. Carlyle, I just detested most people, and him who had robbed me of Philippa most of all.

‘Do you know what he did, Basil? *He insisted on having a latch-key!* Did you ever hate a man?’

I threw out my arms. My heart was full of bitterness.

‘He did more! He has refused to pay my last quarter’s salary. Basil, didn’t you ever hate a man?’

My brain reeled at these repeated outrages.

‘And where are you staying at present, Philippa? I hope you are pretty comfortable?’ I inquired, anxiously.

Philippa went on: ‘My husband as was has chucked me. I was about to have a baby. I bored him. I was in the way – in the family-way. Basil, did you ever hate a fellow? If not, read this letter.’

She threw a letter towards me. She chucked it with all her old gracious dexterity. It was dated from Monte Carlo, and ran thus:

—

‘As we don’t seem quite to hit it off, I think I may as well finish this business of our marriage. The shortest way to make things clear to your very limited intelligence is to assure you that you are not my wife at all. Before I married you I was the husband of the Live Mermaid. She has died since then, and I might have married you over and over again; but I was not quite so infatuated. I shall

just run across and settle up about this little affair on Wednesday. As you are five miles from the station, as the weather is perfectly awful, as moreover I am a luxurious, self-indulgent baronet and as this story would never get on unless I walked, don't send to meet me. I would *rather* walk.'

Here was a pretty letter from a fond husband. 'But, ha! proud noble,' I whispered to my heart, 'you and me shall meet to-morrow.'

'And where are you staying, Philippa?' I repeated, to lead the conversation into a more agreeable channel.

'With a Mrs. Thompson,' she replied; 'a lady connected with Sir Runan.'

'Very well, let me call for your things tomorrow. I can pass myself off as your brother, you know.'

'My half-brother,' said Philippa, blushing, 'on the mother's side.'

The brave girl thought of *everything*. The child of white parents, I should have in vain pretended to be Philippa's full brother. They would not have believed me had I sworn it.

'Don't you think,' Philippa continued, as a sudden thought occurred to her, 'that as it is almost midnight and snowing heavily it would be more proper for me to return to Mrs. Thompson's?'

There was no contesting this.

We walked together to the house of that lady, and at my suggestion Philippa sought her couch. I sat down and awaited the advent of Mrs. Thompson. She soon appeared.

A woman of about five-and-thirty, with an aquiline face, and a long, dark, silky beard sweeping down to her waist. Whatever this woman's charms might have been for me when I was still in the profession, she could now boast of very few. Doubtless she had been in Sir Runan's show, and was one of his victims.

I apologised for the lateness of my call, and entered at once on business.

Mrs. Thompson remarked that 'my sister's health was not as it should be,' – not all she could wish.

'I do not wish to alarm you; no doubt you, her brother, are *used* to it; but, for a girl as mad as a hatter – well, I'll trouble you!'

'I myself can write M.D. after my name,' I replied, 'and you are related, I think, to Sir Runan Errand?'

'We are connections,' she said, not taking the point of my sarcasm. 'His conduct rarely astonishes me. When I found, however, that this lady, your sister, was his wife, I own, for once, I *was* surprised.'

Feeling that this woman had the better of it, with her calm, polished, highbred sarcasms, I walked back to the 'pike, full of hopes of a sweet revenge.

As, however, I had never spoken to a baronet before, I could not but fear that his lofty air of superior rank might daunt me when we met to-morrow.

CHAPTER III. – Mes Gages! Mes Gages!

NEXT morning came, chill and grey, and reminded me that I had two duties. I was to wait at home till Philippa came over from Mrs. Thompson's, and I was also to hang about the road from the station, and challenge Sir Runan to mortal combat. Can duties clash? They can. They did! The hours lagged slowly by, while I read Sir Runan's letter, read and re-read it, registered and re-registered (a pretty term of my own invention) this vow of vengeance.

Philippa's 'things' – her boxes with all her properties – arrived in due time.

Philippa did not.

I passed a distracted day, now bounding forth half way to the railway station to meet Sir Runan, now speeding back at the top of my pace to welcome Philippa at the 'pike.

As I knew not by what train Sir Runan would reach Roding, nor when Philippa might be looked for, I thus obtained exercise enough to make up for months of inaction.

Finally the last train was due.

It was now pitch-dark and snowing heavily, the very time which Philippa generally chose for a quiet evening walk.

I rushed half-way to Roding, changed my mind, headed back,

and arrived at the 'pike.

'Has a lady called for me?' I asked the Sphynx.

'Now, is it likely, sir?' answered my fellow, with rough humour.

'Well, I must go and meet her,' I cried, and, hastily snatching a bull's-eye lantern and policeman's rattle from the Sphynx, I plunged into the darkness.

First I hurried to Mrs. Thompson's, where I learned that Philippa had just gone out for a stroll after a somewhat prolonged luncheon. This was like Philippa. I recognised that shrinking modesty which always made her prefer to veil her charms by walking about after nightfall.

Turning from Mrs. Thompson's, I felt the snow more sharply on my face. Furiously, blindly, madly it whirled here and drifted there.

Should I go for Sir Runan? Should I wait where I was? Should I whistle for a cab? Should I return to the 'pike?

Suddenly out of the snow came a peal of silvery laughter. Philippa waltzed gracefully by in a long ulster whitened with snow.

I detected her solely by means of my dark lantern.

I rushed on her, I seized her. I said, 'Philippa, come back with me!'

'No, all the fun's in the front,' shrieked Philippa. 'My quarter's salary! Oh, my last quarter's salary!'

With these wild words, like bullets from a Gatling gun rattling

in my ears, I seized Philippa's hand.

Something fell, and would have rattled on the hard high road had it not been for the snow.

I stooped to pick up this shining object, and with one more wild yell of 'My quarter's salary!' Philippa waltzed again into the darkness.

Fatigued with the somewhat exhausting and unusual character of the day's performances, and out of training as I was, I could not follow her.

Mechanically, I still groped on the ground, and picked up a small chill object.

It was a latch-key! I thrust it in my pocket with my other keys.

Then a thought occurred to me, and I chucked it over the hedge, to serve as circumstantial evidence. Next I turned and went up the road, springing my rattle and flashing my bull's-eye lantern on every side, like Mr. Pickwick when he alarmed the scientific gentleman.

Suddenly, with a cry of horror, I stopped short. At my very feet, in the little circle of concentrated light thrown by the lantern, lay a white crushed, cylindrical mass.

That mass I had seen before in the warm summer weather – that mass, once a white hat, had adorned the brows of that masher!

It was Sir Runan's topper!

CHAPTER IV. – As A Hatter!

YES, the white hat, lying there all battered and crushed on the white snow, must be the hat of Sir Runan! Who else but the tigerish aristocrat that disdained the homely four-wheeler and preferred to walk five miles to his victim on this night of dread – who else would wear the gay gossamer of July in stormy December?

In that hat, thanks doubtless to its airy *insouciant* grace, he had won Philippa; in that hat he would have bearded her, defied her, and cast her off! The cruelty of man! The larger and bulkier crumpled heap which lay on the road a little beyond the hat, that heap with all its outlines already blurred by snow, that heap must be the baronet himself!

Oh, but this was vengeance, swift, deadly vengeance!

But how, but how had she wreaked it? *She*, already my heart whispered *she!*

Was my peerless Philippa then a murderess?

Oh, say not so; call hers (ye would do so an she had been an Irish felon) ‘the wild justice of revenge,’ or the speedy execution of the outraged creditor.

Killed by Philippa!

Yes, and why? The answer was only too obvious. She must have gone forth to meet him, and to wring from him, by what means she might, that quarter’s salary which the dastard had left

unpaid. Then my thoughts flew to the door-key, the cause of that fierce family hatred which burned between Philippa and her betrayer. That latch-key she had wrested from him, it had fallen from her hand, and I – I had pitched it into space!

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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