

**MARY
RAYMOND
ANDREWS**

THE LIFTED BANDAGE

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The man let himself into his front door and, staggering lightly, like a drunken man, as he closed it, walked to the hall table, and mechanically laid down his hat, but still wearing his overcoat turned and went into his library, and dropped on the edge of a divan and stared out through the leaded panes of glass across the room facing him. The grayish skin of his face seemed to fall in diagonal furrows, from the eyes, from the nose, from the mouth. He sat, still to his finger-tips, staring.

He was sitting so when a servant slipped in and stood motionless a minute, and went to the wide window where the west light glared through leafless branches outside, and drew the shades lower, and went to the fireplace and touched a match. Wood caught and crackled and a cheerful orange flame flew noisily up the chimney, but the man sitting on the divan did not notice. The butler waited a moment, watching, hesitating, and then:

"Have you had lunch, sir?" he asked in a tentative, gentle voice.

The staring eyes moved with an effort and rested on the servant's face. "Lunch?" he repeated, apparently trying to focus on the meaning of the word. "Lunch? I don't know, Miller. But don't bring anything."

With a great anxiety in his face Miller regarded his master. "Would you let me take your overcoat, Judge?—you'll be too warm," he said.

He spoke in a suppressed tone as if waiting for, fearing something, as if longing to show sympathy, and the man stood and let himself be cared for, and then sat down again in the same unrestful, fixed attitude, gazing out again through the glittering panes into the stormy, tawny west sky. Miller came back and stood quiet, patient; in a few minutes the man seemed to become aware of him.

"I forgot, Miller. You'll want to know," he said in a tone which went to show an old bond between the two. "You'll be sorry to hear, Miller," he said—and the dull eyes moved difficultly to the anxious ones, and his voice was uninflected—"you'll be sorry to know that the coroner's jury decided that Master Jack was a murderer."

The word came more horribly because of an air of detachment from the man's mind. It was like a soulless, evil mechanism, running unguided. Miller caught at a chair.

"I don't believe it, sir," he gasped. "No lawyer shall make me. I've known him since he was ten, Judge, and they're mistaken. It's not any mere lawyers can make me believe that awful thing, sir, of our Master Jack." The servant was shaking from head to foot with intense rejection, and the man put up his hand as if to ward off his emotion.

"I wish I could agree with you," he said quietly, and then added, "Thank you, Miller." And the old butler, walking as if struck with a sickness, was gone.

The man sat on the edge of the divan staring out of the window, minute after minute; the November wind tossed the clean, black lines of the branches backward and forward against the copper sky, as if a giant hand moved a fan of sea-weed before a fire. The man sat still and stared. The sky dulled; the delicate, wild branches melted together; the diamond lines in the window blurred; yet, unmoved, unseeing, the eyes stared through them.

The burr of an electric bell sounded; some one came in at the front door and came to the door of the library, but the fixed figure did not stir. The newcomer stood silent a minute, two minutes; a young man in clerical dress, boyish, with gray, serious eyes. At length he spoke.

"May I come in? It's Dick."

The man's head turned slowly and his look rested inquiringly on his nephew. It was a minute before he said, as if recognizing him, "Dick. Yes." And set himself as before to the persistent gazing through the window.

"I lost you at the court-house," the younger man said. "I didn't mean to let you come home alone."

"Thank you, Dick." It seemed as if neither joy nor sorrow would find a way into the quiet voice again.

The wind roared; the boughs rustled against the glass; the fire, soberly settled to work, steamed and crackled; the clock ticked indifferently; there was no other sound in the room; the two men were silent, the one staring always before him, the other sitting with a hand on the older man's hand, waiting. Minutes they sat so, and the wintry sky outside darkened and lay sullenly in bands of gray and orange against the windows; the light of the logs was stronger than the daylight; it flickered carelessly across the ashiness of the emotionless face. The young man, watching the face, bent forward and gripped his other hand on the unresponsive one in his clasp.

"Uncle," he asked, "will it make things worse if I talk to you?"

"No, Dick."

Nothing made a difference, it seemed. Silence or words must simply fall without effect on the rock bottom of despair. The young man halted, as if dismayed, before this overpowering inertia of hopelessness; he drew a quick breath.

"A coroner's jury isn't infallible. I don't believe it of Jack—a lot of people don't believe it," he said.

The older man looked at him heavily. "You'd say that. Jack's friends will. I've been trained to weigh evidence—I must believe it."

"Listen," the young man urged. "Don't shut down the gates like that. I'm not a lawyer, but I've been trained to think, too, and I believe you're not thinking squarely. There's other evidence that counts besides this. There's Jack—his personality."

"It has been taken into consideration."

"It can't be taken into consideration by strangers—it needs years of intimacy to weigh that evidence as I can weigh it—as you—You know best of all," he cried out impulsively, "if you'll let yourself know, how impossible it was. That Jack should have bought that pistol and taken it to Ben Armstrong's rooms to kill him—it was impossible—impossible!" The clinched fist came down on the black broadcloth knee with the conviction of the man behind it. The words rushed like melted metal, hot, stinging, not to be stopped. The judge quivered as if they had stung through the callousness, touched a nerve. A faint color crawled to his cheeks; for the first time he spoke quickly, as if his thoughts connected with something more than gray matter.

"You talk about my not allowing myself to believe in Jack. You seem not to realize that such a belief would—might—stand between me and madness. I've been trying to adjust myself to a possible scheme of living—getting through the years till I go into nothingness. I can't. All I can grasp is the feeling that a man might have if dropped from a balloon and forced to stay gasping in the air, with no place in it, nothing to hold to, no breath to draw, no earth to rest on, no end to hope for. There is nothing beyond."

"Everything is beyond," the young man cried triumphantly. "'The end,' as you call it, is an end to hope for—it is the beginning. The beginning of more than you have ever had—with them, with the people you care about."

The judge turned a ghastly look upon the impetuous, bright face. "If I believed that, I should be even now perfectly happy. I don't see how you Christians can ever be sorry when your friends die—it's childish; anybody ought to be able to wait a few years. But I don't believe it," he said heavily, and went on again as if an inertia of speech were carrying him as an inertia of silence had held him a few minutes before. "When my wife died a year ago it ended my personal life, but I could live Jack's life. I was glad in the success and honor of it. Now the success—" he made a gesture. "And the honor—if I had that, only the honor of Jack's life left, I think I could finish the years with dignity. I've not been a bad man—I've done my part and lived as seemed right. Before I'm old the joy is wiped

out and long years left. Why? It's not reasonable—not logical. With one thing to hold to, with Jack's good name, I might live. How can I, now? What can I do? A life must have a *raison d'être*.

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