

Dowling Richard

Tempest-Driven: A Romance (Vol. 1 of 3)



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CHAPTER I IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT

It was pitch dark, and long past midnight. The last train from the City had just steamed out of Herne Hill railway station. The air was clear and crisp. Under foot the ground was dry and firm with February frost. All the shops in the neighbourhood had long since been shut. Few lights burned in the fronts of private houses. The Dulwich Road was deserted, and looked dreary and forlorn under its tall, skeleton, motionless, silent trees. There was not a sound abroad save the gradually-dying rumble of the train, and the footfalls and voices of the few people who had alighted from it. Little by little these sounds died away, and the stillness was as great as in the pulseless heart of a calm at sea.

Alfred Paulton had arrived by the last train. He was twenty-eight years of age, of middle height, and fair complexion. He lived in Half Moon Lane, and after saying good-night to some acquaintances who came out in the train with him, turned under

the railway viaduct at Herne Hill, and walked in the direction of his home. He was in no hurry, for he knew his father and mother and sisters had gone to bed long ago. He had his latch-key, and should let himself in. His ulster covered him comfortably from neck to heel. He had supped pleasantly with a few friends at his club, the Robin Hood, and earlier in the day finished, a very agreeable transaction with his solicitor, and now had in his pocket a handsome bundle of notes.

As he walked he swung his stick, and hummed in a whisper a few bars from the favourite air of a comic opera which he had been to hear that evening.

Suddenly he started. As he was directly opposite the door of a house, standing back a few yards from the road, the door opened noisily, and he heard a woman's voice in a tone of piteous entreaty exclaim:

"Oh, what shall I do-what shall I do?"

Alfred Paulton drew up and listened. For a while all was silent.

He looked over the paling, which was just as high as his chin. In the doorway of the house stood the figure of a woman against the light of a lamp on a table in the hall. The leafless boughs of the intervening shrubs prevented his getting an uninterrupted view, but he could in a brief glance gather a good deal.

The figure was that of a woman neither tall nor short, neither stout nor thin. She was evidently not a servant. She wore an ordinary indoor costume, and had nothing on her head. Although she had scarcely moved since the opening of the door, he came

to the conclusion she was of alert and active habit. He judged her to be neither old nor young. Her hair shone raven-black in the lamplight. The illumined cheek was finely modelled, dark in hue—that of a brunette. She leaned forward into the darkness, and peered right and left, moving her head but slightly as she did so. Something glittered in the starlight at her throat and at her girdle. Her hands were held behind her to balance the forward inclination of her body. On her fingers jewels sparkled in the lamplight of the hall behind her.

All this he saw at a glance. He was perplexed, and did not know how to act. It was scarcely fair in him to stand there eaves-dropping, as it were. If he moved now she would hear him, and know he had seen her and had stopped to listen. If he spoke he might alarm her.

Up to the moment the door opened and she appeared and called out, he believed this house to be empty. It had been vacant for a long time. Now he recollected having heard that it was let at last, and that the new tenant was expected to arrive this day. The place was called Crescent House. He had heard talk about the new-comers at the breakfast-table that morning; but nothing seemed known of them except that they came from a distance and were well off.

The woman in the doorway now straightened herself, raised both hands to her forehead, and moaned out in a lower and more despairing tone her former words:

"Oh, what shall I do—what shall I do?"

He could hesitate no longer. It was plain she was in a sore strait. He coughed, advanced to the gate, and, putting his hand on the latch, said:

"I beg your pardon. Is there anything wrong?"

She started back a pace into the hall. In doing so her full face met the lamplight for a moment. It was a very beautiful face, full of terror.

"Do not be alarmed," he said softly; "I was passing when you opened the door, and I heard you speak. Is there anything wrong? Anything I can do for you?"

She seemed reassured, and stepped once more to the threshold, and said, in a quick, low voice:

"I am a stranger here. I came to this house only to-day. I am alone with my husband in the house, and he has been seized by sudden illness. I do not know where to find a doctor, even if I could leave the house, and I cannot go away from my husband."

"In what way can I be of use? Pray command me."

He tried to open the gate, but failed.

She perceived his efforts to open the gate, and once more withdrew a pace into the hall, crying in alarm:

"No, no; you must not come in! If you wish to help me, go for the nearest doctor. Go at once. Do not stand there. In heaven's name, do not lose a moment! Go, I implore you."

She clasped her hands, and held them out towards him in entreaty.

"As you wish," he said. "I shall not be many minutes."

He turned and ran back towards the railway station. Dr. Santley, the family physician of the Paultons, lived close by, and Alfred Paulton resolved to summon him, although he might not be exactly the nearest medical man. Time would be gained rather than lost by going for him, as Santley would come at once without waiting for explanations-that is, if he were at home.

On his way he had little space to think, the time being short and the pace quick. He was more lucky than he had hoped, for he almost ran over the man he sought at the gate of his house.

"Oh, doctor," he cried, almost breathless, "I am so glad to meet you up and dressed! I want you, if you will be good enough to come with me at once."

"Mr. Paulton, I'm sorry. What is the matter? I have just come back from another unexpected patient.

"It's no one at our place, thank goodness! It's some one at Crescent House. I don't even know the name."

By this time both men were walking rapidly towards Half Moon Lane.

Dr. Santley was a tall, slender man, with full black beard and moustaches. He had a quiet, gentle, responsible manner, and rarely smiled. As the two strode on together, Alfred Paulton described the scene in which he had just taken part. When he had finished, his companion said:

"Ah, I saw the vans at the door to-day; but surely they cannot have got a big house like that straight in so short a time. Here we are."

They had arrived at the spot where a few minutes before the younger man had stood and spoken to the strange woman in the doorway. The door was now not open.

Paulton rattled noisily at the gate, and then waited a while. There was no answer. He looked at the windows of the house, none was lighted up. Light shone in the fan-sash over the door.

"You cannot have mistaken the house in the dark?" asked Dr. Santley, suppressing a yawn.

"Impossible! It was the only house to be let. It is Crescent House, and you yourself saw the furniture going in to-day."

Again he rattled the gate, this time as loudly as he could.

At length the door of the house was opened slowly, and against the light of the lamp the same figure as Paulton had seen before was revealed. Again the woman stood still on the threshold and leaned out into the darkness. This time she at once turned her face towards the gate.

Before either of the men had time to speak, she said in a calm, low, penetrating voice:

"Is the doctor there?"

"Yes," answered both in a breath.

"I will open the gate in a moment."

With a firm, swift step she left the doorway and trod the gravelled path leading to the gate. She did not hesitate or fumble at the latch. In a few seconds the gate swung open.

"This is Dr. Santley; he is our family physician. He and I live close by. May I offer you my card? I and my family will, I am

sure, feel delighted to be of any service to you," said Paulton, raising his hat.

"Stay," she said. "Will you both come in? I am terrified. I do not know what has happened. I hope you are not too late."

Her words were measured and her tone calm. Although the trees overhead were leafless, where she stood was dark, and neither of the men could see her clearly.

Without further words she led the way back to the house. The two men followed in silence. When they entered the hall she turned round in the full light of the lamp, and, stretching out her right arm towards the first door on the left, said:

"In that room. I shall wait for you. There is no other light. Take this lamp."

Paulton now saw her fully. She was dark, almost swarthy. There was no colour in her cheek. Her forehead was small and compact. Her eyebrows and hair jet, glossy. Her eyes were dark, large, a little sunken, brilliant, and full of suppressed fire. The nose was slightly aquiline. The only relief to the dark hue of the face and the black of the eyebrows, hair, and eyes, was afforded by the full, red, ripe lips. And all the features, the forehead, the nose, the chin, the mouth, the cheeks, were finely modelled. The face was commanding, imperial, triumphant. It was as set and firm as marble. It was the face of an empress born to lead her legions to victory-of a woman in whom courage was a matter of course, who regarded obedience to her wish as a spontaneous offering. She had the immortality of indestructible will in her

face, the weight of irresistible determination.

With the face ended the heroic aspect of the woman.

At her throat blazed the diamonds of a brooch large as the palm of her hand. On her fingers glittered a dozen diamond rings. The belt round her waist was fastened with a diamond clasp. The diamonds at her throat held an orange-coloured silk scarf. The rest of her dress was dead black, close-fitting to the figure, and full of folds below the waist. The arms were bare half-way from the elbow to the wrist. The figure, the arms, the hands were subduingly soft and feminine. The arms and wrists were round, the hands exquisitely delicate, with fine taper fingers, the bust a miracle of rich symmetry.

It was the head of Boadicea on the figure of Rosamond.

Dr. Santley took up the lamp from the hall table and entered the room she had indicated. Paulton paused for a moment in doubt as to whether he should go or stay. The hall lay now in comparative darkness; there was no light except what came through the open door of the front room.

"Follow him."

It was her voice.

Paulton obeyed. As he got inside the doorposts he turned round and looked back into the hall. He could make out nothing but the glitter of the diamonds at her throat, in her girdle, on her fingers. They were stars against the darkness of her dress, as the stars abroad in heaven against the sightless robe of night.

The room in which Dr. Santley and Paulton found themselves

was in the greatest disorder. In one corner lay the carpet rolled up, in another the hearth-rug, fender, fire-irons, and coal-scuttle. All along the right side stood a row of chairs, one inverted on another. Pictures rested on the floor with their faces against the wall; the gaselier sprawled close by the window; the leaves of the dining-table were set against the folding-doors at the back. The drawers and pillars of the sideboard were hard by, the top and back of it stretched upward into the gloom of a deep recess; several boxes and canvas packages littered the floor. Two knights in plate-armour reclined one at each corner of the chimney-piece; easy-chairs were wedged in among amorphous bundles wrapped in Indian matting; rods and poles protruded from under legs of chairs, under bales heaped upon one another. A small table, face down upon another, held its slender legs up in air. Some fire still smouldered in the grate; the fire must have been large not long ago, for the room was still warm.

In the centre of the room stood the dining-table, reduced to its smallest dimensions. On this were spread the remains of a simple supper. Close by the table stood a couch, and on the couch appeared the figure of a man.

The figure was sitting up in the arm of the couch, the legs rested on the couch, the head drooped forward; the chin and lower part of the face were buried in the thick, long, grizzled beard that flowed down over the chest.

Dr. Santley stepped up to the couch on which the figure lay, and having placed the lamp upon the table close at hand, began

his examination. It did not take long. After a few minutes he turned to Paulton, and, pointing to the figure, shook his head.

"Well?" asked the young man below his breath.

The doctor went up to him and whispered in his ear:

"Dead some time."

Paulton looked round apprehensively at the door, and whispered back:

"How will she take it?"

The doctor shook his head.

Both men stood staring at one another.

Suddenly both started; they heard a footfall behind them. Some one had entered the room.

CHAPTER II

FOUL PLAY?

The two men turned quickly round. The light of the lamp fell on the black dress of the woman and sparkled on her diamonds. Her arms hung down by her side. Both hands were clenched. She advanced with a steady, slow step, her eyes firmly fixed on Dr. Santley's face. She did not glance at Paulton. She did not glance at the couch.

"You were long," she said, in a slow, constrained voice, "and I came in to know."

She rested the tips of the fingers of one hand on the table and kept her eyes fixed on the doctor.

"I think," said Santley, placing himself between her and the couch, "that it would be better if we went into some other room."

"We cannot; this must serve. All the other rooms are locked up, except my bed room, and my husband has the keys."

Her voice did not falter.

"Has Mr. — , your husband, been long ill?"

"My husband's name is Louis Davenport. He has been ill a long time-years. He has been suffering from spasmodic asthma. I can gather from your manner that there is no hope."

Her voice was firm and clear. No feature moved but the beautiful, flexible mouth, of which the lips were as full of colour

as ever.

"May I beg of you to be seated?" Dr. Santley left the position he had occupied and handed her a chair. She sank on it without speaking. She rested one of her arms on the table. He went on: "Mrs. Davenport, I am afraid the worst must be faced."

"The worst!" she cried, rising and looking wildly at him, her voice now coming in a terrified whisper from between her lips, which at the moment lost their colour. "The worst! What do you mean by the worst? What do you know of the worst?"

Her face showed intense eagerness, mingled with intense fear.

"I am very sorry to be obliged to give you bad news."

"And it is?" with still greater eagerness and fear.

"That Mr. Davenport will not recover."

"That he is dead?" leaning forward on the back of her chair towards him.

"Unhappily, yes."

"Of his old disease?"

She still kept her eyes on Santley's face.

"Perhaps. Did he complain to-night?"

"Yes; he said he was too ill to think of lying down."

"He used, no doubt, to inhale chloroform when the spasms were bad?"

"Always."

"Yes, I got the smell of chloroform. Well, one of these spasms may have been too severe; and now you know the worst, Mrs. Davenport."

She sat down on her chair and seemed about to faint. There was wine on the table. Santley poured some into a glass and made her drink it. After a while she became composed, and the look of eagerness and dread disappeared wholly from her face, and the red returned to her lips.

She was the first to speak. Her voice had regained all its old, firm serenity. Her face was calm and commanding. She looked, once more as though neither the onslaught of battle nor the wreck of worlds could disturb her.

"You, sir," she said, once more addressing Santley, "I have to thank for your promptness in coming at this hour to one whom you never even heard of before. And" – turning to Paulton—"I have to thank you most sincerely for your kindness in summoning the doctor for me in my extremity."

Each man protested he had in this matter done no more than his duty, and both said they sympathised with her in the awful calamity which had fallen upon her.

She bowed her head in acknowledgment of their kind-hearted speeches, and went on:

"I am, I may say, alone in the world and without a friend in London. I am now, or shall be when you go, alone in this house. I do not know what is to be done in a case of this kind. For a long time I have been aware my husband might die at any moment. But now that this has happened, I find myself as unprepared for it as though the possibility of his death had never before entered my mind. I would therefore ask you to add to the favours you

have already conferred by telling me what I ought to do in the morning."

She spoke in the most measured and deliberate way. It was plain she did not want to excite compassion. Her manner went so far as to imply that she would resent expressions of condolence. She seemed to wish the two men would regard her simply as an inexperienced woman confronted by an unexpected difficulty, and that they would confine themselves to the business aspect of the affair.

Santley and Paulton looked at one another inquiringly.

"It will be impossible for you to stay by yourself in this house to-night," said Paulton, who was completely subjugated by her regal beauty, her sudden misfortune, and her forlorn plight.

"But what am I to do?" she asked, turning to him. "It is too late or too early to look for ordinary help; and if I could get a person to come and stay with me, this place is not fit to receive any one."

Paulton was overwhelmed by this speech and the contemplation of the scene before him. Here was the most superb woman he had ever seen in his life alone in this house of chaos by night with the dead body of her husband, who had spoken to her but a few hours ago. She could not live here by herself till daylight. It would drive her mad, or would kill her. It would be little short of murder to leave her as she was. He could see plainly that her present calmness was artificial, and that when the need for self-restraint caused by the presence of two strangers was removed, she would break down utterly, collapse-in all likelihood

die. He knew that when highly strung natures break down at all they break down more completely than any others. Then he knew that his father and mother were the most kind-hearted and neighbourly people alive, and that if they only heard of the hideous position in which this woman was, they would hasten to her assistance. No doubt the hour-it must now be past two-was most awkward; but if it was awkward for the succourer, how much more awkward for any one in need of help.

All this ran through his mind in a moment. He resolved to act; then he spoke:

"Mrs. Davenport, my father and mother live close by, only a few houses off. I am sure they will be greatly pleased and take it as a kindness if you will come up there to-night. I could send down the coachman to stay here. He is a most good-natured and trustworthy man."

Dr. Santley gave Paulton a peculiar look, of which the latter could make nothing.

"What!" she said. "At such an hour! I could not think of it."

"I can assure you," persisted Paulton, "it will not cause any inconvenience. My mother does not in the least mind getting up. I am perfectly certain both my father and mother would be greatly displeased with me if I did not do everything in my power to induce you to come."

He glanced at Santley for encouragement, and again found the incomprehensible expression on the doctor's face.

She seemed to hesitate. She looked down at her soft, round

arm lying on the table.

"It is most considerate of you to make me such an offer, and if I felt perfectly sure your mother would not regard it as a very inconvenient intrusion, I should be disposed to accept it."

"Believe me, Mrs. Davenport, I am not exaggerating in the slightest degree when I say that my mother would be displeased with me if I omitted any argument likely to influence you. I appeal to Dr. Santley. He will tell you that my mother is most sympathetic. What do you say, doctor?"

"I am sure I know of no one of kindlier nature than Mrs. Paulton," said the doctor.

The face of Santley was now expressionless, the eyes of Mrs. Davenport were fixed on him.

"I will go," she said, and rose. She walked slowly down the side of the table until she reached the elbow of the couch. She bent over the drooped head, kissed the forward-leaning forehead, and then went back to the door, and as she left the room said: "I shall be ready immediately. I do not like to go upstairs. I have a cloak and bonnet in the hall. Please bring the light here a moment."

"Will you wait until I come back?" said Paulton to Santley, as he passed him by carrying the lamp. "I will not be more than half-an-hour."

"I'll wait for you," said the doctor.

In a few seconds Paulton replaced the lamp on the table, and then Mrs. Davenport and he left the house.

As soon as the sound of their footfalls had died away, the

doctor once more approached the recumbent figure.

"I wish," he thought, "Paulton had not been so enthusiastic in his invitation. As a rule, spasmodic asthma does not kill directly. A little chloroform is not a bad thing in spasmodic asthma; but too much chloroform is a bad thing, and there has been too much here. Why, it's all over the beard, and shirt, and waistcoat! She looks as if she could do anything. I hope this is not a case of foul play."

CHAPTER III

HINTS OF EARLY HISTORY

Alfred Paulton had not said too much of the kindliness of his father and mother. He left Mrs. Davenport in the drawing-room and knocked at his mother's door, and explained to both father and mother what had occurred, and the step he had taken in the matter. After expressions of surprise and horror at the tragedy at Crescent House, both applauded his action. Mrs. Paulton then told him to go down to the guest and say that she would follow him in a few minutes.

When he got back to the drawing-room he found the widow where he had left her. She was sitting in an easy-chair, her elbow resting on a table, her head on her hand. She raised her head as he entered. Otherwise she did not move.

"My mother is delighted you have come," he said. "She will be here in a few minutes. I see the fire has gone out. I hope you do not feel the place very cold?"

She looked at him with a stony stare. Her brows were slightly raised, but around her eyes the lids were strangely contracted. The expression of the whole face was that of one who suffered pain, but was not giving attention to the pain. When she spoke, her voice was dry and hard.

"It is most kind of your mother to interest and trouble herself

about a perfect stranger. I do not feel cold, thank you."

The contraction round the eyes relaxed. A look of intelligence alarmed came into her eyes, and she asked, in a husky voice:

"Do you know anything of cases such as this? I mean, do you know anything of the law in such cases?"

"The law!" he said, "the law! In what way do you mean?"

"Oh," she cried, covering her face with her hands, "it is dreadful to think of-horrible! Can you not tell me," she pleaded, "if-if it will be necessary to have an-"

She paused and looked at him beseechingly.

"An inquest?"

"Yes."

"Certainly not," he answered promptly. With this beautiful woman before him it was shocking to think of the ordeal and details of an inquest. "Mr. Davenport was suffering from a disease of long standing; it had been particularly bad to-night, and a violent paroxysm overcame him. My friend, Dr. Santley, will make it right, and you will be spared all pain that can possibly be diverted from you."

"Thank you," she said, feebly; and she threw herself back in her chair.

Nothing further was said until Mrs. Paulton entered the room. The young man introduced Mrs. Davenport to his mother; then he left to rouse the coachman for the purpose of sitting up at Crescent House. As soon as Paulton had arranged this, he hastened back to Dr. Santley.

"I came as quickly as I could, doctor. That poor woman is in a dreadful state of mind; she looks to me as if she were losing her reason."

"H'm," said the doctor, who was sitting on a chair by the lamp on the table, and had been reading a newspaper he had happened to have in his pocket. He seemed thoughtful or sleepy; Paulton was not a man of nice observation.

"Poor thing!" said the latter, compassionately; "she is not only in great grief for the loss of her husband, but was very uneasy about the suddenness of his death."

"No wonder," said the doctor drily.

The younger man sat down on a chair and regarded his companion with surprise. He had known the other for years, and had always taken him for a simple, sympathetic man. His tone now was one of cynical distrust, although distrust of what Paulton could not even guess. He leant forward and peered into Santley's face.

"I told her to make her mind quite easy on the score of the future. You understand what I mean?"

"She does not want an inquest?"

"Precisely."

"That is unfortunate, for I will not certify."

"What!" cried Paulton, leaning still farther forward, "you will not certify as to the cause of death? What do you mean?"

He shivered, and looked apprehensively at the body reclining on the couch.

"I don't know what the cause of death was."

"She said spasmodic asthma."

"A disease that very, very rarely kills."

"I thought that, on the contrary, it was most fatal."

"No. In a paroxysm of coughing, something in the head or chest may give way, but asthma itself does not kill."

An uneasy expression came into the young man's face, and, looking straight into the doctor's eyes, he said:

"And in this case what do you think killed?"

"It is impossible to say until after the inquest. I found on the floor this" – he held a bottle up in his hand. "It is a two-ounce bottle, empty; it contained chloroform. There is chloroform spilt all over the beard, shirt, and waistcoat."

"But perhaps the chloroform was administered for the relief of the dead man?"

"Perhaps so," said Santley, rising; "we shall find out all at the inquest. I'm off to bed now. Let nothing be stirred here. Good-night."

As Dr. Santley turned away from the gate of Crescent House, Paulton's coachman came up and the young man was relieved. He walked home straight and went to bed.

It was past four by this time, and after the excitement of the night there was little chance of the young man closing his eyes. His life up to this had been barren of adventure, and here was he now plunged into the middle of an affair which would be town talk in twenty-four hours. It was quite plain to him, from

Santley's manner, that the latter did not think the man had died a natural death, and it was almost as plain he did not think it was a case of accidental poisoning or suicide. Gradually, as time went by, it seemed to narrow itself down to one question: Did or did not that superb woman-? But no; the mere question was a hideous libel! He wished he could go to sleep; but sleep would not come. He tossed and tumbled until he felt feverish. In the heat and hurry of events a few hours old he had not had time for thought; now he had time for thought, but he did not want to think. True, he had no personal interest in that silent room out of which he had stepped a little while ago, but it haunted him, and lay before his imagination, lighted up with a fierce light which made every object in it stand out with painful sharpness.

While the actions of which he had been a spectator were going on at Crescent House, all had been confusion, chaos. Now every object was firmly defined by a hard, rigid line; every sound had a metallic ring; every motion went forward with mathematical deliberateness and precision. And over this scene of rigid forms and circumspect movement presided the woman, whose dark and lofty beauty had filled him with amazed reverence.

Murder! Could it be that murder had been done? There could be no doubt Santley thought so. Murder done by whom? Ugh! How he wished he had had nothing to do with that house; and yet, it was a privilege even to have seen her, to have heard her voice, to have done her a slight service. Above all, it was consoling to think she was now under this roof. If a fool knew how his thoughts

were running now, that fool might think he was in love with this woman. In love! Monstrous! He would as soon think of falling in love with a sunset, a melody, a poem.

Oh, if he could only sleep! Why should he trouble himself about this matter? Santley said there would be an inquest. That would be trouble enough for him in all conscience. He, of course, would have to appear, although he scarcely knew how his evidence could be material.

It must be near six o'clock now. There was no good in staying in bed any longer; he would get up and go out for a walk. It was dawn, he felt feverish, and the air would refresh him.

He set off at a quick pace. The breeze was raw and cold. He felt physically invigorated, but his mental unrest had not abated. Do what he would he could not banish the scene of the night from his mind—he could not get rid of the awful suspicion Santley's words had given rise to. Over and over he told himself that even the doctor had not explicitly formulated that suspicion. Over and over again that suspicion would intrude upon his thoughts.

He did not return to the house until breakfast-time. At the suggestion of Mrs. Paulton, Mrs. Davenport was breakfasting in her own room, as she was tired and shaken. Alfred had to go over the whole story once more for his father, but he was careful not to say a word of the terrible hint thrown out by Santley.

The moment breakfast was over he left home, and, without having made up his mind as to whither he was going, found himself in front of Santley's house just as the doctor was stepping

into his brougham bound for his morning visits.

"I say, doctor," he said, getting up close to the other, "what you let fall about that unfortunate affair at Crescent House kept me awake all night. You really don't think there has been anything wrong?"

Santley shook his head gravely as he got into his brougham, saying:

"I don't know, Mr. Paulton; I can't say. But I am sorry you mixed yourself up with the affair more than was absolutely necessary."

This was but poor comfort to the young man. He found it impossible to believe any evil of that marvellous-looking woman. If there was anything in what Santley said it plainly pointed at her; for were not she and her husband the only people in the house?

He did not care to go home. He could not meet that woman while even the hint of such a suspicion was in his head. He did not suspect her; but the suspicion had been spoken to him, it was sounding in his ears, and he could not bring himself to stand face to face with her and hear that murmur. He told himself this was an absurd condition of mind; but he could not help it. What was she to him, or he to her, that he should thus give way to such feelings? She was a beautiful, a surprisingly beautiful woman to whom he had rendered a slight service, shown a little kindness. That was all.

He wandered aimlessly about for an hour, and finally went

into town. Dulwich was intolerable to him. At Victoria railway station he took a hansom and drove to the Robin Hood Club. It was now between eleven and twelve. The club had not been long open, and there were only three members in the place. One of these happened to be Jerry O'Brien, a young Irishman, an intimate friend of Paulton, reputed to be clever, and known to be indolent. To him Paulton told the story of Crescent House, and what Dr. Santley had hinted at.

Up to this Jerry O'Brien had given little close attention to the story. He was smoking in a huge easy-chair with eyes half shut. The idea that a woman had poisoned her husband roused even him to attention, and as Paulton had finished his story he began to ask questions.

"And so this doctor of yours won't certify to the cause of death, and thinks your goddess may have had a hand in it!"

"Yes. Isn't it horrible?"

"What is your goddess like?"

"Dark and most lovely. A noble kind of beauty."

"Good figure?"

"Perfect."

"Did you hear her name?"

"Yes; Davenport."

Jerry O'Brien blew the smoke of his cigar away with a whistle.

"Is she English?"

"No. I think Scotch."

"Possibly Irish?"

"Ay, she may be Irish."

"And her husband was an elderly man, with a greyish full beard and chronic asthma?"

"Yes. Do you know them?"

"By heavens, I do! And I think I know, if there has been foul play, who cheated."

"Who? Not she?"

"Not she directly, any way, but Tom Blake, the biggest scoundrel Ireland has turned out for years and years, and an old lover of hers. I saw him in Piccadilly to-day. He looked as if he was meditating murder. Poor old Davenport! – I knew him well. He was a simple man. She must have told Blake of the lonely house. Your doctor is right. There is reason for suspicion, and I'll be at the inquest. You will, of course?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

"Then I promise you will hear an interesting story."

Paulton shuddered.

CHAPTER IV

SEEKING HELP

Young Paulton felt anything but relieved or cheered by Jerry O'Brien's words. He began now to feel it would have been wiser if he had not meddled in this affair. It was quite true his father and mother were the kindest couple in England; but, like most other middle-class elderly people, they were careful about appearances and preferred a smooth and easy way of life to one of surprises and startling situations.

And now were they-owing to his hasty action of the night before-brought into immediate contact with an inquest and a story, which might turn out to be a scandal, which might have for its core an infamous crime. This other man, this Blake, of whom Jerry O'Brien spoke in such unmeasured terms, might, if he appeared upon the stage, complicate matters infinitely.

Besides, although he had taken elaborate care to tell himself he was in no danger of falling in love with Mrs. Davenport, that did not make it desirable a former and disreputable admirer should be in the neighbourhood. But, after all, Jerry O'Brien's surmises might be quite baseless. This old admirer might have ceased to admire-might never in all his life have been within miles of Half Moon Lane, the Crescent House.

At present what was he to do with himself? There was a

kind of treason in leaving all the burden of the situation on the shoulders of his father and mother. He did not know anything about inquests beyond what he had gathered now and then from reading a summarised report in a newspaper. If it was mean to keep away from his father and mother, what could he think of leaving this newly-made widow derelict? And yet what about this old lover? Confound the whole thing! Now he was heartily sorry he had bound himself up in it.

And yet when he thought of her he charged himself with cowardice for flinching.

"Look here, O'Brien," he said at length, "what ought I to do?"

"Do!" cried O'Brien scornfully; "why, get out of it as fast as ever you can. I hope you're not such a fool as to mix yourself and your family any more up in this miserable matter."

Alfred shook his head gravely.

"I can't retreat now. I have promised to see her out of the trouble--"

"And a pretty chance you have of seeing her out of the trouble! My belief is that every hour will make matters only worse."

"Do be reasonable and try and help me. You know I would depend on you more than on any other man living. I can't go home and turn this woman out of doors, and you ought to be able to understand that I don't like to confess to the old people I have been hasty or unwise. Don't desert me, O'Brien."

The other got out of his chair with a growl, and began pacing up and down the smoking-room of the club. O'Brien had private

reasons of his own for wishing to keep friendly with Alfred Paulton. Jerry knew no pleasanter house in all London to spend a long evening in than the Paultons', and he knew no nicer girl in all London than Madge Paulton, Alfred's younger sister. But these facts were both reasons for his impatience with his friend. He felt a firm conviction the adventure of the night before would have no gratifying sequel. The sight of Tom Blake, taken in conjunction with Paulton's story, was enough to make any prudent man cautious. And here now was Alfred, plunged headlong into one of the most disagreeable experiences which could befall a quiet-going citizen. It was too bad, but there was no cure for the thing. It would certainly be rather mean of Alfred to retire from the position in which he had voluntarily placed himself with this woman. O'Brien could not abandon his friend any more than his friend could abandon this woman.

He stopped in his walk, and said, abruptly:

"The first thing is to get a solicitor. Do you know of one?"

"There's Spencer, my own man, or there's my father's."

"And a nice pair they'd make in a case of this kind. Your father's man wouldn't touch it with a forty-foot ladder, and Spencer would get every one connected with the matter locked up. No, you want a man that's accustomed to the work. He must be as sharp as bayonets and as persevering. I would not attach so much importance to this point, only that I know Tom Blake is about. I feel you are standing on a mine, and may be blown sky-high any moment. I have it! You must get Pringle-Pringle, of

Pringle, Pringle, and Co. Young Pringle is the very man for you, and he's a good sort too. Come on, and I'll introduce you to him."

The two friends left the club and proceeded at once to the office of Pringle, Pringle, and Co. Here they were fortunate in finding the younger Pringle, and at their service.

He was a low-sized, stoutish, horsey-looking, clean-shaven man of about thirty-five, in very tight-fitting clothes. He bade the two visitors be seated, and then listened with exemplary patience to Paulton's story. When it was finished, he crossed his legs and reflected for a few moments.

"I see," he said-"I see. Supposing Mrs. Davenport is willing I should appear for her, I think all will be right. Of course, it would be nonsense to pretend to believe that a thing of this kind is agreeable. It is not. Things of this kind are awkward and painful; but that is all. I feel fully persuaded, beyond the inconvenience of appearing as a witness, Mrs. Davenport will suffer none. Your doctor must be mad, I should say, Mr. Paulton. You don't think he could be induced to certify?"

"I am perfectly sure he won't. I have known him some years, and he is a man of great determination," said Paulton.

"Well, we must only try and do the best we can. Has the deceased any relatives-blood relatives, I mean?"

"I don't know," said Paulton.

"Yes, he has a brother, who lives in the south of Ireland," answered O'Brien. "Mr. Davenport was somewhat peculiar in his thoughts and habits, but his brother is an oddity."

"Ah, that is not fortunate. No doubt he will want to know all about this unlucky affair.

"And now, O'Brien, it is your turn. I want you to tell me all you know about this other man, Blake."

"Well, I'll tell you all I know about the whole thing," said Jerry O'Brien.

"Ay, do," said the solicitor, settling himself comfortably in his elbow chair.

"The man who is dead, Louis Davenport, was a native of the south of Ireland, County Waterford, to be exact. His wife is about thirty-four, and he must have been about sixty when he died. She, too, is Irish; her maiden name was Butler. She comes of a good Cork family-the Butlers of Scrouthea. They were as poor as church mice. Davenport was rich, and had money, not land; and Marion Butler was a beauty, as my friend Paulton has told you.

"About ten years ago, when Louis Davenport was elderly, and Marion Butler no longer very young, he proposed to her father for her. The father was delighted, for Davenport promised all sorts of comfortable things about money; but when the matter was spoken of to Miss Butler, they found a difficulty had to be faced, for Mr. Tom Blake stood in the way.

"This Tom Blake is and was one of the most hopeless scamps in Europe. He is now about thirty-eight years of age, and has deserved hanging for every year of his life. He was in the army, to start with; he was kicked out of it. He tried the Turf for a while, until he was kicked out of that too. Then he turned his hand to

card-sharpping. What he's doing now, I don't know, except he may have gone in for a little murder. He's quite capable of it, I assure you, Pringle-quite capable of it."

"And you say this Miss Butler had a strong predilection for this objectionable man?"

"It amounted to nothing short of infatuation. As the account of the matter reached me, she was assured by people who were quite disinterested that he was a thorough scamp. They might as well have saved their breath. She would listen to all they had to say, and simply shake her head."

"And how did they in the end over come this infatuation?"

"They never overcame it at all. They got her to marry Davenport by appealing to the baseness of Blake's nature. Some friends of mine were very intimate with the Butlers at that time, and I heard the whole history of his abominable conduct. He was then in great extremities for money, and took a sum down to leave the country and hold no communication with her. That's the sort of man Tom Blake is."

"But surely this woman whom he treated so vilely cannot care for him still-cannot have any regard for such a scurvy knave?"

"I don't know how matters have gone of late. I have been out of their tracks for some time. If he has any influence now it may rest on fear, not fascination. I am quite sure if there is anything wrong, he is at the bottom of it. I have been in London for months now, and never saw him or heard of him. Is it a mere coincidence that I should come across him just as I hear this story from Paulton?"

"It is strange. I presume Mrs. Davenport is childless?"

"Yes. And as far as I know she is now absolutely alone in the world, if you do not count this brother-in-law, with whom she never got on well."

"I'll go out to Dulwich with you myself now. I think that will be the best thing."

The three men rose and walked to Ludgate Hill railway station.

CHAPTER V

PRINGLE UNANSWERED

When the three men arrived at Dulwich, they went straight to Carlingford House, where Mr. Paulton lived. The owner was in. Some years ago he had retired from business in the City, and now interested himself in local affairs, his garden, his horses, and reading. He was bluff, white-haired, stout, brief of speech, straightforward, kindly. He was not quite sixty yet, notwithstanding his white hair.

Just as they got into the house he was crossing the hall. He paused, and held out his hand cordially to Jerry O'Brien.

"What lucky wind has blown you here at such an hour?" he cried. "You are just too late for luncheon; but I dare say they'll be able to find something for you and Alfred, and-"

He now became aware the third man was a stranger, and stopped.

Young Paulton introduced the solicitor, and then all four went into a little library on the right hand side of the hall. Alfred felt acutely the difficulty of his position, and he found himself completely at a loss to explain the situation to his father. Then it occurred to him to appeal to O'Brien for help.

"Jerry," said he, "tell the governor all about it."

The old man looked apprehensively from one to the other.

There was evidently something wrong.

"Out with it whatever it is, my lad," said he to O'Brien, and, without further delay, Jerry began. When he had finished, the old man seemed thunderstruck. It was incredible that he should ever be brought into contact with such people, and such a history. He had sat down in an easy-chair, and now he felt he had not the strength to get out of it. He looked blankly around at the three figures and the bookcases and the walls, as if he were awaiting contradiction from animate or inanimate objects. But no one spoke, and nothing occurred to reassure him.

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