

PUBLISHED BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT.

DR. RUMSEY'S PATIENT:

A VERY STRANGE STORY.

BY L. T. MEADE AND DR. HALIFAX,

Joint authors of "Stories from the Diary of a Doctor."

Copyrighted, 1896, by L. T. Meade and Dr. Halifax.

CHAPTER I.

Two young men in flannels were standing outside the door of the Red Doe in the picturesque village of Grandcourt. The village contained one long and straggling street. The village inn was covered with ivy, wisteria, flowering jessamine, monthly roses and many other creepers. The flowers twined round old-fashioned windows, and nodded to the guests when they awoke in the morning and breathed perfume upon them as they retired to bed at night. In short, the inn was an ideal one, and had from time immemorial found favor with reading parties, fishermen, and others who wanted to combine country air and the pursuit of health with a certain form of amusement. The two men who now stood in the porch were undergraduates from Balliol. There was nothing in the least remarkable about their appearance—they looked like what they were, good-hearted, keen-witted young Englishmen of the day. The time was evening, and as the inn faced due west in the whole place was bathed in warm sunshine.

"This heat is tremendous and there is no air," said Everett, the younger of the students. "How can you stand that sun beating on your head, Frere? I'm for indoors."

"Right," replied Frere. "It is cool enough in the parlour."

As he spoke he took a step forward, and gazed down the winding village street. There was a look of pleased expectation in his eyes. He seemed to be watching for someone. A girl appeared, walking slowly up the street. Frere's eyes began to dance. Everett, who was about to go into the study parlor, gave him a keen glance, and for some reason his eyes also grew bright with expectation.

"There's something worth looking at," he exclaimed in a laughing voice.

"What did you say?" asked Frere gruffly.

"Nothing, old man—at least nothing special. I say, doesn't Hetty look superb?"

"You've no right to call her Hetty."

Everett gave a low whistle.

"I rather fancy I have," he answered—

"she gave me leave this morning."

"Impossible," said Frere. He turned pale under all his sunburn, and bit his lower lip. "Don't you find the sun very hot?" he asked.

"No, it is sinking into the west—the great heat is over. Let us go and enliven this little chamber."

"I will," said Frere suddenly. "You had better stay here where you are. It is my right," he added. "I was about to tell you so, when she came in view."

"You're right!" cried Everett; he looked disturbed.

Frere did not reply, but strode quickly down the village street. A dozen strides brought him up to Hetty's side. She was a beautiful girl, with a face and figure much above her station. Her hat was covered with wild flowers which she had picked in her walk, and coquettishly placed there. She wore a pink dress covered with rose buds—some wild flowers were stuck into her belt. As Frere advanced to meet her, her laughing eyes were raised to his face—there was a curious mixture of timidity and audacity in their glance.

"I have a word to say to you," he accented her in a gruff tone. "What right had you to give Everett leave to call you Hetty?"

The timidity immediately left the bright eyes, and a slight expression of anger took its place.

"Because I like to distribute my favours, Mr. Horace."

She quickened her pace as she spoke. Everett, who had been standing quite still in the porch watching the little scene, came out to meet the pair. Hetty flushed crimson when she saw him; she raised her dancing, charming dark eyes to his face, then looked again at Frere, who turned sullenly away.

"I hope, gentlemen you have had good sport," said the rustic beauty, in her demure voice.

"Excellent," replied Everett.

They had now reached the porch, which was entwined all over with honeysuckle in full flower. A great spray of the fragrant flower nearly touched the girl's charming face. She glanced again at Frere. He would not meet her eyes. Her whole face sparkled with the feminine love of teasing.

"Why is he so jealous?" she whispered to herself.

"It would be fun to punish him. I like him better than Mr. Everett, but I'll punish him."

"Shall I give you a buttonhole?" she said, looking at Everett.

"It'll be so kind," he replied.

She raised her eyes to the honeysuckle over her head, selected a spray with extreme care, and handed it to him demurely. He asked her to place it in his buttonhole; she looked again at Frere, he would not go away, but neither would he bring himself to glance at her. She bent her head to search in the bodice of her dress for a pin, found one, and then with a laughing glance of her eyes into Everett's handsome face, complied with his request.

The young fellow blushed with pleasure, then he glanced at Frere, and a feeling of compunction smote him—he strode abruptly into the house.

"Hetty, what do you mean by this sort of thing?" said Frere the moment they were alone.

"I mean this, Mr. Horace, I am still my own mistress."

"Great Scott! of course you are; but what do you mean by this sort of trifling? It was only this morning that you told me you loved me. Look here, Hetty, I'm in no humor to be trifled with; I can't and won't stand it. I'll make you the best husband a girl ever had, but listen to me, I have the devil's own temper when it is roused. For God's sake don't provoke it. If you don't love me, say so, and let there be an end of it."

"I wish you wouldn't speak so loudly," said Hetty, pouting her lips and half crying. "Of course I like you; I—well, yes, I suppose I love you. I was thinking of you

all the afternoon. See what I gathered for you—this bunch of heart's ease. There's meaning in heart's ease—there's none in honeysuckle."

Frere's brow cleared as if by magic.

"My little darling," he said, fixing his deep-set eyes greedily on the girl's beautiful face. "Forgive me for being such a brute to you, Hetty. Here—give me the flowers."

"No, not until you pay for them. You don't deserve them for being so nasty and suspicious."

"Give me the flowers, Hetty; I promise never to doubt you again."

"Yes, you will; it is your nature to doubt."

"I have no words to say what I feel for you."

Frere's eyes emphasised this statement so emphatically, that the empty-headed girl by his side felt her heart touched for the moment.

"What do you want me to do, Mr. Horace?" she asked, lowering her eyes.

"To give me the flowers, and to be nice to me."

"Come down to the brook after supper, perhaps I will give them to you then. There's aunt calling me—don't keep me please."

She rushed off.

"Hetty," said Mrs. Armitage, the innkeeper's wife, "did I hear you talking to Mr. Horace Frere in the porch?"

"Yes, Aunt Fanny, you did, replied Hetty."

"Well, look here, your uncle and I won't have it. Just because your pretty—"

Hetty tossed back her wealth of black curls.

"It's all right," she said in a whisper, her eyes shining as she spoke. "He wants me to be his wife—he asked me this morning."

He doesn't mean that, surely," said Mrs. Armitage, incredulous and pleased.

"Yes, he does; he'll speak to uncle tomorrow—that is, if I'll say 'Yes.' He says he has no one to consult—he'll make me a lady—he has plenty of money."

"Do you care for him, Hetty?"

"Oh, don't ask me whether I do or not, Aunt Fanny—I'm sure I can't tell you."

Hetty moved noisily about. She put plates and dishes on a tray preparatory to taking them into the parlour for the young men's supper.

"Look here," said her aunt, "I'll see after the parlour lodgers to-night." She lifted the tray as she spoke.

Hetty ran up to her bedroom. She took a little square of glass from its place on the wall and gazed earnestly at the reflection of her own charming face. Presently she put the glass down, locked her hands together, went over to the open window, and looked out.

"Shall I marry him?" she thought. "He has plenty of money—he loves me right enough. If I were his wife I'd be a lady—I needn't worry about household work any more. I hate household work—I hate drudgery. I want to have a fine time, with nothing to do but just to think of my dress and how I look. He has plenty of money, and he loves me—he says he'll make me his wife as soon as ever I say the word. Uncle and aunt would be pleased, too, and the people in the village would say I'd made a good match. Shall I marry him? I don't love him a bit, but what does that matter?"

She sighed—the color slightly faded on her blooming cheeks—she poked her head out of the little window.

"I don't love him," she said to herself.

"When I see Mr. Andrew my heart beats. Ever since I was a child I have thought more of Mr. Andrew than of any one else in all the world. I never told—no, I never told, but I'd rather slave for Mr. Robert Andrew than be the wife of any one else on earth. What a fool I am! Mr. Andrew thinks nothing of me, but he is never out of my head, nor out of my heart. My heart aches for him—I'm nearly mad sometimes about it all. Perhaps I'll see him tonight if I go down to the brook. He's sure to pass the brook on his way to the Court. Mr. Everett likes me too I know, and he's a gentleman as well as Mr. Frere. Oh, dear, they both worry me more than please me. I'd give twenty men like them for one sight of the young Squire. Oh, what folly all this is!"

She went again and stood opposite to her little looking glass.

"The young ladies up at the Court haven't got a face like mine," she murmured. "There isn't anyone all over the place has a face like mine. I wonder if Mr. Andrew really thinks it pretty? Why should I worry myself about Mr. Frere? I wonder if Mr. Andrew would mind if I married him—would it make him jealous? If I thought that, I'd do it fast enough—yes, I declare I would. But of course he wouldn't mind—not one bit; he has scarcely ever said two words to me—nor since each other with apples in uncle's orchard. Oh, Mr. Andrew, I'd give all the world for one smile from you, but you think nothing at all of poor Hetty. Dear, beautiful Mr. Andrew—won't you love me even a little—even as you love your dog. Yes, I'll go and walk by the brook after supper. Mr. Frere will meet me there, of course, and perhaps Mr. Andrew will go by—perhaps he'll be jealous. I'll take my poetry book and sit by the brook just where the forget-me-nots grow. Yes, yes—oh, I wonder if the Squire will go by."

These thoughts no sooner came into Hetty's brain than she resolved to act upon them. She snatched up a volume of L.E.L.'s poems; their weak and love-lorn phrases exactly suited her style and order of mind, and ran quickly down to a dancing rivulet which ran its merry course about a hundred yards back of the inn. She sat by the bank, pulled a great bunch of forget-me-nots, laid them on the open pages of her book, and looked musingly down at the flowers. Footsteps were heard crunching the underwood at the opposite side. A voice presently sounded in her ears. Hetty's heart beat fondly.

"How do you do?" said the voice.

"Good evening, Mr. Robert," she replied. Her tone was demure and extremely respectful. She started to her feet, letting her flowers drop as she did so. A blush suffused her lovely face, her dancing eyes were raised for a quick moment, then as suddenly lowered. She made a beautiful picture. The young man who stood a few feet away from her, with the running water dividing them, evidently

had a boyish figure—a handsome, manly face. His eyes were very dark, deeply set, and capable of much thought. He looked every inch the gentleman.

"Is Armitage in?" he asked after a pause.

"I don't know, Mr. Robert, I'll go and inquire if you like."

"No, it doesn't matter. The Squire asked me to call and beg of your uncle to go to the Court tomorrow morning. Will you give him the message?"

"Yes, Mr. Robert."

There was a perceptible pause. Hetty looked down at the water. Andrew looked at her.

"Good evening," he said then.

"Good evening, sir," she replied.

He turned and walked slowly up the narrow path which led towards the Court.

"His eyes told me tonight that he thought me pretty," muttered Hetty to herself, "why doesn't he say it with his lips? I—I wish I could make him. Oh, is that you, Mr. Frere?"

"Yes, Hetty. I promised to come, and I am here. The evening is a perfect one, let us follow the stream a little way."

Hetty was about to say "No," when suddenly lifting her eyes, she observed that the young Squire had paused under the shade of a great elm tree a little further up the bank. A quick idea darted into her vain little soul. She would walk past the Squire without pretending to see him, in Frere's company. Frere should make love to her in the Squire's presence. She gave her lover a coy and affectionate glance.

"Yes, come," she said; "it is pretty by the stream, perhaps I'll give you some forget-me-nots presently."

"I want the heart's ease which you have already picked for me," said Frere.

"Oh, there's time enough."

Frere advanced a step, and laid his hand on the girl's arm.

"Listen," he said; "I was never more in earnest in my life. I love you with all my heart and soul. I love you madly. I want you for my wife. I mean to marry you come what may. I have plenty of money and you are the wife of all others for me. You told me this morning that you loved me, Hetty. Tell me again; say that you love me better than anyone else in the world."

Hetty paused, she raised her dark eyes; the Squire was almost within earshot.

"I suppose I love you—a little," she said, in a whisper.

"Then give me a kiss—just one."

She walked on. Frere followed.

"Give me a kiss just one," he repeated.

"Not to night," she replied, in a demure voice.

"Yes, you must—I insist."

"Don't Mr. Frere," she called out, sharply, uttering a cry as she spoke.

He didn't mind her. Overcome by his passion he caught her suddenly in his arms and pressed his lips many times to hers.

"Hold, sir! What are you doing?"

shouted Andrew's voice from the opposite side of the bank.

"By heaven, what is that to you?" called Frere back.

He let Hetty go with some violence, and retreated one or two steps in his astonishment. His face was crimson up to the roots of his honest brow.

Andrew leaped across the brook. "You will please understand that you take liberties with Miss Armitage at your peril," he said. "What right have you to take such advantage of an undefended girl? Hetty, I will see you home."

Hetty eyes danced with delight. For a moment Frere felt too stunned to speak.

"Come with me, Hetty," said Andrew, putting a great restraint upon himself, but speaking with irritation. "Come—you should be at home at this hour."

"You shall answer me for this, whoever you are," said Frere, whose face was white with passion.

"My name is Andrew," said the Squire; "I will answer you in a way you don't like if you don't instantly leave this young girl alone."

"Comfound your interference," said Frere. "I am not ashamed of my actions. I can justify them. I am going to marry Miss Armitage."

"Is that true, Hetty?" said Andrew, looking at the girl in some astonishment.

"No, there isn't a word of it true," answered Hetty, stung by a look on the Squire's face. "I don't want to have anything to do with him—he shan't kiss me. I—I'll have nothing to do with him." She burst into tears.

"I'll see you home," said Andrew.

CHAPTER II.

The Awbseys of 'The Court' could trace their descent back to the Norman Conquest. They were a proud family with all the special characteristics which mark races of long descent. Amongst the usual accompaniments of race, was given to them the curse of heredity. A strange and peculiar doom hung over the house. It had descended now from father to son during many generations. How it had first arisen his gorgon head no one could tell. People said that it had been sent as a punishment for the greed of gold. An old ancestor more than a hundred and fifty years ago, had married a West Indian heiress. She had coloured blood in her veins, a purse of enormous magnitude, a deformed figure, and what was more to the point a particularly crooked and obtuse order of mind. She did her duty by her descendants, leaving to each of them a gift. To one, deformity of person—to another, a stammering tongue—to a third, a squint, to a fourth, imbecility. In each succeeding generation, at least one man and woman of the house of Andrew had cause to regret the gold which had certainly brought a curse with it. But beyond and above all these things, it was immediately after the West Indian's entrance into the family that strange doom began to assail the male members of the house which was now more dreaded than madness. The doom was unique and curious. It consisted of one remarkable phase. There came upon those on whom it descended, an extraordinary and complete lapse of memory for the grave events of life, accompanied by perfect retention of memory for all minor matters. This

It Makes a Good Breakfast.

curious phase once developed, other idiosyncrasies immediately followed. The victim's moral sense became weakened—all physical energy departed—a curious lassitude of mind and body became general. The victim did not in the least know that there was anything special the matter with him, but as a rule the doomed man either became idiotic, or died before the age of thirty.

All the great physicians of their time had been consulted with regard to this curious family trait, but in the first place no one could understand it, in the second no possible cure could be suggested as a remedy. The curse was supposed to be due to a brain affection, but brain affections in the old days were considered to be special visitations from God, and men of science let them alone.

In their early life, the Awbseys were particularly bright, clever sharp fellows, endowed with excellent animal spirits, and many amiable traits of character. They were chivalrous to women, kind to children, full of warm affections, and each and all of them possessed much of the golden gift of hope. As a rule the doom of the house came upon each victim with startling suddenness. One of the disappointments of life ensued—an unfortunate love affair—the death of some beloved member—a money loss. The victim lost all memory of the event. No words no explanations could revive the dead memory—the thing was completely blotted out from the photograph of the brain. Immediately afterwards followed the mental and physical decay. The girls of the family quite escaped the curse. It was on the sons that it invariably descended.

Up to the present time, however, Robert Andrew's father had lived to confute the West Indian's dire curse. His father had married a Scotch laird's daughter, with no bluer blood in her veins than that which had been given to her by some rugged Scotch ancestor. Her health of mind and body was all that her descendants much good. Even the word "nerves" had been unknown to this healthy-minded daughter of the North—her children had all up to the present escaped the family curse, and it was now firmly believed at the Court that the spell was broken, and that the West Indian's awful doom would leave the family. The matter was too solemn and painful to be alluded to except under the gravest conditions, and young Robert Andrew, the heir to the old place and all its belongings, was certainly the last person to speak of it.

Robert's father was matter-of-fact to the backbone, but Robert himself was possessed of an essentially reflective temperament. Had he been less healthily brought up by his stout old grandfather, and by his mother, he might have given way to morbid musings. Circumstances, however, were all in his favor, and at the time when this strange story really opened, he was looking out at life with a heart full of hope and a mind filled with noble ambitions.

Robert was the only son—he had two sisters, bright good-natured every-day sort of girls. As a matter of course his sisters adored him. They looked forward to his career with immense pride. He was to stand for Parliament at the next general election. His brains belonged to the highest order of intellect. He had taken a double first at the University—there was no position which he might not hope to assume.

Robert had all the chivalrous instincts of his race towards women. As he walked quickly home now with Hetty by his side, his blood boiled at the thought of the insult which had been offered to her. Poor silly little Hetty, was nothing whatever to him except a remarkably pretty village girl. Her people, however, were his father's tenants; he felt it his duty to protect her. When he parted with her just outside the village inn, he said a few words.

"You ought not to allow those young men to take liberties with you, Hetty," he said. "Now go home. Don't be out so late again in the future, and don't forget to give your uncle my father's message."

She bent her head, and left him without replying. She did not even thank him. He watched her until she disappeared into the house, then turned sharply and walked up the village street home with a vigorous step.

He had come to the spot where he had parted with Frere, and was just about to leap the brook when that young man started suddenly from under a tree, and stood directly in his path.

"I must ask you to apologise to me," he said. Andrew flushed.

"What do you mean?" he replied.

"What I say. My intentions towards Miss Armitage are perfectly honest. She promised to marry me this morning. When you chose to interfere I was kissing my future wife."

"If that is really the case, I beg your pardon," said Andrew, "but then," he continued, looking full at Frere, "Hetty Armitage denies any thought of marrying you."

"She does, does she?" muttered Frere. His face turned white.

"One word before you go," said Andrew. "Miss Armitage is a pretty girl."

"What is that to you?" replied Frere, "I don't mean to discuss her with you."

"You may please yourself about that, but allow me to say one thing. Her uncle is one of my father's oldest and most respected tenants; Hetty is therefore under our protection, and I for one will see that she gets fair play. Anyone who takes liberties with her has got to answer to me. That's all. Good evening."

Andrew slightly raised his hat, leapt the brook, and disappeared through the underwood in the direction of the Court.

Horace Frere stood and watched him. His rage was now almost at white heat.

He was madly in love, and was therefore not quite responsible for his own actions. He was determined at any cost to make Hetty his wife. The Squire's interference spoke the demon of jealousy in his heart. He had patiently borne Everett's marked attentions to the girl of his choice—he wondered now at the sudden passion which filled him. He walked back to the inn feeling exactly as if the devil were driving him.

"I'll have this thing out with Hetty before I am an hour older," he cried aloud. "She promised to marry me this very morning. How dare that jacksnapper interfere. What do I care for his position in the place? If he's twenty times the Squire it's nothing to me. Hetty had the cool cheek to eat her own words to him in my presence. It's plain to be seen what the thing means. She's a heartless flirt—she's flying for higher game than honest Horace Frere, but I'll put a spoke in her wheel, and in his wheel too, curse him. He's in love with the girl himself—that's why he interferes. Well, she shall choose between him and me tonight, and if she does choose him it will be all the worse for him."

As he rushed home, Frere lashed himself into greater and greater fury. Everett was standing inside the porch when the other man passed him roughly by.

"I say, Frere, what's up?" called Everett, taking the pipe out of his mouth.

"Curse you, don't keep me, I want to speak to Miss Armitage."

Everett burst into a somewhat discordant laugh.

"Your manners are not quite to be desired at the present moment, old man," he said. "Miss Armitage seems to have a strangely disquieting effect upon her swains."

"I do not intend to discuss her with you, Everett. I must speak to her at once."

Everett laughed again.

"She seems to be a person of distinction," he said. "She has just been seen home with much ceremony by no less a person than Andrew, of the Court."

"Curse Andrew and all his belongings. Do you know where she is?"

"A sweet high-pitched voice within the house now made itself heard."

"I can see you in Aunt's parlour if you like, Mr. Horace."

"Yes."

Frere strode into the house—a moment later he was standing opposite to Hetty in the little hot gaslit parlour.

Hetty had evidently been crying. Her tears had brought shadows under her eyes—they added pathos to her lovely face, giving it a look of depth which is usually lacking. Frere glanced, then he felt his anger dropping from him like a mantle.

"For God's sake, Hetty, speak the truth," said the poor fellow.

"What do you want me to say, Mr. Horace?" she asked.

Her voice was tremulous, her tears nearly broke forth anew. Frere made a step forward. He would have clasped her to his breast, but she would not allow him.

"No," she said with a sob, "I can't have anything to do with you."

"Hetty, you don't know what you are saying. Remember this morning."

"I remember, it but I can't go on with it. Forget everything I said—go away—please go away."

"No, I won't go away by heaven, you shall tell me the truth. Look here, Hetty, I won't be humbugged—you've got to choose at once."

"What do you mean, Mr. Horace?"

"You've got to choose between that fellow and me."

"Between you and the Squire?" exclaimed Hetty.

She laughed excitedly; the bare idea caused her heart to beat wildly. Her laughter nearly drove Frere mad. He strode up to her, took her hands with force, and looked into her frightened eyes.

"Do you love him? The truth, girl, I will have it."

"Let me go, Mr. Horace."

"I won't until you tell me the truth. It is either the Squire or me; I must hear the truth now or never—which is it, Squire Andrew or me?"

"Oh, I can't help it," said Hetty, bursting into tears—"It's the Squire—oh, sir, let me go."

(To be continued.)</