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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."

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CHAPTER XXIV.

Hetty left the room, leaving the dog behind her—he uttered a frightful howl when she did so and followed her as far as the door, which she shut and locked; he scratched at it to try and release himself, but Hetty took no notice—she was cruelly regarded the dumb beast's fear in her own agony and terror.

She ran upstairs to her room, put on her hat and jacket, and went out. Stumbling and trembling, she went along the road until she reached the summit of the hill which led straight down in a gentle slope towards Grandcourt. She was glad the ground sloped downwards, for it was important that she should quicken her footsteps in order to see the Squire with as little delay as possible. She was quite oblivious of the lapse of time since her last visit, and hoped he might still be in the office. She resolved to try the office first. If he were not there she would go on to the house—find him she must; nothing should keep her from her residence to-night. She presently reached Grandcourt, entered the grounds by a side entrance, and pursued her way through the darkness. The sky overhead was cloudy, no other moon stars were visible. Fluttering and falling she pressed forward, and by-and-by reached the neighbourhood of the office. She saw a light burning dimly behind the closed blinds—her heart beat with a sense of thankfulness—she staggered up to the door, brushing her dress against it as she did so—she put up her hand and knocked feebly. The next instant the door was opened to her—a man, a total stranger, confronted her, but behind him she saw Awdrey. She tottered into the room.

The comparative light and warmth within, after the darkness and chilly damp of the spring evening, made her head reel and her eyes at first could take in no object distinctly. She was conscious of uttering excited words, then she heard the door shut behind her. She looked around—she was alone with the Squire. She staggered up to him, and fell on her knees.

'You must save me as I saved you long ago,' she panted.

'What is it? Get up. What do you mean?' said Awdrey.

'I mean, Squire—oh! I mean I wanted to come to you today, but Vincent—' her voice faltered—'Vincent was mad with jealousy. He thought that I ought not to see you, Squire; he had got summat in his brain, and it made him mad. He thought that, perhaps, long ago—Squire, I loved you—long ago. I'm not afeared to say anything tonight, the truth will be out to-night—I loved you long ago, I love you still; yes, yes, with all my heart, with all my heart. You never cared nought for me I know that well. You never did me a wrong in thought nor in deed, I know that well also; but to me you were as a God, and I loved you, I love you still, and Vincent, my husband, he must have seen it in my face; but you did me no wrong—never, in word nor in deed—only I loved you—and I love you still.'

'You must be mad,' said Awdrey. 'Why have you come here to say such words? Get up at once; your words and your actions distress me much. Get up, Hetty; try to compose yourself.'

'What I have come to say had best be said kneeling,' replied Hetty, 'it eases the awful pain in my side to kneel. Let me be, Squire; let me kneel up against your father's desk. Ah! that's better. It is my heart—I think it is broke; anyhow it beats awful, and the pain is awful.'

'If you have come for any other reason than to say the words you have just said, say them and go,' replied Awdrey.

Hetty glanced up at him. His face was hard, she thought it looked cruel, she shivered from head to foot. Was it for this man she had sacrificed her life? Then the awful significance of her errand came over her, and she proceeded to speak.

'Vincent saw the truth in my face,' she continued, 'he was mad with jealousy, and he said that I won't come and see you. He heard me speak to you last night, he heard me say it is a matter of life and death and he was mad. He said I won't come; but I won't mad, too, mad to come, and I thought I would get over him by guile. I put summat in his stout, and he drank it—summat, I don't know the name, but I had often taken it myself and it always made me a sight better, and I gave it to him in his stout and he drank it, and then he slept. He lay down on the settle in the kitchen, and he went off into a deep sleep. When he slept real sound I stole away and I came to you. I saw you this evening and you spoke to me and I spoke to you, and I begged of you to keep our secret, and I thought perhaps you would, and I came away feelin' better. I went back home, and the place was quiet, and I got into the kitchen. Vincent was lying on the settle sound asleep. I thought nought o' his sleepin' only to be glad, for I knew he could never have missed me. I made his supper for him, and built up the fire, and I lit the lamps in the house, and I took off my outdoor things. The dog howled, but I took no notice. Presently I went up to Vincent, and I shook him—I shook him 'ard, but he did not wake, I took his hand in mine, it was cold as ice; I listened for his breath, there was none. Squire,' said Hetty, rising now to her feet, 'my man was dead; Squire, I have killed him, just the same as you killed the man on Salisbury Plain six years ago. My husband is dead, and I have killed him. Squire, you must save me as I saved you.'

'How can I save you?' asked Awdrey. His voice had completely altered now. In the presence of the real tragedy, all the hardness left it. He sank into a chair near Hetty's side, he even took one of her trembling hands in his.

'How am I to help you, you poor soul?' he said again.

'You must prove an alibi—that is the word. You must say, "Hetty was with me, she could not have killed her man," you must say that; you must tell all the world that you and me was together he e.'

'I will do better than that,' said Awdrey. 'What do you mean?' Hetty started back and gazed at him with an queer mixture of hope and terror in her face. 'But—' but there ain't no better,' she cried. 'If you don't tell the simple truth I shall be hanged; hanged by the neck until I die—I, who saved you at the risk of my own soul nearly six years gone.'

'I will not let you be hanged,' said Awdrey, rising. 'Get up, Hetty; do not kneel to me. You do not quite know what you have done for me to-night. Sit on that chair—compose yourself—try to be calm. Hetty, you just came in the nick of time. God and the devil were fighting for my soul. In spite of all the devil's efforts God was getting the better of me, and I—I did not want him to get the best. I wanted the devil to help me, and, Hetty, I even prayed to him that he might come and help me. When I saw you coming into the room I thought at first that my prayer was answered. I seemed to see the devil on your face. Now I see differently—your presence has lifted a great cloud from before my mind—I see distinctly, almost as distinctly as if I were in hell itself, the awful consequences which must arise from wrong-doing. Hetty, I have made up my mind; you, of all people, have been the most powerful advocate on the side of God to-night. We will both do the right, child—we will both of us confess the simple truth.'

'No, Squire, no; they will kill me, they will kill me, if you do not help me in the only way you can help me—you are stronger than me, Squire—do not lead me to my death.'

'They will not kill you, but you must tell the whole truth as I will tell the truth. It can be proved that you gave the poison to your husband with no intent to kill—that matter can be arranged. Come with me, Hetty, row—let us come together. If you falter I will strengthen you—if I falter you will strengthen me. We will go together at once and tell what you saw and what I did nearly six years ago.'

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'She is not well,' answered Awdrey for her, 'but she will tell you presently. Come into the drawing-room, too, Anne; I should like you to be present.'

'I cannot understand this,' said Anne. She ran on first and opened the great folding doors—she entered the big room, her face ablaze with excitement and wonder—behind her came Awdrey holding Hetty's hand. There was an expression on the Squire's face which arrested the attention of everyone. Mr. Cuthbert, who had not seen him since his return home, rose eagerly from the deep arm-chair into which he had sunk, intending to give him a hearty welcome, but when he had advanced in the Squire's direction a step or two, he paused—he seemed to see by a sort of intuition that the moment for ordinary civilities was not then. Margaret left her seat by the piano and came into the centre of the room.

Her husband's eyes seemed to motion her back—her uncle went up to her and put his hand on her shoulder; he did not know what he expected, nor did Margaret, but each felt with an electric thrill of sympathy that a revelation of no ordinary nature was about to be made.

Still holding Hetty's hand, Awdrey came into the great space in front of the fire; he was about to speak when Rumsey hurried forward.

'One moment,' he said. 'This young woman is very ill; will some one fetch brandy?' He took Hetty's slight wrist between his finger and thumb, and felt the fluttering pulse.

Anne rushed away to get the brandy. The doctor mixed a small dose, and made Hetty swallow it. The stimulant brought back a faint color to her cheeks, and her eyes looked less dull and dazed.

'I have come into this room tonight with Hetty Vincent, who used to be Hetty Armistage, to make a very remarkable statement,' said Awdrey.

Rumsey backed a few paces. He thought to himself—'We shall get now to the mystery. He has made his mind on the side of the good—bave it now! What can all this mean? What is the matter with the pretty girl? She looks as if she were dying. What can be the connection between them?'

'What can be the connection between them? Was also the thought in the mind of every spectator. Margaret shared it, as her uncle's hand rested a little heavier moment by moment on her slight shoulder. Squire Cuthbert was swearing heavily under his breath. The sisters and their husbands stood in the background prepared for any denunciation—all was quietness and expectancy. Mrs. Everett, who up to the present instant had taken no part in the extraordinary scene, hurried now to the front.

'Squire,' she said, 'I do not know what you are going to say but I can guess. In advance, let me thank you from my heart; a pronouncement seizes me that the moment of my son's release is at hand. You have got this young woman to reveal her secret?'

'Her secret is mine,' said Awdrey. Squire Cuthbert swore aloud.

'Just wait one moment before you say anything,' said Awdrey, fixing his eyes on him. 'The thing is not what you imagine. I can tell the truth in half a dozen words. Mrs. Everett, you are right—you see the man before you who killed Horace Frere. Your son is innocent!'

'You did this?—you?' cried Mrs. Everett.

'Robert, what are you saying?' exclaimed Margaret.

'Robert? Echoed Ann.

'Dear brother, you must be mad,' said Dorothy.

'No, I am sane—I am sure I was mad for a time, but I am quite sane tonight. I killed Horace Frere on Salisbury Plain. Hetty Vincent saw the murder committed; she hid her knowledge for my sake. Immediately after I committed the deed the deed of my house fell upon me, and I forgot what I myself had done. For five years I had no memory of my own act. Rumsey, when I saw my face reflected in the pond, six months ago, the knowledge of the truth returned to me. I remembered what I had done. I remembered, and I was not sorry, and I resolved to hide the truth to the death; my conscience, the thing which makes the difference between man and beast, never awoke within me—I was happy and I kept well. But yesterday—yesterday when I came home and saw my people and saw Hetty here, and noticed the look of suffering on your face, Mrs. Everett, the voice of God began to make itself heard. From that moment until now the powers of evil have been fighting against the powers of good for my soul. I was coward enough to think that I might hide the truth and live the life of a hypocrite. The Squire's voice, which had been quiet and composed, faltered now for the first time. 'It could not be done,' he added. 'I found I could not close with the devil.'

At this moment a strange thing happened. Awdrey's wife rushed up to him, she flung her arms round his neck, and laid her head on his breast.

'Thank God!' she murmured. 'Nothing matters, for you have saved your soul alive.'

'But this is a most remarkable thing,' said Mr. Cuthbert, finding his tongue, and coming forward. 'You, Awdrey—you, my niece's husband, come quietly into this room and tell us with the utmost coolness that you are a murderer. I cannot believe it—you must be mad.'

'No, I am perfectly sane. Hetty Vincent can prove the truth of my words. I am a murderer, but not by intent. I never meant to kill Frere; nevertheless, I am a murderer, for I have taken a man's life.'

'You tell me this?' said Squire Cuthbert. 'You tell me that you have suffered another man to suffer in your stead for close on six years?'

'Unknowingly, Squire Cuthbert. There was a blank over my memory.'

'I can testify to that,' said Rumsey, now coming forward. The whole story is so astounding, so unprecedented, that I am not the least surprised at you all being unable to make a just estimate of the true circumstances at the present moment. Nevertheless, Awdrey tells the simple truth. I have watched him as my patient for years.

'I am glad he is here; we shall want a magistrate,' said Awdrey.

'A magistrate! What is the matter?'

'You will know in a moment, Anne. Did you say Rumsey was in the drawing-room?'

'Yes; they are all there. Margaret is playing the Moonlight Sonata—you hear it, don't you through the closed doors—she plays so mournfully that I ran away—I hate music that affects me to tears.'

Awdrey bent down and said a word to Hetty; then he looked at his sister.

'I am going into the drawing-room and Hetty Vincent will come with me,' he said.

'I used to know you as Hetty Armistage,' said Anne. 'How are you, Hetty?'

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I have given his case my greatest attention. I consider it one of the most curious psychological studies which has occurred in the whole of my wide experience. Awdrey killed Horace Frere, and forgot all about it. The deed was doubtless done in a moment of strong irritation.'

'He was provoked to it,' said Hetty, speaking for the first time.

'It will be necessary that you put all that down in writing,' said Rumsey, giving her a quick glance. 'Squire, I begin to see a ghost of daylight. It is possible that you might be saved from the serious consequences of your own act, if it can be proved before a jury that you committed the terrible deed as a means of self-protection.'

'It was for that,' said Hetty, again. 'I can tell exactly what I saw.'

The excited people who were listening to this narrative now began to move about and talk eagerly and rapidly. Rumsey alone altogether kept his head. He saw how ill Hetty was, and how all-important her story would be if there was any chance of saving Awdrey. It must be put in writing without delay.

'Come and sit here,' he said, taking the girl's hand, and leading her to a chair. All the others shrank away from her, but Mrs. Everett, whose eyes were blazing with a curious combination of passionate anger and wild, exultant joy, came close up to her for a moment.

'Little hypocrite—little spy!' she hissed. Do not forget that you have committed perjury. Your sentence will be a severe one.'

'Hush,' said Rumsey, 'is this a moment—? A look in his eyes silenced the widow—she shrank away near one of the windows to relieve her overcharged feelings in a burst of tears.'

'Sit here and tell me exactly what you saw,' said Rumsey to Hetty.

'Bless my stars, I don't know what I am at the present moment,' said the worthy Squire, moping his crimson brow.

'Try to retain your self-control—remember how much hangs on it.' This young woman is very ill—it will be all important that we get her deposition before—' Rumsey paused; Hetty's eyes were fixed on his face, her lips moved faintly.

'You may save the Squire after all if you tell the simple truth,' said Rumsey, kindly, bending towards her and speaking in a low voice. 'Try and tell the truth, I know you are feeling ill but you will be better afterwards. Will you tell me exactly what happened? I shall put it down in writing.'

'Is it the case that I tell just the truth I may save Squire?' asked Hetty.

'It is his only chance. Now begin.'

The others crowded round; all but Mrs. Everett, who still sat in the window, her face buried in her handkerchief.

Hetty began her tale falteringly, often trembling and often pausing, but Rumsey managed to keep her to the point. By and by the whole queer story was taken down and was then formally signed and sworn to. Rumsey folded up the paper and gave it to Squire Cuthbert to keep.

'I have a strong hope that we may clear Awdrey,' he said. 'The case is a clear one of manslaughter which took place in self-defence. Mrs. Vincent's deposition is most important, for it not only shows that Awdrey committed the unfortunate deed under the strongest provocation, but explains exactly why Frere should have had such animosity to the Squire. Now Mrs. Vincent, you have rendered Mr. Awdrey a very valuable service.'

'Before Hetty leaves the room there is something to be said on her own account,' said the Squire.

He then related in a few words the tragedy which had taken place at the Gable Farm. While he was speaking, Hetty staggered to her feet and faced him.

'Will what I have told just now really save you, Squire?' she asked.

'It seems impossible to believe it, Hetty; but Dr. Rumsey thinks so,' answered Awdrey.

The deadly whiteness of her face was suddenly illuminated with a look of joy.

'Then nothing else matters,' she panted. If you, Squire, are safe—Hetty, poor Hetty, has not suffered in vain!'

She staggered blindly forward as the last words left her lips, and fell in a heap on the floor.

The doctor, Margaret and the Squire rushed to her assistance, but when they raised her up she was dead.

'Heart disease,' said Rumsey, 'accelerated by shock.'