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DR. RUMSEY'S PATIENT:

A VERY STRANGE STORY.

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CHAPTER XV.

On the evening of the same day Awdrey entered the room where his wife was sitting, giving way to her bitter anguish. She was overcome by her grief—her eyes were swollen by much crying, her dress was disarranged, the traces of a sleepless night, and the fearful anguish through which she was passing, were visible on her beautiful face. Awdrey, who had come in to the room almost cheerfully, started and stepped back a pace or two when he saw her—he then knelt his brows with marked irritation.

"What can be the matter with you, Margaret?" he exclaimed. "I cannot imagine why you are crying in this silly way."

"I'll try not to cry any more, Robert," she answered.

"Yes, but you look in such dreadful distress; I assure you your state affects me most disagreeably—you know, don't you, that nothing ever annoys a man more than weak, womanish tears."

"It is impossible for me to be cheerful to-night," said the wife. The pain is too great. He was our only child, and such—such a darling."

Awdrey laughed.

"Forgive me, my dear," he said, "I really would not hurt your feelings for the world, but you must know, if you allow your common sense to speak, that we never had a child. It has surely been one of our great trials that no child has been given us to carry on the old line. My poor Maggie, she went up to her neck, and kissed her, 'you must be very unwell to imagine these sort of things.'"

She suddenly took his hand which lay on her shoulder, between both her own.

"Come with me, Robert," she said, "an expression of the most intense despair on all her features, 'come, I cannot believe that this blight which has passed over you can be final. I'll take you to the room where the little body of our beautiful child is lying. When you see that sweet face, surely you will remember.'"

He frowned when she began to speak; now he disengaged his hand from her clasp.

"It would not be right for me to humour you," he said. "You ought to see a doctor, Maggie, for you are really suffering from a strong delusion. If you encourage it, it may become fixed, and even assume the proportions of a sort of insanity. Now, my dear wife, try and restrain yourself and listen to me."

She gazed at him with wide open eyes. As he spoke she had difficulty in believing her own ears. A case like his was indeed new to her. She had never really believed in the tragedy of his house—but now at last the suspected and dreaded blow had fallen. Awdrey, like his ancestors before him, was forgetting the grave events of life. Was it possible that he could forget the child, whose life had been the joy of his existence, whose last looks of love had been directed to him, whose last faltering words had breathed his name? Yes, he absolutely forgot all about the child. The stern fact stared her in the face, she could not shut her eyes to it.

"You look at me so strangely, Margaret," said Awdrey. "I cannot account for your looks, nor indeed for your actions during the whole of to-day. Now I wish to tell you that I have resolved to carry out Rumsey's advice—he wants me to leave home at once. I spent a night with him—was it last night? I really forgot—but anyhow, during that time he had an opportunity of watching my symptoms. You know, don't you, how nervous I am, how full of myself? You know how this inertia steals over me, and envelops me in a sort of cloud. The state of the case is something like this, Maggie; I feel as if a dead hand were pressed against my heart; sometimes I have even a difficulty in breathing, at least in taking a deep breath. It seems to me as if the stupor of death were gradually creeping up my body, enfeebling all my powers more and more. Rumsey, who quite understands these symptoms, says they are grave, but not incurable. He suggests that I should leave London and at once. I propose to take the eight o'clock Continental train. Will you come with me?"

"I?" she cried. "I cannot; our child's little body lies upstairs."

"Why will you annoy me by referring to that delusion of yours? You must know how painful it is to listen to you. Will you come, Maggie?"

"I cannot. Under any other circumstances I would gladly, but to-night, no, it is impossible."

"Very well then, I must go alone. I have just been up in my room packing some things. I cannot say how long I shall be absent—perhaps a few weeks perhaps only a day or two—I must be guided in this matter by my sensations."

"If you come back in a day or two, Robert, I'll try and go abroad with you, if you really think it would do you good," said Margaret.

"I'll see about that," he replied. "I cannot quite tell you what my plans are to-night. Meanwhile I find I shall want more money than I have in the house. Have you any by you?"

"I have twenty-five pounds."

"Give it to me; it will be quite sufficient. I have about fifteen pounds here. He touched his breast pocket. "I'll don't return soon I'll write you. Now good-bye, Maggie. Try and conquer that queer delusion, my dear wife. Remember, the more you think of it, the more it will feed upon itself, until you will find it too strong for you. Good-bye, darling."

She threw her arms round his neck. "I cannot describe what my feelings are at this awful moment," she said. "Is it right for me to let you go alone?"

"Perfectly right, dearest. What possible harm can come to me?" he said with tenderness. He pushed back the thick black hair from her brow as he spoke.

"You love me, Robert?" she cried, suddenly—"at least your love for me remains?"

He knelt his brows.

"If there is anyone I love, it is you," he said, "but I do not know that I love anyone—it is this inertia, dearest—I have touched his breast—it buries love beneath it, it buries all emotion. You are not to blame. If I could conquer it my love for you would be as full, as fresh and strong as ever. Good-bye now. Take care of yourself. If those strange symptoms continue pray consult Dr. Rumsey."

He went out of the room.

Margaret was too stricken and stunned to follow him.

A few days later a child's funeral left the house in Seymour Street. Margaret followed her child to the grave. She then returned home, wondering if she could possibly endure the load which had fallen upon her. The house seemed empty—she did not think anything could ever fill it again. Her own heart was truly empty—she felt as if there were a gap within it which could never by any possibility be closed. Since the night after her child's death she had heard nothing from her husband—sometimes she wondered if he were still alive.

Dr. Rumsey tried to reassure her on this point—he did not consider Awdrey the sort of man to commit suicide.

Mrs. Everett came to see Margaret every day during this time of terrible grief, but her excited face, her watchful attitude, proved the reverse of soothing. She was sorry for her friends, but even in the midst of Margaret's darkest grief she never forgot the mission she had set before herself.

On the morning of the funeral she followed the procession at a little distance. She stood behind the more immediate group of mourners as the body of the beautiful child was laid in his long home. Had his father been like other men Margaret would never have consented to the child's being buried anywhere except at Grandcourt. But under existing circumstances she had no energy to arrange this.

About an hour after Mrs. Awdrey's return, Mrs. Everett was admitted into her presence.

Margaret was seated listlessly by one of the tables in the drawing-room. A pile of black-edged paper was lying near her—a letter was begun. Many letters of condolence which had poured in lay near. She was endeavouring to answer one, but found the task beyond her strength.

"My poor dear," said Mrs. Everett. She walked up the long room, and stooping down by Margaret, kissed her.

Margaret mechanically returned her embrace. Mrs. Everett untied her bonnet strings and sat by her side.

"Don't try to answer those letters yet," she said. "You are not fit for it. Why don't you have a composing draught and go to bed?"

"I would rather not; the awakening would be too terrible," said Margaret.

"You will knock yourself up and get really ill if you go on like this."

"It does not matter whether I am ill or well. Nothing matters," said Margaret, in a voice of despair.

"Oh, my poor love, I understand you," said the widow. "I do not know in what words to approach your terribly grieved heart—there is only one thing which I feel impelled to say, and which may possibly at some time comfort you. Your beautiful boy's fate is less tragical than the fate which has fallen upon my only son. When Frank was a little child, Margaret, he had a dreadful illness—I thought he would die. I was frantic, for his father had died not long before. I prayed earnestly to God. I vowed a vow to train the boy in the paths of righteousness, as never boy had been trained before. I vowed to do for what no other mother had ever done, if only God would leave him to me. My prayer was answered, and my child was saved. Think of him now, Margaret. Margaret, think of him now."

"I do," answered Margaret. "I have always felt for you—my heart has always been bitter with grief for you—don't you know it?"

"Do—you have been the soul of all that is sweet and dear to me. Except Frank himself, I love no one as I love you!"—Mrs. Everett started suddenly to her feet—the room door was slowly opened and Awdrey walked in. His face was very pale and more emaciated looking than ever—his eyes were bright, but sunken.

"Well," he said, with a sort of queer assumption of cheerfulness, "here I am. I came back sooner than I expected. How are you Maggie?" He went up to his wife and kissed her. "How do you do, Mrs. Everett?"

"I am well," said Mrs. Everett. "How are you, are you better?"

"Yes, I am much better—in fact, there is little or nothing the matter with me."

He sat down on a sofa as he spoke and stared at his wife with a puzzled expression between his brows.

"What in the world are you in that heavy black for?" he asked, suddenly.

"I must wear it," she said. "You cannot ask me to take it off."

"Why should I ask you?" he replied. "Do not excite yourself in that way, Maggie. If you like to look hideous, do so. Black, heavy black, of that sort, does not suit you—and you are absolutely in crepe—what does all this mean? It irritates me immensely."

"People wear crepe when those they love die," said Margaret.

"Have you lost a relation?—Whom?" She did not answer. A moment later she left the room.

When she did so Awdrey got up restlessly, walked to the fire and poked it, then he approached the window and looked out. After a time he returned to his seat. Mrs. Everett sat facing him. It was her wont to sit very still—often nothing seemed to move about her except her watchful eyes. Today she had more than ever the expression of a person who is quietly watching and waiting. Awdrey, inert as he doubtless was, seemed to feel her gaze—he looked at her

"Where have you been, Mr. Awdrey?" she asked, gently. "Did you visit the Continent?"

He favoured her with a keen, half-suspicious glance.

"No," he said. "I changed my mind about that. I did not wish the water to divide me from my quest. I have been engaged on a most important search."

"And what was that?" she asked, gently. "I have been looking for a stick which I missed some years ago."

"I have heard you mention that before," said Mrs. Everett—the colour flushed hotly into her face. "You seem to attribute a great deal of importance to that trifle."

"To me it is no trifle," he replied. "I regard it as a link," he continued slowly, "between me and a past which I have forgotten. When I find the stick I shall remember the past."

As he spoke he rose again and going to the hearth-rug stood with his back to the fire.

At that moment Margaret re-entered the room in white—she was in a soft, flowing tea gown made of white silk and trimmed with ermine—it swept about her in graceful folds, and exposed some of the lovely contour of her arms. Her face was nearly as colourless as her dress, only the wealth of thick, dark hair, only the sombre eyes, relieved the monotony of her appearance. Awdrey gave her a smile and a look of approval.

"Come here," he said; "now you are good—how sweet you look. Your appearance makes me recall, recall. I pressed his hand to his forehead. "I remember now," he said; "I recall the day we were engaged—don't you remember it?—the picnic on Salisbury Plain; you were all in white then, too, and you wore somewhat the same intense expression in your eyes. Margaret, you are a beautiful woman."

She stood close to him—he did not offer to kiss her, but he laid one emaciated hand on her shoulder and looked earnestly into her face.

"You are very beautiful," he said; "I wonder I do not love you." He sighed heavily, and removed his gaze to look intently into the fire.

Mrs. Everett rose.

"I'll come again soon," she said to Margaret. Margaret took no notice of her, nor did Awdrey see when she left the room.

After a moment Margaret went up to her husband and touched him.

"You must have something to eat," she said. "It is probably a long time since you had a proper meal."

"I don't remember," he replied, "but I am not hungry. By the way, Maggie, I recall now what I came here for. His eyes, which seemed to be lit from within, became suddenly full of excitement.

"Yes," she said as gently as she could. "I came because I want you."

Her eyes brightened.

"I want you to come with me. I do not care to be alone, and I am anxious to leave London again to-night."

Before Margaret could reply the servant threw open the door and announced Dr. Rumsey. The doctor came quickly forward.

"I am glad you have returned, Awdrey," he said, holding out his hand as he spoke. "I called to inquire for your wife, and the man told me you were upstairs."

"Yes, and I am better," said Awdrey. "I came back because I thought perhaps Margaret—but by the way, why should I speak so much about myself? My wife was not well when I left her, I hope, doctor, that she consulted you, and that she is now much better."

"Considering all things, Mrs. Awdrey is fairly well," said Rumsey.

"And she has quite got over that delusion?"

"Quite." The doctor's voice was full of decision.

Margaret shuddered and turned away.

Rumsey seated himself at a little distance from the fire, but Awdrey remained standing. He stood in such a position that the doctor could get a perfect view of him. Rumsey did not fail to avail himself of so excellent a moment for studying this queer case. He observed the wasted face of his patient; the unnaturally large and bright eyes; the lips which used to be firm as a line, and which gave considerable character to the face, but which had now become loose and had a habit of drooping slightly open; the brows, too, worked at times spasmodically, and the really noble forehead, which in old times betokened intelligence to a marked degree, was now furrowed with many lines. While Rumsey watched he also made up his mind.

"I must tear the veil from that man's eyes at any cost," he said to himself. He gave Margaret a glance and she left the room. The moment she did so the doctor stood up.

"I am glad you have returned," he said. "How strange of you to say that," answered Awdrey. "Do you not remember you were the man who ordered me away?"

"I do remember that fact perfectly, but since I gave you that prescription a very marked change has taken place in your condition."

"Do you think me worse?"

"In one sense you are."

Awdrey laughed.

"Doctors are not infallible," he said, "for to tell the truth, I feel better; I am not quite so troubled by inertia."

"I must be frank with you, Awdrey. I consider you very ill."

Awdrey started when Rumsey said this.

"Pray speak out, doctor, I dislike riddles," he replied.

"I mean to speak out very plainly. My poor fellow, I am obliged to remind you of the strange history of your house."

"What do you mean?" said Awdrey—the history of my house?" he continued; "there is a psychological history, which I dislike to think of, is it that you refer to?"

"Yes, I refer to the strange condition of brain which men of your house have inherited for several generations. It is a queer doom; I am forced to say an awful doom. Robert Awdrey, it has fallen upon you."

"I thought as much," said Awdrey.

"But you never would believe it. Now I fully believe it. That lapse of memory, which is one of its remarkable symptoms, has taken place in your case. You have forgotten a very important event in your life."

"Ah, you are wrong there," said Awdrey. "I certainly have forgotten my walking-stick. I know well that I am a queer fellow. I know too that at times my position is the reverse of satisfactory, but with this one exception I have never forgotten anything of the least consequence. Don't you re-



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member telling me that the lapse of memory was not of any moment?"

"It was not, but you have forgotten something else, and it is my duty now to remind you of it."

"I have forgotten?" began Awdrey. Well, speak."

"You had a child—a beautiful child," Awdrey interrupted with a laugh. "So you have got that delusion, too," he said. "I tell you, Dr. Rumsey, I never had a child."

"Your child is no longer with you, but you had a child. He lived for four years, but is now dead. This very afternoon he was laid in his grave. He was a beautiful child—more lovely than most. He died after twenty-four hours' illness. His mother is broken-hearted over his loss, but you, his father, have forgotten all about it. Here is the picture of your child—come to the light, and look at it."

Rumsey strode up to a table as he spoke, lifted a large photograph from a stand, and held it before Awdrey's eyes.

Awdrey looked at it with a careless glance. "I do not know that face," he said. "How did the photograph get here? Is Margaret's delusion really so bad? Does she imagine for a moment that the little boy represented in that picture has ever had anything to do with us?"

"The photograph is a photograph of your son," repeated Rumsey, in a slow, emphatic voice. As he spoke he laid the picture back again on its ebony stand. "Awdrey," he continued. "I cannot expect impossibilities—I cannot expect you to remember what you have absolutely forgotten, but it is my duty to tell you frankly that this condition of things, if not immediately arrested, will lead to complete atrophy of your mental system, and you, in short, will not long survive it."

You told me once very graphically that you were a man who carried about with you a dead soul. I did not believe you then. Now I believe that nothing in your own description of your case has been exaggerated. In some way, Awdrey, you must get back your memory."

"How?" asked Awdrey. He was impressed in spite of himself.

"To begin with, whether you remember or not, you must act as though you remembered. You now think that your wife never had a child. It is your duty to act as if you had one."

Awdrey shrugged his shoulders. "That is impossible," he said.

"It is not. Weak as your will now is, it is not yet so inert that you cannot bring it to bear upon the matter. I observe that Mrs. Awdrey has taken off her mourning. She must put it on again. It would be the height of all that is heartless for her to go about now without showing proper respect to your beautiful child. You also allow your wife to speak of the child. In short, even though you have no belief, you must allow those who are in a healthy mental condition to act for you in this matter. By doing so you may possibly arrest the malady."

"I see what you mean," said Awdrey, "but I do not know how it is possible for me to act on your suggestions."

"For your wife's sake you must try, and also because it is necessary that you should show respect to the dead heir of your house."

"Then I am to put a band on my hat and all that sort of thing?"

"Yes."

"It is a trifle, doctor. If you and Margaret wish it, I cannot reasonably refuse. To come back to myself, however, you consider that I am quite doomed?"

"Not quite yet, although your case is a bad one. I believe you can be saved if you will exert yourself."

"Do wishes go for anything in a case like mine?"

"Assuredly. To hear you express a wish is a capital sign. What do you want to do?"

"I have a strange wish to go down to the Court. I feel as if something or someone, whether angel or demon I do not know, were drawing me there. I have wished to be at the Court for some days. I thought at first of taking Margaret with me."

"Do so. She would be glad to accompany you. She is a wife in a thousand."

"But on second thoughts," continued Awdrey, "if I am obliged to listen to her bitter distress over the death of a child who never, as far as I can recall, existed, I should prefer not having her."

"Very well then, go alone. In the condition which I am now in, a complete vacuum in all my thoughts may occur, and long before I reach the Court I may forget where I am going."

"That is possible."

"Then, Rumsey, will you come with me?" The doctor thought a moment.

I will go with you this evening," he said,

"but I must return to town early to-morrow. 'Thanks, I'll ring and order a hansom. We shall be in time, if we start at once, to catch the five o'clock train.'"

"Remember Awdrey that I shall treat you as the child's father. You will find all your tenantry in a state of poignant grief. That dear little fellow was much loved."

Awdrey pursed up his lips as if he would whistle. A smile dawned in his eyes and vanished.

CHAPTER XVI.

At a late hour that evening Rumsey and his patient arrived at Grandcourt. A telegram had been sent to announce their visit, and all was in readiness for their reception. The old butler, Hawkins, who had lived in the family for nearly fifty years, came slowly down the steps to greet his master. Hawkins' face was pale, and his eyes dim as if, he had been indulging in silent tears. He was very much attached to little Arthur. Awdrey gave him a careless nod.

"I hope all is in readiness, Hawkins," he said. "I have brought my friend, Dr. Rumsey, with me; we should like supper—has it been prepared?"

"Yes, Mr. Robert—I beg your pardon, Squire—all is in readiness in the library."

"What bedroom have you got ready for Dr. Rumsey?"

"The yellow room, Squire, in the west wing."

"That will do nicely. Rumsey, you and I will inhabit the same wing to-night. I suppose I am to sleep in the room I always occupy, eh, Hawkins?"

"Yes, sir, Mrs. Burnett, the housekeeper, says you would wish that."

"It does not matter in the least where I sleep; now order up supper, we shall be down directly. Follow me, doctor, will you?"

Dr. Rumsey followed Awdrey to the west wing. A few moments later the two men were seated before a cheerful meal in the library—a large fire burnt in the grate, logs had been piled on, and the friendly blaze and the fragrance of the wood filled the room. The supper table was drawn into the neighbourhood of the fire, and Awdrey lifted the cover from the dish which was placed before him with a look of appetite on his face.

"I am really hungry," he said—"Bring some champagne—Hawkins, take it from the named a certain bin. The man retired, coming back presently with some dusty-looking bottles. The cork was quickly removed from one, and the butler began to fill the glasses."

Supper came to an end. Hawkins brought in pipes and tobacco, and the two men drew up their chairs before the fire. Awdrey, who had taken from two to three glasses of champagne, was beginning to feel drowsy, but Rumsey talked in his usual pleasant fashion. Awdrey replied by fits and starts, once he nodded and half fell asleep in his chair.

"You are sleepy," said Rumsey suddenly; "if you go to bed now you may have a really good night—what do you say?"

"I am quite agreeable," said Awdrey, rising as he spoke—"but it is not too early for you, doctor?"

"Not at all—an undisturbed night will be a treat to me."

"Well, then, I'll take you to your room."

They went upstairs together, and a moment later Rumsey found himself in the palatial chamber which had been prepared for him. He was not really sleepy and decided to sit up for a little. A fire burned in the grate, some books lay about—he drew his easy chair forward and taking up a volume of light literature prepared to dip into it—he found that the book he had selected was Stevenson's "Treasure Island" a story which he had not yet happened to read; it interested him, and he read for some time. Presently he closed the volume and laying his head against the cushion of his chair, dropped fast asleep.

The events of the day made him dream; his dreams were about his queer patient. He thought that he had followed Awdrey to the Plain—that Awdrey's excitement grew worse and worse, until the last lingering doubt was solved, and the man was in very truth absolutely insane.

In the midst of his dream the doctor was awakened by a hand being laid on his shoulder—he started up suddenly—Awdrey half-dressed and looking ghastly stood before him.

"What is it?" said Rumsey. "Do you want anything?"

"I want you," said Awdrey. "Will you come with me?"

"Certainly—where am I to go? But why are you not in bed?"

Awdrey uttered a hollow laugh. There was a ring of horror in it.

"You could not sleep if you were me," he said. "Will you come with me now at once?"

"In a moment when you are better—sit down, won't you—here, take my chair—where do you want me to go?"

"Out with me, doctor—out of doors. I want you to come with me to the Plain."

"All right, my dear fellow—but just allow—but just allow me to get on my boots."

The doctor retired to a back part of the room to change his house shoes. While he was doing so, Awdrey sank down on a chair, laid his hands on his knees, and stared straight before him into the centre of the room.

"I wish, doctor, you'd be quick," he said, at last.

"I don't want to go alone, but I must follow it."

"Follow what?" said Rumsey.

"The globe of light—I have told you of it before."