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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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## SYNOPSIS OF PREVIOUS CHAPTERS.

CHAPTERS I. & II.—Pretty Hetty Armitage, niece of Mr. and Mrs. Armitage, innkeepers at the village of Grandcourt, is seduced by two young undergraduates named Horace Freer and Everett, and the first named elicits a promise from her to become his wife. Notwithstanding this promise, however, Hetty, who is a born flirt, is in love with Mr. Robert Awdrey, the son of the Squire, upon whom, however, is thought to rest the curse of his race, a total absence of memory of the most important events of his life, whilst less significant matters are remembered. Awdrey is passing a brook side when Freer asks Hetty to give him a kiss as his friend's wife. She refuses, and as they are struggling, Awdrey intervenes and takes the girl home, she denying that she has given any promise to marry. Freer is enraged, and visiting the inn again asks Hetty for her decision between Awdrey and himself. She speedily declares for Awdrey, much to Freer's chagrin.

## CHAPTER III.

Freer stood perfectly still for a moment after Hetty had spoken. Then without a word he turned and left her. Everett was still standing in the porch. Everett had noticed to himself that he had a decided penchant for the little rustic beauty, but Freer's fierce passion cooled him. He did not feel particularly inclined, however, to sympathize with his friend.

"How rough you are, Freer," he said angrily; "you've almost knocked the pipe out of my mouth a second time this evening."

Freer went out into the night without uttering a syllable.

"Where are you off to?" called Everett after him.

"What is that to you?" was shouted back.

Everett said something further. A strong and very emphatic oath left Freer's lips in reply. The innkeeper, Armitage, was passing the young man at the moment. He stared at him, wondering at the whiteness of his face and the extraordinary energy of his language. Armitage went indoors to supper, and thought no more of the circumstance. He was destined however to remember it later. Everett continued to smoke his pipe with philosophical calm. He hoped against hope that pretty little Hetty might come and stand in the porch with him. Finding she did not appear, he resolved to go out and look for his friend. He was leaving the Inn when Armitage called after him—

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Everett, but will you be out late?"

"I can't say," replied Everett, stopping short; "why?"

"Because if so, sir, you had better take the latch-key. We're going to shut up the whole place early tonight; the wife is dead beat, and Hetty is not quite well."

"I'm sorry for that," said Everett, after a pause; "well, give me the key. I daresay I'll turn quite soon; I am only going out to meet Mr. Freer."

Armitage gave the young man the key, and returned to the house.

Meanwhile Freer had wandered some distance from the pretty little village and the charming rustic Inn. His mind was out of tune with all harmony and beauty. He was in the sort of condition when men will do mad deeds not knowing in the least why they do them. Hetty's words had, as he himself expressed it, "awakened the very devil in him."

"She has owned it," he kept saying to himself. "Yes, I was right in my conjecture—he wants her himself. Much he regards honour and behaving straight to a woman. I'll show him a thing or two. Jove, if I meet him tonight, he'll rue it."

The great solemn plain of Salisbury lay not two miles off. Freer made for its broad downs without knowing in the least that he was doing so. By and by, he found himself on a vast open space, spreading sheer away to the edge of the horizon. The moon which had been bright when he had started on his walk was now about to set—it was casting long shadows on the ground; his own shadow in gigantic dimensions walked by his side as he neared the vicinity of the plain. He walked on and on, and the further he went the more fiercely did his blood boil within him. All his life hitherto had been calm, collected, reasonable. He had taken the events of life with a certain rude philosophy. He had intended to do well for himself—to carve out a prosperous career for himself, but although he had subdued his passions both at college and at school, he had never blinded his eyes to the fact that there lived within his breast, ready to be awakened when the time came, a devil. Once, as a child, he had given way to this mad fury. He had flung a knife at his brother, wounding him in the temple, and almost killing him. The sight of the blood and the fainting form of his only brother had awakened his better self. He had lived through agony while his brother's life hung in the balance. The lad eventually recovered, to die in a year or two of something else, but Freer never forgot that time of mental torture. From that hour until the present, he had kept his "devil," as he used to call it, well in check.

It was rampant to-night, however—he knew it, he took no pains to conceal this fact from his own heart—he rather gloried in the knowledge.

He walked on and on, across the plain. Presently in the dim distance he heard Everett calling him.

"Freer, I say Freer, stop a moment, I'll come up to you."

A man who had been collecting under-wood, and was returning home with a bagful, suddenly appeared in Freer's path. Hearing the voice of the man shouting behind he stopped.

"There be some-un calling yer," he said in his rude dialect.

Freer stared at the man blindly. He looked behind him, saw Everett's figure silhouetted against the sky, and then took wildly to his heels; he ran as if something evil were pursuing him.

At this moment the moon went completely down, and the whole of the vast plain lay in dim grey shadow. Freer had not the least idea where he was running. He and Everett had spent whole days on the plain reveling in the solitude and the

splendid air, but they had neither of them ever visited it at night before. The whole place was strange, uncanny, unfamiliar.

Freer soon lost his bearings. He tumbled into a hole, uttered an exclamation of pain, and raised himself with some difficulty.

"Hallo!" said a voice, "you might have broken your leg. What are you doing here?"

Freer stood upright, a man slighter and taller than himself faced him about three feet away. Freer could not recognize the face, but he knew the tone.

"What the devil have you come to meet me for?" he said. "You've come to meet a madman. Turn back and go home, or it will be the worse for you."

"I don't understand you," said Awdrey.

Freer put a tremendous restraint upon himself.

"Look here," he said, "I don't want to injure you, upon my soul. I don't, but there's a devil in me to-night, and you had better go home without any more words."

"I shall certainly do nothing of the kind," answered Awdrey. "The plain is as open to me as to you. If you dislike me take your own path."

"My path is right across where you are standing," said Freer.

"Well, step aside and leave me alone!"

It was so dark the men only appeared as shadows one to the other. Their voices, each of them growing hot and passionate, seemed scarcely to belong to themselves.

Freer came a step nearer to Awdrey.

"You shall have it," he cried. "By the heaven above, I don't want to spare you. Let me tell you what I think of you!"

"Sir," said Awdrey, "I don't wish to have anything to do with you—leave me or go about your business!"

"I will after I've told you a bit of my mind. You're a confounded sneak—you're a liar—you're no gentleman. Shall I tell you why you interfered between me and my girl tonight?—because you want her for yourself!"

This sudden accusation so astounded Awdrey that he did not even reply. He came to the conclusion that Freer was really mad.

"You forget yourself," he said, after a long pause. "I excuse you, of course; I don't even know what you are talking about!"

"Yes, you do, you black-hearted soundrel. You interfered between Hetty Armitage and me because you want her for yourself—she told me so much tonight!"

"She told you—that's your own pretence. Get out of the way, or I'll strike you to the earth, you dog!"

Freer's wild passion prevented Awdrey's rising. The accusation made against him so preposterous that it did not even rouse his anger.

"I'm sorry for you," he said after a pause, "you labor under a complete misapprehension. I wish to protect Hetty Armitage as I would any other honest girl. Keep out of my path now, sir, I want to continue my walk."

"By Heaven, that you never shall!"

Freer uttered a wild, maniacal scream. The next instant he had closed with Awdrey and raising a heavy cane which he carried, aimed it full at the young Squire's head.

"I could kill you, you brute, you soundrel, you low, base seducer," he shouted.

For a moment Awdrey was taken off his guard. But the next instant the fierce blood of his race awoke within him. Freer was no mean antagonist—he was a stouter, heavier, older man than Awdrey. He had also the strength which madness confers. After a momentary struggle he flung Awdrey to the ground. The two young men rolled over together. Then with a quick and sudden movement Awdrey sprang to his feet. He had no weapon to defend himself with but a light stick which he carried. Freer let him go for a moment to spring upon him like a tiger. A sudden memory came to Awdrey's aid—a memory which was to be the undoing of his entire life. He had been told in his boyhood by an old prize-fighter who taught him boxing, that the most effective way to use a stick in defending himself from an enemy was to use it as a bayonet.

"Prod your toe in the mouth," old Jim had said—"be dog or man prod him in the mouth. Grasp your stick in both hands, and when he comes to you, prod him in the mouth or neck."

The words flashed distinctly now through Awdrey's brain. When Freer raised his heavy stick to strike him he grasped his own slender weapon and rushed forward. He aimed full at Freer's open mouth. The stick went a few inches higher and entered the unfortunate man's right eye. He fell with a sudden groan to the ground.

In a moment Awdrey's passion was over. He bent over the prostrate man and examined the wound which he had made. Freer lay perfectly quiet; there was an awful silence about him. The dark shadows of the night brooded heavily over the place. Awdrey did not for several moments realize that something very like a murder had been committed. He bent over the prostrate man—he took his limp hand in his, felt for a pulse—there was none. With trembling fingers he tore open the coat and pressed his hand to the heart—it was strangely still. He bent his ear to listen—there was no sound. Awdrey was scarcely frightened yet. He did not even now in the least realize what had happened. He felt in his pocket for a flask of brandy which he sometimes carried about with him. An oath escaped his lips when he found he had forgotten it. Then taking up his stick he felt softly across the point. The point of the stick was wet—wet with blood. He felt carefully along its edge. The blood extended up a couple of inches. He knew then what had happened. The stick had undoubtedly entered Freer's brain through the eye, causing instant death.

When this knowledge came to Awdrey he laughed. His laugh sounded queer, but he did not notice its strangeness. He

felt again in his pocket—discovered a box of matches which he pulled out eagerly. He struck a match, and by the weird, uncertain light which it cast looked for an instant at the dead face of the man whose life he had taken.

"I don't even know his name," thought Awdrey. "What in the world have I killed him for? Yes, undoubtedly I've killed him. He is dead, poor fellow, as a door-nail. What did I do it for?"

He struck another match, and looked at the end of his stick. The stick had a narrow steel ferrule at the point. Blood bespattered the end of the stick.

"I must bury this witness," said Awdrey, to himself.

He blew out the match, and began to move gropingly across the plain. His step was uncertain. He stooped as he walked. Presently he came to a great copse of underwood. Into the very thick of the underwood he thrust his stick.

Having done this, he resolved to go home. Queer noises were ringing in his head. He felt as if devils were pursuing him. He was certain that if he raised his eyes and looked in front of him, he must see the ghost of the dead man. He was early in the night, not yet twelve o'clock. As he entered the grounds of the Court, the stable clock struck twelve.

"I suppose I shall get into a beastly mess about this," thought Awdrey. "I never meant to kill that poor fellow. I ran at him in self-defence. He'd have had my blood if I hadn't his. Shall I see my father about it now? My father is a magistrate; he'll know what's best to be done."

Awdrey walked up to the house. His gait was uncertain and shambling, so little characteristic of him that if anyone had met him in the dark he would not have been recognized. He opened one of the side doors of the great mansion with a latch key. The Awdreys were early people—an orderly household who went to rest in good time—the lamps were out in the house—only here and there was a dim illumination suited to the hours of darkness. Awdrey did not meet a soul as he went up some stairs, and down one or two corridors to his own cheerful bedroom. He paused as he turned the handle of his door.

"Yes, it is quite some miles from here—I am truly sorry for him."

"Sit down here, Mr. Awdrey, here at my feet if you like, and tell me about it."

"I will sit at your feet with all the pleasure in the world, but why should we talk any more on this gruesome subject?"

"That's just it," said Margaret, "if I am to get rid of it, I must know all about it. You said you met him last night?"

"I did," said Awdrey speaking with unwillingness.

"And you guess why he came by his end?"

"Partly, but not wholly."

"Well, do tell me."

"I will—I'll put it in as few words as possible. You know that little witch Hetty, the pretty niece of the innkeeper Armitage?"

"Hetty Armitage—of course I know her. I tried to get her into my Sunday class, but she wouldn't come."

"She's a silly little creature," said Awdrey.

"She is a very beautiful little creature," corrected Miss Douglas.

"Yes, I am afraid her beauty was too much for this unfortunate Freer's sanity. I came across him last night, or rather they passed me by in the underwood, enacting a love scene. The fact is, he was kissing her. I thought he was taking a liberty and interferred. He told me he intended to marry her—but Hetty denied it. I saw her back to the Inn—she was very silent and depressed. Another man, a handsome fellow was standing in the porch. It just occurred to me at the time, that perhaps he also was a suitor for her hand, and might be the favoured one. She went indoors. On my way home I met Freer again. He tried to pick a quarrel with me which of course I nipped in the bud. He referred to his firm intention of marrying Hetty Armitage, and when I told him that she had denied the engagement, he said he would go back at once and speak to her. I then returned to the Court."

The first thing I heard this morning was the news of the murder. My father as magistrate, was of course made acquainted with the fact at a very early hour. Poor Everett has been arrested on suspicion, and there's to be a Coroner's inquest to-morrow. That is the entire story as I know anything about it. Your face is whiter than ever, Miss Douglas. Now keep your word—forget it, since you have heard all the facts of the case."

She looked down again. Presently she raised her eyes, brimful of tears, to his face.

"I cannot forget it," she said. "That poor young fellow—such a fearfully sudden end, and that other poor fellow; surely if he did take away a life it was in a moment of terrible madness?"

"That is true," said Awdrey.

"They cannot possibly convict him of murder, can they?"

"My father thinks that the verdict will be manslaughter, or at the worst, murder under strong provocation; but it is impossible to tell."

Awdrey looked again anxiously at his companion. Her pallor and distress aroused emotion in his breast which he found almost impossible to quiet.

"I'm sorry to my heart that you know about this," he said. "You are not fit to stand any of the roughness of life."

"What folly," she answered, with passion.

"What am I that I should accept the smooth and reject this rough? I tell you what I would like to do. I'd like to go this very moment to see that poor Mr. Everett, in order to tell him how deeply sorry I am for him. To ask him to tell me the story from first to last, from his point of view. To clear him from this awful stain. And I'd like to lay flowers over the breast of that dead boy. Oh, I can't bear it. Why is the world so full of trouble and pain?"

She burst into sudden tears.

"Come then," said Margaret.

She went first, her companion followed her. He looked at her many times as she walked on in front of him. Her figure was supple and easy grace, her young steps seemed to speak the very essence of youth and springtime. She appeared scarcely to touch the ground as she walked over it; once she turned, and the full light of her dark eyes made Awdrey's heart leap. Presently she reached the shadow caused by a copse of young trees, and stood still until the Squire came up to her.

"Here's a throne for you, Miss Douglas. Do you see where this tree extends two friendly arms? Take your throne."

She did so immediately and looked up at him with a smile.

"The throne suits you," he said.

She looked down—her lips tightly trembled—then she raised her eyes.

"Why are you so pale?" he asked anxiously.

"I can't quite tell you," she replied, "except that notwithstanding the beauty of the day, and the summer feeling which pervades the air, I can't get rid of a sort of fear. It may be superstitious of me, but I think it is unlucky to have a picnic on the very plain where a murder was committed."

"You forget over what a wide extent the plain extends," said Awdrey; "but if I had known—I should have been very sorry to see you here."

"Never mind," she answered, endeavouring to smile and look cheerful, "any sort of tragedy always affects me to a remarkable degree. I can't help it—I'm afraid there is something in me akin to trouble, but of course it would be folly for us to stay indoors just because that poor young fellow came to a violent end some miles away."

"Yes, it is quite some miles from here—I am truly sorry for him."

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