

An Hour of Terror.

"Annie," said Dr. Somers, entering his young wife's sitting-room late one winter afternoon, "I am sorry to be obliged to leave you alone to-night, my pet; but Robert Bradshaw has just sent a message at life and death speed for me, and I have to go at once to the Oaks. The old Colonel is dying at last—or thinks he is."

"Oh, John! How can you talk so?" said Mrs. Somers, in an expostulating tone. "Dying at last? The dear old Colonel. I am so very sorry to hear it. Think of dear Mrs. Bradshaw and Robert. I shall be so sorry if he does die."

"Most people do some time or other," rejoined the Doctor, kicking off his slippers quite savagely, and beginning to draw on a pair of heavy riding boots. "I wouldn't mind the trouble, of course, if he really was dying."

He went on in an apologetic tone, "but ten to one it is only another attack of gout in his left foot, and I am to ride twelve miles over these wretched roads on this wretched night to prescribe for it."

"Hush, John," said his wife, peremptorily. "If the Colonel should be dying you would be sorry to think that you had got so out of patience about going to see him. It is provoking and the roads are horrid, but then you ought to have made up your mind to these things when you studied medicine."

"Yes, a physician is nothing more than a public slave," grumbled the Doctor, as all doctors do grumble. "If I had known what I was about I would have taken a berth in the penitentiary in preference to a country practice, especially a country practice in Ross County. This is a particularly aggravating case, too," went on the injured practitioner, "for I really don't believe that there is anything of importance the matter with the Colonel. He looked well enough when I saw him yesterday, and such roads. Then, see here, little woman, I don't at all fancy the idea of leaving you quite alone."

"What should harm me?" asked the woman gaily. "Don't be hypocritical, John. You know you are thinking about the twelve miles, and not of me. But pray consider what delightful hot punch Mrs. Bradshaw will have ready for you. She always does, you know."

"Yes, she always does," said Dr. Somers, rising from his seat and stamping in his boots in that provoking masculine fashion which is such a total destruction to carpets. "Where is my overcoat? Deuce take the thing. Ring the bell, Annie, if you please, and let me hear if poor Rollo has been brought out. He has been ten miles already to-day, and he'll hate this tramp as badly as I do."

The maid that answered the bell reported that the Doctor's horse was ready and waiting, and after frotting and fuming a little more, the Doctor bade his pretty wife good bye and set out. He told her to be sure and take care of herself, and of the sweet little rosetub that sleep in its crib, and Mrs. Somers promised to do both. But as she stood on the piazza and watched her husband ride off in the gray winter twilight, with roads of two feet mud below and a sky threatening snow above, she could not help thinking that it was he and not herself who needed to take care, and she almost wished that old Colonel Bradshaw had been more considerate about the time of his dying.

"Poor John," she said, half aloud, and then she turned back into the bright little sitting-room, where she plied him more than ever at sight of his easy chair and discarded slippers. It was a hard case, and a doctor was a public slave, thought the Doctor's wife, a little indignantly, and this indignation sensibly increased when she looked at a volume of "Very Hard Cash," which her husband had been reading aloud to her for several nights, and which she had counted on his finishing that evening. The sight of the book also brought to her mind the realization of the fact that she would have to spend the evening alone, for already soft flakes of snow were floating past the window, and the weather promised to be much too inclement for any hope of visitors. She was not in the least a foolish or nervous woman, however, and she faced the prospect very quietly. When poor John was plodding along in the cold and wet she certainly had no right to complain because she was thrown on her own powers of entertainment for a single evening. So, while daylight lasted she certainly thought of all before him, but when the shades of night had absolutely fallen she began to think a little about herself.

The Doctor's house was situated just on the outskirts of the small village of V., and, although every one said it was a lovely situation and commanded a charming view, yet it was certainly quite isolated, since the nearest neighbor was distant nearly, if not quite, a quarter of a mile.

The Doctor was a young man, with small family, his mind all before him to make, and his means moderate, so it necessarily followed that the household was small, as well as his family. Indeed, in that luxurious region of the country people thought it very strange that the Doctor's young wife, who, three years before, had been the prettiest belle of a neighboring county, should be able to keep house with only three servants. But she had practical sense, though she had been a belle, this dainty, brown-eyed little creature, and she laughed and went her way,

and managed so cleverly that "John," at least, never dreamed but that three servants were quite enough for the menage of a king. Yet, in those three, in case of emergency, could not be relied on for much aid or protection.

The cook was a hysterical person of the raving, distracted kind, who retired to her own house at night, burred and locked herself in, as if she were going to stand a siege, and had even been known to refuse to open the door when her mistress's voice demanded admission. The half footman half hostler of the establishment, sleepy quite out of call in a room over the stable, and a mulatto girl, who was nurse and parlor maid in one, occupied a small dressing-closet adjoining her mistress's chamber. This girl was very bright, very pretty, very fond of the baby, and consequently a great favorite with Mrs. Somers, who, when she came in after a while, to close the shutters and prepare the room for tea, began to talk her into her confidence.

"Your master has gone away for the night, Rose," she said, "and we will be all alone. You must be sure and look to the fastening well. You'd better tell Joe to sleep in the dining-room. I won't feel at all afraid, but John always likes him to do so."

"Joe's gone to see his wife, ma'am; she's sick, and master told him he might," said Rose, with the shutter in her hand. "He left after dinner, and said as how he didn't expect to get back to-night."

"Indeed!" said Mrs. Somers, a little surprised. "John did not mention that to me. Who brought out his horse this afternoon?"

"Oscar Giles, ma'am. He was here to—"

"To see you, I suppose," added her mistress, with a laugh. "Well, it can't be helped, I suppose. But really everybody seems to be getting sick all at once in a most unaccountable manner. Put up the bar on the front door, Rose. It is very bad weather, is it not?"

"Dreadful, ma'am," Rose answered. "Snowing and sleeting, both together, and freezing besides. It's an awful night for master to be out."

"Poor John, that is," said Mrs. Somers, with a sigh. "But then it was some consolation to think that John was used to such exposure, and probably did not mind it much, and that Mrs. Bradley's punch was proverbially good. So she stirred the fire, sat down in the absent John's easy chair, and plunged into the absorbing history of Captain Dodd's fourteen thousand pounds, where she remained until the tea tray and the baby were brought in together. While she took her solitary supper, Rose sat down on the hearth-rug with the delicate little ten-month-old girl in her lap, and asked her mistress if she had heard that Will Peters had broken out of jail.

Mrs. Somers had not heard this intelligence, and she was very much interested and excited immediately. So Rose forthwith went into a detailed account of how it was supposed to have happened, and how much alarmed everybody was since. "You see, ma'am, nobody knows where he'll turn up next, or who he'll be murdering next."

"Good heavens! Of course not," said Mrs. Somers. "A creature like that at large—why, it is terrible! Rose, you should not have told me. The mere thought of such a thing makes me foolish and frightened both at once."

"I suppose he was to get in here to-night, ma'am, and master away?"

"Hush!" cried Mrs. Somers, with a shudder. "Really, if I had known this I believe I should have been foolish enough to send for Uncle Jones to spend the night with me; but it is too late now after him. Give me the baby, Rose, and clear away the table. I declare this is terrible—about Peters, I mean."

Rose shook her head lugubriously, as she cleared away the table. It was evident that some depressing influence—the cook's probably—had been at work on her, and so subtle are such influences that she in turn affected her mistress. After the tray had been carried off and Mrs. Somers was alone she began to take her tea, but she felt so uncomfortable that she could not get to bed. Yet to ask it might have been some consolation to her that a good many other people, much better defended than she was, were even more discomforted that night.

The man of whom Rose had spoken—William Peters by name—was the hero of a tragedy that had shocked the whole county only a few weeks before. He had been an epileptic all his life, and the disease was known to him only a little "foolish," and gave him no credit for any possible malignancy of disposition. How mistaken they were in this conclusion events at last proved; as events in similar cases have often proved before.

Although he was a married man, he led a wandering, erratic kind of life, and had not been heard of for several weeks, until one day he entered a neighboring house, where he exhibited a sharp knife, of which he had by some means become the possessor, and saying that he had been called to a high mission—that of killing all the children in the county.

The people, who were accustomed to this wild, aimless talk, laughed at him, and this laughter, contrary to its usual wont, immediately enraged him. "This is how I will do it," he said, and laying hold of a child standing near in a moment the keen blade would have put an end to its life, if the

startled lookers-on had not promptly interfered. The frightened, unwilling victim was instantly taken from him, but there were those who stood about men on the premises who felt no further fear of violence and suffered him to take his leave, swearing vengeance and still carrying the knife.

He went directly to his own house, where his family, consisting of his wife and one child, lived. Immediately on his entrance he laid violent hands on the latter, and when the terrified man interfered, a desperate struggle ensued, in which both mother and child were barbarously slaughtered.

Having accomplished this he built a large funeral pyre and the bodies thereof, going, however, to summon his neighbors and friends, preparatory to lighting it.

They were at first simply incredulous of his story, but yielding at last to his persuasions, and going to see for themselves they found the horrible tale true in every particular. Of course he was immediately taken into custody and committed in the jail at V., less for fear of his insanity than as a place of security for the insane.

With all the details of this story fresh in the public mind, it can be imagined that the good people of Ross county were not a little panic-stricken to hear that the murderer was once more at large, and that Mrs. Somers shivered as she sat in her close room by her bright fire, clasping her baby in her arms and thinking of that poor mother who had died so shortly before the very act of defending her child.

She looked down on the little head nestling against her arms, and the baby lips smiled at her with that sweet, angelic smile which we never see except on a baby's or a saint's face. It was a very pretty child—parental authority apart, there could be no doubt of that—a child showing already its mother's graceful features and rosy brown eyes; but, if she had been the ugliest creature in existence, the strong mother love would not have thought with a mightier thro' that the poor murdered woman had done well and bravely to die for this sake!

After a while Rose came in, and reported that the cook had retired to her own fortress. Rose was directed to make all fast for the night. With the thought of Peters vividly before her, there was no danger of her falling in regard to any of the bolts or bars; so Mrs. Somers did not accompany her on the tour of inspection, but remained in the sitting-room until she returned. Then the sleeping baby was given to her charge, and conveyed away upstairs, into the doctor's wife's room, an enticing prospect of her solitary evening. Of course she took up "Very Hard Cash," and began to read, but in her present mood, there was something ghastly and awful in those dreadful madhouse scenes, and she felt herself becoming so sensibly influenced by them that she was, at last, obliged to put the volume down. She tried a little music, but everything about the house was so profoundly still that the chords of the piano sounded unaccountably loud and startling in her ears, and she very soon gave up the attempt. Then she got her sewing, a pique skirt, which she was braiding, and felt to work very determinedly, but it was dreadfully dull, she found, this working in utter silence, with nobody to read or talk to, or even to give that sense of society which a silent companion can do quite so profoundly still as the house was so profoundly still that the chords of the piano sounded unaccountably loud and startling in her ears, and she very soon gave up the attempt. 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