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DR. RUMSEY'S PATIENT:

A VERY STRANGE STORY.

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SYNOPSIS OF PREVIOUS CHAPTERS.

CHAPTER 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 Frere 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 Armitage, the son of the Squire, upon whom, however, it is thought to rest the curse of her race, a total absence of memory of the most important events of her life, while less significant matters are remembered. Armitage is passing a brook side when Frere asks Hetty to give him a kiss as his gift of good will. She refuses, and as they are struggling, Armitage intervenes and takes the girl home, she denying that she has given any promise to marry. Frere is enraged, and visiting the inn again asks Hetty for her decision between Armitage and himself. She speedily declares for Armitage, much to Frere's chagrin.

CHAPTER III.

Frere 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 owned to himself that he had a decided penchant for the little rustic beauty, but Frere's fierce passion cooled him. He did not feel particularly inclined, however, to sympathize with his friend.

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

Frere 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 Frere'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 this 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 let me out late?"

"I can't say," replied Everett, stopping about; "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 to hear of Hetty's illness, after a pause; 'well, give me the key. I don't want to turn quite soon; I am only going out to meet Mr. Frere.'"

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

Meanwhile Frere 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 man 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. Frere 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 was of gigantic dimensions, walked by his side as he neared the vicinity of the plain. He walked on and on, the further he went the more fiercely did his blood boil within him. All his life hitherto he had been calm, collected, reasonable. He had taken the events of life with the least 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 Frere 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 the 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.

"Frere, I say Frere, 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 Frere's path. Hearing the voice of the man shouting behind he stopped.

"There he came—un calling yer," he said in his rude dialect.

Frere 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 plain lay in dim grey shadow. Frere had not the least idea where he was running. He and Everett had spent whole days on the plain revelling 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. Frere 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?"

Frere stood upright, a man slighter and taller than himself, faced him about three feet away. Frere 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 Armitage. Frere 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'd better go home without any more words."

"I shall certainly do nothing of the kind," answered Armitage. "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 Frere.

"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. Frere came a step nearer to Armitage.

"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 Armitage, "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 Armitage that he did not even reply. He came to the conclusion that Frere 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 scoundrel. You interfered between Hetty Armitage and me because you want her for yourself—she told me so much tonight!"

"She told you?—it's you who do it," said Armitage. "You strike me to the earth, you dog!"

Frere's wild passion prevented Armitage'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!" Frere uttered a wild, maniacal scream. The next instant he had closed with Armitage and raised a heavy cane which he carried, aimed it full at the young Squire's head.

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

For a moment Armitage was taken off his guard. But the next instant the fierce blood of his race awoke within him. Frere was no mean antagonist—he was a stouter, heavier, older man than Armitage. He had also the strength which madness confers. After a momentary struggle he flung Armitage to the ground. The two young men rolled over together. Then with a quick and sudden movement Armitage sprang to his feet. He had no weapon to defend himself with but a right stick which he carried. Frere let him go for a moment to spring upon him like a tiger. A sudden memory came to Armitage'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 flexible 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 Armitage's brain. When Frere raised his heavy stick to strike him he grasped his own slender weapon and rushed forward. He aimed full at Frere'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 Armitage's passion was over. He bent over the prostrate man and examined the wound which he had made. Frere lay perfectly quiet; there was an awful silence about him. The dark shadows of the night rooded heavily over the place. Armitage 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. Armitage 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 the stick he felt softly across a 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 Frere's brain through the eye, causing instant death.

When this knowledge came to Armitage 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 gave he looked for an instant at the dead face of the man whose life he had taken.

"I don't even know his name," thought Armitage. "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 he do for it? He struck another match, and looked at the end of it. The stick had a narrow steel ferrule at the point. Blood bespattered the end of the stick.

"I must bury this witness," said Armitage, 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 quietly home. He was ringing in his head. He felt as if a devil looked on 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. It 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 Armitage. "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 hit him. Shall I see my father about it now? My father is a magistrate; he'll know what's best to be done."

Armitage was standing in the porch of his house. He was uncertain and shuffling, 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 door was early people—An.

Armitage walked up the stairs. His good time—the lamp was out in the house—only here and there was a dim illumination suited to the hours of darkness. Armitage 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 crossed the hall of the door.

"My father is in bed. There's no use in troubling him about this horrid matter before the morning," he said to himself.

Then he opened the door of his room, and went in.

To his surprise he saw on the threshold, just inside the door, a little roe. He picked it up and opened it.

It was from his sister Ann. It ran as follows: "Dearest Bob—I have seen the Cuthberts, and they can join us on the plain tomorrow for a picnic. As you have gone early to bed, I thought I'd let you know in case you choose to get up at cock-crow. I shall perhaps leave us for the day. Don't forget that we start at ten o'clock, and that Margaret will be there—Your loving sister, Ann."

Armitage found himself reading the note with interest. The excited beating of his heart cooled down. He sank into a chair, took off his cap, and wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

"I wouldn't miss Margaret for the world," he said to himself.

A look of pleasure filled his dark grey eyes. A moment or two later he was in bed, and sound asleep. He awoke at his usual hour in the morning. He rose and dressed, and he had forgotten all about the murder—the doom of his house had fallen upon him.

CHAPTER IV.

"I wish you would tell me about him, Mr. Armitage," said Margaret Douglas.

She was a handsome girl, tall and slightly made—her eyes were black as night, her hair a raven hue, her complexion was fair, and she had a heavy cane which she carried, and there to be a coroner's inquest tomorrow. 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 Armitage. "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."

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

"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 the rough? I tell you I would like to do. I'd like to go to this very moment to 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 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 Armitage'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 Armitage; "but if I had known," he stopped and his lips trembled.

"Never mind," she answered, endeavoring to smile and look cheerful, "a 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 you 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."

"Sit down here, Mr. Armitage, 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 Armitage 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 Armitage.

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

"Yes, I am afraid her beauty was too much for this unfortunate Frere's sanity. I can assure him last night, or rather this passed me by in the end of the evening, he was kissing her. The fact is, he was kissing her. I thought he was taking a liberty and interfered. 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 Frere again. He tried to pick a quarrel with me which of course I nipped in the bud. He came across to his friend Armitage, the innkeeper's son, and when I told him that she had denied the engagement, he said he would go back on it 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 Frere has been arrested on suspicion, and there to be a coroner's inquest tomorrow. 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."

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