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## IN AN EVIL MOMENT.

BY HARRY BLYTH.

Author of "A Wily Woman," "The Bloom of the Heather," "When the Clock Stopped," "Magic Morsels," &amp;c.

## CHAPTER V.—CONTINUED.

## A GUILTY FACE.

Gregory still sat in his old position, and the other men turned from him.

"I can't be possible that you believe me to be guilty," he cried, starting up and gazing at them wildly. "You cannot think that I would be capable of such a crime."

"Can't see how you can expect us to believe anything else," said one of the men, rather roughly; "that there tale 'o yours will hold 'bout as much water as a 'swagger's' boot."

Walter regarded the man blankly; then he wrung his hands, and whispered childishly—

"Why did I come here? Why did I ever come?" Turning to Gregory he cried:

"You know me, Gregory; you were always my best friend; say you do not believe me guilty of this thing."

Gregory did not move nor speak, and Walter's agitation became painful to witness.

Presently Mr. Axon raised his head.

"You need not wait here," he said to the men; "I will watch this man."

Before leaving the room, two of them approached Walter, and very carefully searched him.

"There's no weapons about him, Boss," said one of them. He added, as he left the room with the others, "The Boss is a match for twenty such darned wuzzes as that chap."

As the door closed, blinding sheets of rain drove against the house; now and again this was changed into heavy snow flakes; the roar of the wind, and the rattle of the shingles increased every moment.

"Won't you take my hand?" Walter cried, striving to get above the wind; "you must know me well enough, Gregory, to feel sure that I would not injure your wife."

For a moment Gregory remained silent, as though he was studying some intricate problem. Walter was on the point of turning disappointedly from him, when Gregory roused himself and grasped the proffered palm.

An expression of intense relief passed over Walter's face, and he exclaimed—

"Then do you believe me innocent?"

"I am sure of your innocence."

"Thank heaven for that!"

"But, Walter, I am the only man in this country you will get to believe your tale."

Gregory spoke solemnly, and, as he did so, he turned his large eyes upon his companion.

"But surely the truth must prevail. I can prove—"

"My poor unhappy friend, you can prove nothing. The dead woman denounced you with her last breath; you were caught practically in the act; the very mystery of your sudden appearance will make people declare that the crime had long been meditated."

"I am stunned," cried Walter. "I am overwhelmed."

Then, as though a thought had flashed suddenly upon him, he demanded—

"If the evidence is so black against me, why do you believe my story?"

"Because I know what no one else ever knew—my poor wife was mad."

"Mad!" Barr echoed. This explained much that before had been incomprehensible.

"Mad!" Gregory repeated, "and since I last saw you, Walter, my life has been full of misery."

His listener looked into his open, truthful eyes, and was quite sure that he had suffered much.

"Rhode was deeply enraged with me this morning, and she threatened me. I did not take much notice of her menaces—of late I have grown accustomed to them. I think now I see how she hoped, in her mad way, to be revenged upon me. She determined to commit suicide and in some way make it appear that I had murdered her. Unhappily, she laid her plans well—with all the precision of the insane—and, but for your unexpected arrival, I should now be in your position. She mistook you for me, and now every man who hears the evidence will declare you to be her murderer."

"No, no," cried Walter, "not if you tell them the truth—not if you explain the whole story as you have explained it to me."

Gregory shook his head sadly.

"Nothing will help you, my poor friend," he said, with deep compassion.

"You don't mean to say that they will hang me?" Walter screamed in terror.

"The people here," Gregory replied, softly, "are a very practical people, and peculiarly unimaginative. They would only laugh at your story."

"What shall I do—what shall I do?" Walter wrung his hands, and paced the room feverishly.

"You must escape."

"In this storm?"

"It is certain death for you to remain; terrible as the weather is, there is a possibility of reaching some place of safety alive. Time may clear you. If you stay here you will certainly be hanged. If you succeed in getting away, I will follow you to England, and—"

Rapid footsteps approached the room, and Gregory ceased abruptly. Walter stood with his face bedewed with beads of perspiration, and trembling in every limb.

Mr. Axon was wanted at once in the room wherein lay the body of his wife, and there seemed to be much excitement in the house.

Walter was left in custody of two men. When Gregory returned, his manner had become even more troubled than before.

It was arranged that Walter should be placed in the strongest room in the house, and that the two men should watch him through the night. Before retiring to his own apartment, Gregory gave the two custodians a strong glass of whisky each; cautioning them to be careful, he wished them good night.

Next morning no trace of the prisoner could be discovered. After many threats, the useless guards confessed to Gregory that once during the night they had both been overtaken by sleep. How long they had remained unconscious, they did not know. It must have been the whisky, they said, that had made them drowsy. During their slumber the prisoner had escaped.

"He can't go far," said Gregory, grimly, as they all listened to the roaring of the wind and the deluge of rain; "if we don't catch him alive, we will find his body in some of the bog-holes across the range."

## CHAPTER VI.

## TOM WESTALL.

Sixteen years have passed since that eventful night when the New Zealand wind swept down the gorges with resistless force, driving the shingle against Gregory Axon's windows, and laying low the vegetation round about, since Walter Barr, dazed and terror-stricken, crept from the house of his friend into the solid sheet of rain and savage room.

Gregory's prophecy had not been fulfilled. Walter Barr was never taken, nor was any trace of his body discovered. The house in which Rhode had committed her mad crime had now passed into the possession of another. Soon after the events described in the last chapter, Gregory sold his property and returned to England. He kept up no correspondence with his old friends, and in a few years he and his connections were forgotten. The lapse of time, and the movements of our characters, bring us now to more homely ground—in a word, to a quaint, moss-hidden village nestling among the rocks of the North Devon coast.

It was a glorious evening towards the end of August; the sky was clear, scarcely a murmur came from the green glassy waters. In the far distance a golden ball kissed the sea, and the horizon was streaked with a band of yellow light. At each end of the village of Sowton a ridge of amber rocks dipped into the Atlantic. Behind the scattered houses, thickly-wooded hills, revealing in deep browns and variegated greens with a tint now and again of a warm

red, crept towards the watchful sky. Over sea and hills, village and pasture-land a delicious calm brooded, and the air was fragrant with sweet scents. The houses, for the most part, faced the silvery water, and the majority had a small garden in front. Here, on such an evening as this, you would find the male population of Sowton attending very assiduously to its vegetables and sunflowers—it was a wonderful place for sunflowers—or leaning lazily over the wooden gates smoking placidly.

A few bent and trembling figures would be on the settle outside the "Fortescue Arms," discussing local topics—how they discovered them was a mystery—and drinking the smallest possible beer from bulgy quaintly-shaped jugs.

Altogether Sowton was a remarkably quiet little place, and its people were models of sobriety and early rising. It had one startling peculiarity—there were scarcely any children in it. It seemed as though the old drowsy place was going to die out with its aged inhabitants.

At the one end of the village stood a whitewashed cottage, evidently more recently erected than the neighbouring moss-covered buildings. It made some pretence to posing as a small villa, too. The roof was slated; the central door had a bow-window on each side of it, and the railings round the garden were of iron.

Fixed to the gate was a small marble slab bearing in black letters the words—

THOMAS WESTALL, M. B. C. S., L. S. A.

As Mr. Westall would with much gaiety point out, this plate reminded one irresistibly of a miniature gravestone.

"It's a capital thing," he would say, laughingly, "to bring those obstinate old fellows who affect to despise doctors to their senses. They see that, sir, and it reminds them of the uncertainty of life. Then they remember that pain in their back, or their side, or their big toe, and in they come—finest notion in the world. It's paid for itself fifty times over."

On this particular evening the young surgeon sat by his open window, busily oiling and polishing a fishing-rod of numberless joints.

He was a tall, well-made, athletic fellow this, and you had only to look at his hairless face to see how full of fun he was. Now and again you would detect faint traces of lines about his mouth, which suggested that beneath the good-humoured exterior was a courageous, determined disposition. His broad chin, and the fire which occasionally flashed in his dark eyes, supported his view.

His brown hair had a tendency to curl. It was crisp, and stood up from his high, freckled forehead.

"Well," said Tom to himself, as he rubbed the lithe rod, "if I'm not more successful at hooking fish than I have been at catching patients, I might as well have left the old rod in its case."

He let the piece of rag he had been using drop from his hand, and gazed dreamily across the breathing waters at the slowly sinking golden orb.

"Did anybody ever know such a place?" he went on. There was a complaint in his words, but no murmur in his tone.

"I don't believe that the people ever are ill here. Six patients last week, and five of them would have been glad to borrow a shilling from me if they had thought that I had such a thing in my pocket."

A laugh escaped him, and he resumed polishing of the fishing-rod.

"Of course every one says that I was mad ever to settle down in such an out-of-the-way hole, but then everybody can be very wise after the event. I wonder," he continued, reflectively, as he dropped the finishing rod into its case, "whether I should ever have thought of coming here at all had not I met little Lily Barr here in the old college days?"

His grow more serious as he went on slowly, "It's a queer thing that I should come down here to spend my last vacation. It isn't a bit queer that I should fall in love with her—that was only natural; but it was the maddest thing on earth to set up here. She's a jolly little girl, and very kind, and all that, but it isn't to be expected that she will throw herself away upon a penniless fellow like me. Oh, no," he added, cynically, pacing the room with his hands in his pockets, "in this charming nineteenth century young ladies with money don't do that sort of thing. I'm just about as happy here," he continued, "as a bear in winter, with nothing to do but to suck my paws. Perhaps, though, a cheroot

would be a more sensible thing to pull at."

He walked to the tiny side-board at the end of the room, and helped himself to a cigar from a box thereon.

He stood for a little time leaning against this fragile piece of furniture smoking, his hands again plunged into his pockets.

The manilla appeared to exercise a soothing influence, for presently he muttered—

"After all, I suppose some fellows would be jolly glad to be in my shoes—plenty of credit, glorious scenery, and nothing to do. Hello," he cried, throwing his half-finished cigar into the fire-place, as there came a ring at the bell, "here's three and sixpence come at last!"

An elderly woman, very prim as regards cap, and precise in manner, knocked at the door and announced—

"Miss Barr, sir."

Tom ran to greet one of the brightest little morsels of sunshine that ever wore skirts.

Lily Barr was barely seventeen years of age. She wore a tightly-fitting costume of some rare cotton stuff, so daintily made that she looked like a wild blossom plucked from the wood-side. A delicious little chip bonnet was on the back of her head, allowing her hair to fall in golden clouds upon her forehead. Her eyes were bright, blue and daring; her dimpled cheeks were full of merriment, and her pouting lips ripe and tempting.

Tom caught hold of both her hands as she entered the room—they seemed quite lost in his giant palms—and cried in his bolterous way—

"Well, I am glad to see you." Suddenly changing his tone, he added, "but it's an awful 'sell.' I made sure that you were three and sixpence—medicine and advice, you know—three and six."

Lily laughed heartily. Then she said, with great demureness, "How mercenary men are! So you really wish, Mr. Westall, that it had been three and sixpence?"

"Mr. Westall!" he echoed, in disgust. "Now, my dear young lady, come here."

He led her to the open window. "Just look all round you and tell me whether you consider this a fit proper place to use that odious word 'Mister'—'Mister' Westall—'Miss' Barr."

He laid a scornful emphasis on the titles. "Surely we are far enough removed from civilization to be able to abandon its irritating conventionalities."

Lily judiciously changed the conversation. "Before you describe my appearance as a 'sell,' she said, "you should have waited and heard the object of my visit. No thank you, I will not sit down now; I want you to go to the other end of the village—"

"Say the other end of the world, Miss Barr."

"I shall be quite satisfied," she answered. "If you go as far as poor Mrs. Summer's."

"You see," she added, with a roguish twinkle in her eyes, "if I don't bring the three and sixpence to you, I can take you to the three and sixpence."

"If the said three and sixpence is supposed to lurk in the purse of Mrs. Summer, I'm afraid it is rather dubious. However, of course I'll go and see the old soul. Though, to tell you the truth," he continued, as they walked from the house, "there's nothing I've got in my surgery that will do the old lady much good. She wants a pint of strong beef tea every day and a 'lass'—two of port wine."

"You have only to order it," said Lily. "It's easy enough to order it; but how is the poor body—?"

"I always see that my patients have what they are ordered," Lily interrupted with dignity.

Tom looked at her inquiringly.

"What I mean is," she said, "that in future I'm going to look after Mrs. Summer. You know we have got lots of beef at home, and I'm sure papa can spare some of his wine."

Tom looked at her with such a strange glow in his eyes, that the scarlet ran up her cheeks and burnt them.

"I did not see you out this morning," he said presently; "I suppose you were busy at home?"

"No, indeed, I went as far as Barnsbarn."

"If I'd have known," he said, "I should have liked to have driven you over."

"I wouldn't take you from your patients for the world," she said gravely.

Whereat he laughed with much merriment, and she ultimately joined him.

"I went," she said, "to pay my tribute to the Goddess of Vanity—in other words, to have my likeness taken."

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