

Mrs. Quiggs, the Vampire

PART I

Mrs. Quiggs was a cross, tetchy, perverse old Londoner, whose acquaintances—she had no friends—altered to her, when they took the trouble of mentioning her at all, as "the Vampire." She also possessed a somewhat startling originality of character—an originality which took the shape of making herself as unpleasant as possible on every conceivable occasion. Indeed, her ingratitude was so great in this respect that it had passed into a proverb, and her impatient exclamation of "Go on!"—an exclamation signifying incredulity and derision—had gradually become shortened to "Garne!"—a limitation in length which made the phrase even more objectionable than before.

Most of the dwellers in "Moberly Muddles" (they had been originally known as "Moberly Models") hated Mrs. Quiggs with a deadly hatred born of impotent fury, for she scorned the conventionalities and made herself equally unpleasant all round. Indeed, when she outpoured the vials of her wrath, it was, as one old biblical knowledge remarked: "Enough to make Joshua himself stand still," although it had the reverse effect on the inhabitants of "The Muddles." They generally sought safety in flight down the nearest court until the storm abated. Which was wise; for Mrs. Quiggs's adjectival fluency was appalling in its aimless incoherence. She had, too, an objectionable habit of following up her victims as they went about their daily avocations and of compelling them to listen to her grievances: If they failed to evince a proper amount of neighborly sympathy, she promptly regarded them as enemies and treated them—with more bitterness than the original offenders. And she had an exasperating way of threatening timid young matrons with "castling a spell on them" if they did not heed her "luppence for a go of gin."

As for her garments, they were indescribable. At some prehistoric period, they had been, presumably of different colors. Now, the beneficent influence of Time had blended them into one subdued, olive green—a tint which was unobtrusive, and did not attract attention when Mrs. Quiggs wished to take her walks abroad. She wore one shoe and a slipper, and her bonnet, which was minus a string, generally hung down her face, the wrong end in front, the remaining rusty fastening creating in Mrs. Quiggs's mind the delusion that a fly was tickling her nose. When possessed of the necessary funds, she generally smoked an old, short-stemmed clay pipe. Even in the coldest weather, her costume never varied as she found it comfortable enough and suited to her requirements: no one dared point out to her how much better looking she would be if properly dressed and tidied up a little. In her youth, it is conceivable that Mrs. Quiggs had not been bad looking; but a too constant adherence to suspicious compounds and an utter indifference to the effect of the London climate, had given her an aspect of vicious ugliness. Which was a pity, for Mrs. Quiggs was woman, and had been known to smile under the mollifying influence of a judicious compliment from the big policeman at the corner.

Nobody knew how Mrs. Quiggs originated. In the beginning of things there had been Mrs. Quiggs and "The Muddles." Now it was thought to be "The Muddles" and Mrs. Quiggs. "The Muddles" had been repaired again and again. Not so Mrs. Quiggs, although it was generally admitted that she "had a tile loose." Besides, she was partly bald. She also required whitewashing, mentally and physically, although there was no one in the building bold enough to undertake the task.

Of late things had not gone well with Mrs. Quiggs. She had innovations. Walter was an innovation, so was Miss Shenstone, therefore, Mrs. Quiggs did not want these "lads" to come down to her "Muddles" and "lord it over people as 'ad a right to be there? They aren't afair no good," said Mrs. Quiggs, oracularly. "Don't tell me Garne!" and so people did not tell her. What was the use of telling a woman like Mrs. Quiggs anything—a woman who merely said "Garne!" and refused to listen to reason unless her deliberations were assisted by means of unlimited gin and water, the more gin and the less water, the more gin.

Miss Shenstone was librarian of a charitable institution in the east end of London. She had taken high honors at Girtton, and was rich. But she was an enthusiast, and her enthusiasm—an enthusiasm which had been fired by the perusal of Sir Walter Scott's "The Two Rovers" and "The Two Admirals"—she dragged old Miss Carmichael, her aunt, to live with her at "The Muddles." Four rooms were transformed into an elegant flat, with beautiful furniture and accessories, so that the old lady might be thoroughly comfortable. Then Miss Shenstone set about reforming everything and everybody, with an enthusiasm which brought a smile to the lips of Walter

the attention was quite voluntary on "The Penwiper's" part.

PART II

As far as externals went, there was nothing to indicate that the dinner was to be the east instead of the west end of London. The rooms were rather small, but decidedly cosy. Miss Carmichael had known Walter Dean's father intimately. "He always was an obstinate man when he wanted anything," she said. "I suppose you take after him, or you wouldn't be here."

Walter looked at Miss Shenstone, and thought that he could be very obstinate indeed with regard to her should circumstances ever enable him to speak out. For some months past he had been living in a dream, when he had it in his mind to dream, which was infrequent intervals. And he was really making his way. He found the library a very pleasant room at which to work. Miss Shenstone and her assistants were most considerate. He could stay there all day in a comfortable nook by the huge fire. And latterly, Isabel Shenstone had become very much interested in the pale, intellectual face of the dark-haired young fellow who stuck so perseveringly to his work. Indeed, it was her instigation that he had sent stories to a certain paper, and that they had been accepted. He did not know that Isabel had intimated to the editor at a dinner-party that the stories should be attentively considered. The editor, who was on the lookout for "rising talent," with many misgivings had consented to read the stories. Past experience did not incline him favorably towards the work of unknown men. But Walter Dean's stories were very good, indeed, the editor wanted as many more as the author could produce. Owing to this sudden demand, Walter's circumstances had so far improved that he felt justified in leaving "The Muddles," only, somehow, he did not care to do so, and the reason why he did not care to do so was Isabel Shenstone. Still, he was poor, and she was rich. He could not speak yet.

"I have been telling my niece," said the silver-haired old Miss Carmichael, "that I am tired of 'The Muddles.' There have been two ghastly murders in the neighborhood. It is not a fit place for either of us to live in. Isabel has given me the experiment a fair trial. We have lived down here a year. She has a following of some twenty or thirty people who prey on her. I admit that the children love her. However, it is time she resumed her proper position in society. That is the fault of Girtton. It unites girls for society. They always want to be doing something useful instead of sitting down and waiting for what Providence chooses to send them. In my young days it would have been considered indecorous not to sit down and wait. Don't you think it very unbecoming, Isabel?"

Isabel seemed paler and more tired than usual. "I have come to the same conclusion, aunt," she said. "I meant well, but I am a failure. All my strength seems to have faded away. It must be the bad air. We will go down to the country somewhere and take a pretty cottage. I can't bear to think of these horrible murders. They haunt me. It makes one despair of human nature to hear of such sickening butchery. What do you think, Mr. Dean?"

As Walter looked at her, something in his glance brought an unusual color into Isabel's cheek. "You are right to leave here," he said sorrowfully. "It isn't fit for gently-nurtured ladies. In your exquisite goodness and desire to benefit your fellows, you have borne all this without a murmur but the time has come when you ought not to bear it any longer. You will kill yourself."

Miss Carmichael had left the room. Isabel turned away from his earnest glance.

"There is only Miss Carmichael who would lament me," she said almost inaudibly, as she sank into a chair.

He came round to her side. "Pardon me, that is not so. Everyone who knows you here would find it a very sad day when you left; but you must leave. I—I implore you."

"Why?"

"For your sake and—mine."

She rose to her feet, confronting him. "You have said too much of too little. Do you wish me to go? If you want me to go, I will go, but—"

"—but—"

"—Yes," he said steadily. "I wish you to go. Some day I will tell you why, should—"

"Should what?"

"Should I be justified in doing so."

She turned aside.

"Before you go," he said, "I should like to tell you what an angel of mercy and light you have been to me. I came to this desolate hole—this vile den of misery, want, and crime—utterly friendless and alone. You helped me in a hundred ways, you encouraged me to persevere, you gave me fresh heart and hope and life. To urge you to go away from me is like cutting off my hand. Yet it is best that you should go. Were you to remain I could not—No! No! I must not speak. Good-night and good-bye. Some day I will come to you, with a prayer for you to grant or refuse. Until then—farewell!"

She gave him her hand as the tears struggled to her eyes. The man was hopelessly proud. He loved her, and yet he would not speak because of his

poverty.

"You are very proud," she said. "Good-bye!"

When Miss Carmichael entered the room, she found that Dean had disappeared. "I was looking for an old photograph of his father," she said. "It is very rude of him to go away. I like him so much. Don't you, Isabel?"

"Yes," said Isabel, simply.

Miss Carmichael took the girl in her motherly arms. "Is that it?" she asked. "Why shouldn't it be so, Isabel?"

"He is proud, and I could not unsex myself by making him speak. Auntie, let us go away. I have made my experiment and failed. Let us go home."

"If the lad is like his father," said the old lady, decisively, "he will speak some day. And now let us make our arrangements for leaving. This place has been too much for you."

"Yes," Isabel gazed thoughtfully into the fire. "It has been too much for me. Murderers and thieves are all very well in fiction but they are not pleasant to meet in the slums behind 'The Muddles.' Mr. Dean must go away also. The district is not safe."

PART III

The next morning the inhabitants of "The Muddles" were electrified to learn that Walter Dean had been arrested for the murder of a poor Polish refugee who had sought shelter in "The Muddles" and whose body had been found lying by the gateway with the skull smashed in. There was no mistake about it. Mrs. Quiggs had also disappeared from "The Muddles" in the custody of a stalwart and unemotional policeman. "Garne!" she said to the jeering crowd which accompanied her upon her way, turning upon them like a female-Jonathan Wild. "Garne! 'ome! I'll be back in a hour. It's me as informed agin 'im!"

Things looked very black against Walter Dean, for a cloak dabbled with blood had been found in his room. This cloak was known to have been worn the night before by the murdered man. Mrs. Quiggs testified that she had gone into Walter Dean's sitting-room at eight in the morning to put it to rights and had found the cloak under the sofa. "I give her a turn," she said, for she had already heard of the murder, and she at once fetched the police.

Directly this revolting accusation was made known to Isabel she telegraphed to a certain famous solicitor who was with her in an hour. Two or three mysterious-looking people glided about in the vicinity of the murder. They returned with the result of their enquiries to the solicitor, who smiled, and informed Miss Shenstone that she need not be uneasy with regard to Walter Dean.

At the police court proceedings held the same afternoon, Mrs. Quiggs was asked if she knew the nature of an oath. On her proceeding to give

examples with singular fluency and volubility, she was hastily checked by the presiding magistrate. At length she was sworn and repeated her evidence, which seemed perfectly clear. On going to her work that morning she had seen part of the cloak projecting from Walter Dean's sofa, and there was blood upon it—human blood.

"Accused, have you anything to say?" asked the presiding magistrate after learning other details.

"Only to declare my innocence and to state that the witness, who has a grudge against me, probably put the cloak there herself," said Walter. "She must have taken it off the dead man's body before the murder was discovered."

"Gammion!" said Mrs. Quiggs from the back of the court. "Garne!"

The magistrate looked incredulous. "That is precisely what I am about to prove," said Miss Shenstone's solicitor, turning to the bench. "I produce a witness named Jacob Ray, who will corroborate this statement. I call Jacob Ray."

Jacob Ray darted into the box as if he had been there before and knew all about it. He was a sharp little urchin of twelve. At 7 o'clock that morning, just before the discovery of the body, he was passing through the narrow passage opposite "The Muddles," and saw Mrs. Quiggs come out carrying the cloak in her hand. Even then she was not sober, and he heard her muttering that she would "plant" the cloak of someone whose name he did not catch, and get even with him for "rovin' her about."

The urchin's story was corroborated by the caretaker of "The Muddles," who said that the old woman had been very tipsy the night before and had wandered into the covered archway opposite "The Muddles" to sleep off her debauch. Mr. Dean had not left "The Muddles" since the evening before his arrest.

"I apply for a warrant against this woman for perjury," said the solicitor, quietly. "The police are on the track of the real murderers. His unhappy victim was supposed to have many precious stones concealed about him, and these constituted the temptation to kill and plunder him."

As a consequence of the solicitor's high-handed and unfeeling action, Mrs. Quiggs did not return to her friends "in a hour." She was after-

wards tried for perjury, convicted, and, worst of all, before beginning to serve her sentence, made to take a bath. The shock ultimately proved too much for her sensitive constitution. "There is hope for you yet if you repent of your wickedness," said the jail chaplain. "Garne! Not after that bath!" retorted Mrs. Quiggs, with undiminished spirit, and died hating Mr. and Mrs. Walter Dean with unrelenting vigor up to the very last moment.

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