

The Murder at Carew Court

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by Amy Randolph
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“And Charlie—must we leave *him* behind?”

“Remember, Mrs. Carew,” said the grave old doctor, “that I send you away for perfect rest of mind and body. Even the care and responsibility of such a child as little Charlie would be a serious drawback.”

“My dear,” said Mr. Carew, caressingly, “Dr. Bayne is right. Charlie will be in excellent hands here—and your health must be our first consideration. Remember that it will be only a few weeks, at the utmost!”

And Mrs. Carew, with her blue eyes full of tears, and her heart inwardly rebelling against the dictum of solemn old bachelor doctors, was forced to accede. So Carew Court was left to the sole possession of the four-year-old heir, his nurses, and a picked force of sedate servants, and a merry party of guests assembled at Silverbeach, the sea-side residence of the Carews. For Dr. Bayne had said:

“Give her change—society—amusement; keep her mind constantly occupied, if you wish to fight off the hereditary enemy of the family—consumption.”

And Mr. Carew, tremulously watching the transparent cheeks and marvelously luminous eyes of the beautiful wife who was scarce half his own age, eagerly caught at the merest straw of hope.

“My dear,” said Mr. Carew one morning at the breakfast table, “I had a letter from Clarence; he will be here tonight.”

“Will he?”

“And very happy I shall be to welcome him after his six months’ absence in Europe.”

Mrs. Carew was silent.

“Inez, you never liked Clarence,” said Mr. Carew, rather complainingly. “Before my marriage, he was a son to me, almost.”

“And it was because he was so visibly chagrined at that same marriage, Eustace, that I have never been able to learn to like him,” answered Mrs. Carew, with a slight curl of her lip. “Once he was heir-apparent: he is nothing, now.”

“But, my dear Inez—”

“But, my dear Eustace,” laughed the young wife, “I will do my best to welcome your nephew; but I really think he has no business to ruffle the serenity of this magnificent June morning. Let us arrange the preliminaries of tomorrow’s picnic with our guests, before the breakfast table circle is broken up.”

And her face of pretty pleading checked the words of remonstrance that were evidently trembling on Mr. Carew’s dignified lips.

“She is but a child,” he said to himself, “a beautiful, wayward child—let her have her own way.”

It was nearly sunset; the long shadows from antique statue and shapely cedar were stretching themselves across the lawn, and the delicious salt air from the sea was beginning to spread a refreshing coolness through the sultry apartments, when Mrs. Carew came bounding into the apartment—a library, with French windows opening upon the piazza—where her husband and several of his guests were sitting. She was wonderfully beautiful, with the pale brown curls floating back from her forehead, her blue eyes glowing like sapphire stars, and a rosy spot of color on each cheek.

“Where is he, Eustace? Where have you hidden him? and when did he come? Oh, speak quickly! do not keep me in suspense!”

She clasped one hand eagerly over her heart as she spoke, looking from one to the other with a face of smiling eagerness. Eustace Carew rose from his seat, in surprise.

“My dear, I do not understand you. Who is *he*?”

“Why Charlie, of course,” she answered petulantly.

“Charlie, my love? Our son Charlie? He is at Carew Court.”

“He is *not* at Carew Court; he is here!” she answered eagerly. “I saw him just now standing in the hall doorway, with his little apron full of flowers, and the sunshine full upon his golden curls—my Charlie. And when I sprang forward to sieze him in my arms, he was not there. Oh, Eustace, I know how it is; you have waited to surprise me, and—and—but I am calm now—I am prepared—tell them to bring him to me!”

Mr. Carw looked in blank surprise and dismay from his pale and excited wife to the astonished guests at his side.

“Inez,” he began, “calm yourself, my love. This is really an extraordinary instance of hallucination which I am entirely unable to account for. Charlie is not here; it is simply impossible that he should be here. No train is due until eight; it is now but a few minutes past four. You have been asleep, my dear, and the child’s image has mingled with your dreams.”

The house was searched, and servants and guests were alike questioned, however, before Mrs. Carew would be satisfied that Charlie was really not in the house. Then she sank on a chair, pale and trembling.

“Eustace,” she cried, passionately, “if that was not my Charlie, alive and in the body, it was his spirit. Something has happened to my boy! Oh, let us go to Carew Court now—this instant!”

“My love,” said moderate Mr. Carew, “you must be crazy. Go to Carew Court upon such a mere fancy as this—and no possible way of reaching it until tomorrow morning! There is but one train a day, and—”

“Then telegraph,” she eagerly interrupted. “Eustace, I shall die if I am left in this horrible suspense all night!”

“Certainly, I will telegraph, Inez, at once, if you think it would be such a relief to your mind, although I myself think it an unnecessary precaution.”

The evening train brought an addition to the company assembled at Silverbeach—Mr. Clarence Carew, a tall, sickly looking young man, with a face of true scholarly pallor, and a sort of stereotyped smile upon his countenance. Mr. Carew welcomed him warmly.

“We are glad to see you once more among us, Clarence, my boy,” he said cordially.

While Inez let her cold hand rest one instant in his grasp, murmuring a few mechanical words of courtesy, in reply to his voluble greeting.

“By the way, uncle,” he said, turning to the elder Mr. Carew, “I have a telegraphic despatch for you, which was handed me at the station.”

“A telegraphic despatch!” Inez echoed the words almost in a scream, as she caught it from Clarence Carew’s grasp and tore it eagerly open.

The next instant, with a scream that rang through the hall and corridor, with awful distinctness, she sank fainting on the floor. Mr. Carew seized the despatch she had dropped, and read, with eyes before which the fatal writing seemed to swim:

“Come at once. Charlie fell over the precipice in the ravine this afternoon at about four o’clock, and was killed instantly.”

The telegram was signed by an aged female friend of the family who had been left in a sort of general charge of Carew Court.

We draw a veil over the confusion and consternation that followed; but the next day Silverbeach was closed and silent—the gay company dispersed; the host and hostess at Carew Court, where only a little coffin remained of the merry laughing child they had left behind so few days ago.

While Clarence Carew, walking up and down the broad paved terrace, with drooping head, and hands tightly clasped behind his back, kept murmuring to himself:

“Heir to Carew Court—heir to Carew—in spite of fate and destiny! My blue-eyed, scornful lady aunt can hardly help herself *now!*”

And the old nurse, when she heard Mrs. Carew’s tale of the golden-haired vision she had seen smiling at her, with its apron full of flowers, shook her head, sagely.

“Yes, yes, honey, de Carews always was a wonderful family for seein’ ghosts, and he *was* pickin’ wild flowers, bless his little heart, when he met his death. It’s *him* you seed, sure ‘nough, Mrs. Carew, ma’am—his sperrit, goin’ home.”

And to this mere straw of consolation Mrs. Carew clung with an eagerness that threatened to become almost a monomania, while the presence of Clarence Carew, now once more heir apparent to the riches of the Court and Silverbeach, became more distasteful than ever to her.

“My love, you are prejudiced,” said poor Eustace, on whose brow deep wrinkles were ploughed and whose hair was fast turning white.

“I cannot help it,” said Inez, with a sort of sad energy. “I *hate* that man!”

“Please, sir, a note for Mrs. Carew.”

It was a ragged little girl with swarthy, sunburned skin, and hair hanging in elf-locks over her eyes that had crossed the peaceful current of Mr. Clarence’s daily promenade upon the terrace.

“Ah? for Mrs. Carew? Give it to me, and here is a penny for your trouble, my little girl. I will see that it is given to Mrs. Carew.”

But the elf-locks shook her head.

“Please, sir, I was to give it into Mrs. Carew’s own hands.”

“But I am Mrs. Carew’s nephew.”

The child pressed resolutely on to where the flutter of a white dress among the shrubbery, some distance beyond, betokened the presence of a woman, leaving Mr. Clarence somewhat discomfited.

“Are you Mrs. Carew, ma’am?” asked the child, pressing up close to the pale lady in the white dress.

“Yes; what do you want, my child?”

“Mammy told me to give this note into your own hands.”

And she held up a greasy slip of paper.

Mrs. Carew unfolded it, and read with surprise the following words:

“If you want to hear how your boy died, come to the keeper’s lodge at ten tonight—alone, and tell nobody.”

“Did your mother write this?” she questioned.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Is your mother the lodge-keeper’s wife?”

“No, ma’am—she’s her cousin; we came from Pennsylvania last May.”

Mrs. Carew hurriedly dropped a silver coin in the child’s hand, and concealing the note in her dress, hurried to the house to think over this strange message.

At ten o’clock that night, a soft tap came to the lodge door, and it was quietly opened.

“I am Mrs. Carew,” said the lady, drawing her shawl closer round her shoulders; “what have you to tell me?”

The lodge-keeper’s wife came curtseying forward.

“To be sure, ma’am, it’s my cousin, Mrs. Tripler *would* trouble you to come down here; she’s just gettin’ the better of a long illness, and couldn’t come to you, or else sure she knows her place better, ma’am.”

“Let me see her.”

The keeper’s wife threw open the door, and ushered Mrs. Carew into a small, stifling bedroom, where a woman sat, propped up with pillows.

“Just leave us alone a bit, Polly,” said she, as she beckoned Mrs. Carew to a chair; and Polly, nodding good-humouredly, disappeared.

“And now what have you to tell me?” said Mrs. Carew, bending eagerly over the pillows.

“This—and I should have told it before, but I have been very sick—I took cold in them damp woods the very day, and I’ve had rheumatic fever since, and been at death’s door. Listen, Mrs. Carew. The tenth of June—you remember it, don’t you?”

“Remember it!”

Mrs. Carew’s low groan only answered the question.

“Well, it was the afternoon o’ the tenth of June, and I had gone out into the woods by the precipice to gather roots to make a healing drink I sometimes sell—for I am poor, Mrs. Carew, and poor people have to do ‘most any way to make both ends meet—and I was diggin’ away under a lot o’ tangled bushes, when I heard footsteps—a child’s little uneven footsteps and a man’s. I kind o’ straightened up, and listened without bein’ seen, for I was in my old, ragged calico dress, and ne’er a shoe to my feet. But I could *see*, and ma’am, it was your curly haired boy, with his apron full of wild flowers and weeds; and the tall man—it was that yellow faced young man at the Court; Mr. Clarence, my cousin says they call him—stepped out of a sudden from the path that comes t’other way. And the little child, scared-like, as was only natural, you know, steps back, just on the edge of them cruel, steep rocks. Then I starts to spring out of my hidin’ place and save him, but the young man was quicker yet, and as the child catches for dear life at a cedar bush, growin’ out o’ the cracks in the rocks, he stoops over and—”

She stopped, and covered her eyes with her hands.

“It’s no use; I can’t shut out the ugly sight, nor the cry that went through and through my heart. I thought he was goin’ to lift the child up, but instead, oh, ma’am, he tore the little clinging hands away, and it fell down, down; and he straightens himself and looks down a minute, when you may believe all was still enough by that time, and he mutters somethin’ under his breath, and turns round, with such an evil smile on his face, and such livid eyes, oh, ma’am, I ought to ha’ screamed and caught at him, but them eyes fairly burnt the strength out o’ me. He might have hurled me after the innocent child—he *would* have done it, I solemnly believe. And then he swung himself down to the ledge below, where the path leads to the high road, and disappeared. And I crept tremblin’ down, and just then, among the leaves, was a shinin’ gold pencil-case, with his name on it, had dropped somehow out of his pocket. Here it is, ma’am.”

With trembling hand she laid the trinket on Mrs. Carew’s ice-cold palm.

“And then the servants’ voices sounded, callin’ ‘Charlie!’ ‘Charlie!’ and somehow I can’t remember any o’ the rest, except findin’ myself on the bed here; and Polly, good soul, frettin’, because, she said, some vine had poisoned me in the woods. Now, you know all, ma’am.”

She closed her eyes and turned her face to the pillow with a low sigh of exhaustion. Mrs. Carew rose, very pale, but with every feature as rigid as iron.

“I knew it! I felt it!” she gasped; “and now for revenge!”

She returned to Carew Court with footsteps fleeter than those of the wild antelope’s. Dr. Bayne was at once sent for, with directions to visit the sick woman at once. Inez knew what a powerful instrument she would be as a witness; and then, closeted with her husband, she told him the whole story.

“But, my love,” faltered the terror-stricken man, “Clarence came direct from Boston to Silverbeach; he never stopped at the Court at all.”

“Then how came he to drop his pencil-case among the dead leaves in the woods?” calmly demanded Inez, showing the gaudy gold case with “Clarence Carew” plainly initialed on its side!

That night Clarence Carew, luxuriously sitting in his dressing gown and slippers, in his own apartment at Carew Court, was roughly roused from his Sybarite dreams, by being arrested for murder.

He was duly imprisoned, tried, and condemned; and the sentence of the law would have been rigidly carried into effect if the unhappy young man had not, on the night preceding his execution, swallowed a potent draught of some foreign poison. How he obtained it was, and must ever remain, a mystery; but when his keepers entered the cell, the morning of his doom, they found but a senseless corpse.

At Carew Court, the cloud of sadness still broods, where Inez is dying of consumption, and her husband, whose very life seems wrapped up in hers, sits constantly by her bedside. And the rustics tell strange stories about the Court, and whisper of its being “haunted;” and the village children shun its vicinity after dark. And the poplar leaves, tapping at the casements, sound strangely like little, irregular footsteps; and dying Inez loves to close her eyes and fancy that they are the footfalls of the little golden-haired Charlie, whose feet have long since trodden the golden pavements above!

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