

A Doctor's Adventure

“And now we’ll have a cozy, comfortable evening together,” said my wife. “And—but what’s that, Irving?”

My wife started nervously as a sharp peal at the bell interrupted our domestic quiet.

“Only the office bell, my dear; somebody wanting me, I suppose.”

And I went down stairs, secretly wondering to myself if, after all there was a very wide difference between a galley slave and a country doctor.

The office door stood wide open, but nobody was there, and through the blinding darkness without I could just discern the black outline of a close carriage, and a man standing at the horse’s head.

“Who’s there?—what’s wanting?” I asked, coming to the threshold, and instinctively buttoning up my overcoat I had hurriedly thrown on.

“You’re wanted, Doctor,” said the man, speaking indistinctly behind the muffling that surrounded his face.

“Yes, but what for? Who wants me?”

“I am not at liberty to tell.”

I had already entered the carriage, but this suspicious answer inspired me with distrust. I made a step to descend, but I was too late; the vehicle was already in motion.

“It is quite unnecessary to alarm yourself, Doctor,” said a quiet, measured voice at my side. “Believe me, you are quite safe; and I trust you will not feel any uneasiness when I tell you that you must be blindfolded.”

And at the same instant a folded bandage was deftly slipped over my eyes.

“Hold!” I ejaculated. “It strikes me that is rather superfluous. The night is dark as Erebus, and you have no lamp.”

“Possibly,” returned the dry voice; “but it is best to run no risks.”

And then ensued a silence of some ten or fifteen minutes, while the carriage rolled swiftly along, and the low, measured breathing of my unknown companion kept tome to my own uncomfortable thoughts.

At length my companion spoke, again I in the same soft, modulated tones.

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“Doctor! One more little precaution is necessary: your promise never to divulge a word of this night's visit to a human soul.”

I hesitated.

“I cannot bind myself by any such covenant. The relations between physician and patient are of course confidential; but—”

The carriage abruptly stopped here, and the door was swung open. At the same instant something cold touched my temples—it was the muzzle of a pistol. I recoiled in horror.

“You surely would not murder me?”

“Your promise Doctor!”

“I promise!” I gasped, recoiling once more from the chilling touch of cold steel at my temples.

“Very well. Come!”

I was led up a narrow walk, through a doorway, into a narrow room, where the bandage was removed from my eyes.

The spot was very familiar to me—a ruinous cottage, long since abandoned to decay, in the very heart of dense, swampy woods. How the carriage had ever reached it I was at a loss to know. Upon a pile of straw, hurriedly thrown into the corner of the moldering floor, lay a prostrate figure, moaning at every breath. His face was concealed by a handkerchief, and the blood was slowly dripping from a gun shot wound just above the ankle—a wound that had been clumsily bandaged by some unskillful hand. Moreover, there was a dark red stain upon the straw where his head lay, and his light brown hair was matted with coagulated drops. Two or three men stood around, with rude masks of black cloth drawn over their faces, in which three slits were cut for the eyes and mouth, and a female figure knelt beside the heap of straw, veiled closely.

The men silently made way for me as I advanced into the apartment, and held their lanterns so the lurid light should fall full upon the strange patient, as silently I stooped, and critically examined the wounds.

“Well?” asked my carriage companion.

“I can do nothing. The man must die.”

“Nonsense! A mere bullet wound through the leg—what does that amount to?” hurriedly gasped the man.

“In itself not much; but that blow upon the skull must prove fatal.”

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A low, half suppressed cry broke from the woman opposite; she tore the veil from her face, as if she could not breathe through its heavy folds, revealing features as white and beautiful in their marble agony as so much sculptured stone. Large, dark eyes—hair like coiled gold, catching strange gleams from the shifting lanterns—and a broad, smooth brow—it was a face you see but once in a whole lifetime.

And yet, in the midst of her distress, she never spoke.

“At least you can do *something* for him, Doctor,” said my interlocutor, impatiently. “Don’t let us waste time here.”

As I proceeded in my ministrations, the moaning grew fainter and fainter, the convulsive movements became scarcely perceptible. A faint gleam of hope lighted up the face of the woman who knelt with clasped hands opposite; she looked appealingly at me.

“He is better—he is surely better?”

“He will be better soon,” I answered, moved to pity in spite of myself. “He cannot live half an hour longer.”

The horror of that sepulchral silence that fell upon us as my accents died away—shall I ever forget it? And five minutes afterwards the breathing, spasmodic and painful to hear, died into eternal stillness.

The woman lifted the corner of the handkerchief, and gazed upon the ghastly face.

“Oh, my God! He is dead!”

Her clear, agonized voice was ringing in my ears as they led me back into the darkness of the night. I felt a bank note pressed into my hand as I entered the carriage once more.

“Doctor, you have done your best; it is not your fault that your efforts have not been more successful. Remember, you are pledged to secrecy!”

The next moment I was whirling swiftly through the November midnight, with the strange, unquiet feeling of one wakened suddenly from a startling dream. Yet it was no dream; alas! It was a startling reality.

The carriage stopped at a cross-road near the village.

“Please to alight here, sir,” said the driver. “You are not far from home.”

I obeyed, and stood listening in the middle of the road, while the noise of the carriage wheels died away, losing its distinctness in the shriek of the restless winds. And the clock in the village church tolled out the hour of “ONE!”

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Late as it was, however, my office was open and lighted up; the servant from Haddenleigh Hall had just ridden up to the door.

“If you please, Doctor, you are wanted immediately at the Hall. The judge said you were to ride my horse, if yours was not already saddled, and I can walk, so there will be not time lost.”

I mechanically mounted the noble animal that stood waiting for me and rode off, rather glad of an opportunity to revolve in my mind the singular adventure that had that evening befallen me.

Haddenleigh stood a little back from the road, on a magnificent knoll crowned with century old chestnuts and beeches, and I reached the broad stone steps in about half an hour, by dint of rapid riding.

As I entered the vestibule Judge Hadden, who had been pacing up and down the hall in a perfect agony of impatience, came to meet me.

“Is that you, Dr. Meller? I thought you would never come. We're in a pretty state of confusion here. Burglars in the house—my wife's set of diamonds gone—nobody knows what else—but old Hopkins left his sign manual on one of the fellows. They *must* be caught; they can't escape far. For you see—”

“Yes, but Judge Hadden—”

“O, aye—I understand—you want to see your patient. It's Hopkins the butler; he got an ugly blow on the left arm—and afterwards, Doctor, I really wish you'd give me something to quiet my nerves a little. My wife went herself for Dr. Maynard—no offence, Meller, but he's had more experience than you—but he was out. She has only just returned. I couldn't very well leave Hopkins. I tell you, sir, the mischief has been to pay.”

Hopkins, the butler, was as voluble as his master, and ten times as circumstantial, and by the time I had set his broken fore-arm, I was pretty well in possession of all the particulars of the attempted burglary of Haddenleigh.

And, thinking of my midnight patient when life had ebbed out upon the pile of straw, I felt a strange guiltiness as I listened to Judge Hadden's eager conjectures as to the whereabouts of the desperadoes who had fled.

“And now, Doctor, you'll take a glass of wine?” said the hospitable old judge, ushering me into the library.

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It was brightly lighted, and warm with the crimson glow of a genial fire, before which, in a singularly graceful attitude, sat a woman wrapped in the gorgeous folds of an Indian shawl.

“My wife, Doctor. Isabel, my love, this is Dr. Meller.”

We stood before one another in silence; I could not speak, for I knew that I was looking into the startled, agonized eyes of the woman who had knelt scarcely an hour ago by the dying couch in the desolate cottage—Judge Haddon's new wife, of whose beauty I had heard so much.

The judge talked on, but I heard not a word that he said. I could not but marvel at the wonderful self-possession of the woman, who smiled and looked grave and said “Yes” and “No” in just the right places.

“To be sure,” the judge was saying, as I woke into a sort of consciousness of his voice, “the loss of Isabel's diamonds is something serious, but of course we shall recover them again. Only, my love, it was rather careless of you to leave them on the drawing-room table.”

“It *was* careless,” replied Mrs. Hadden calmly. “Doctor, are not you going? Judge, you have forgotten that curious old English book you were wanting to show Dr. Meller.”

“I had entirely forgotten it,” ejaculated the judge. “I'll get it in half a minute, and you can take it home with you, Meller.”

As the door closed behind the honest old gentleman, Mrs. Hadden glided up to me and placed her cold hand on mine—it was like the touch of an icicle.

“Doctor, you have my secret—you surely will not betray it?”

“I am pledged to silence, Madam,” I returned coldly; “but this deceit—”

“It is not my fault, Doctor,” wailed the woman, “it is my *fate*. How I endure it I scarcely know; were I to pause and think I should go mad. The man who died tonight was my son! Judge Hadden knows nothing of my first marriage, nor of this dreadful secret of my son's crime that has weighed me down for years. Time and again I have thought to escape from it, but it has followed upon my footsteps like a doom. Tonight closes that chapter of my life—oh, God! how dreadfully! But my secret is safe—the diamonds provided for that.”

“But your husband, Mrs. Hadden!”

She covered her pallid, beautiful face with her hands.

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“I know what you would say, Dr. Meller. I love him and honor him beyond all men; but what can I do? Believe me, I have never willingly wronged nor deceived him. I never dreamed of—of—”

She paused abruptly. Judge Hadden was entering the room, and the smiling, casual remark she addressed to him filled my heart with amazement—almost admiration. Rachael herself could not have been a better actress.

I rode home to my blue-eyed little Eleanor, feeling, as I entered the snug sitting room, as if I were returning to the homely, happy atmosphere of every-day life. But I never forgot the terrible excitement, the feverish suspense of that November night.

The desperadoes who had attempted to rifle Haddenleigh Hall were never detected or taken—all trace of them seemed to have vanished utterly out of the earth.

And were it not for the bank-note which had most liberally recompensed my services, and the everlasting witness borne by Mrs. Hadden's lovely, startled face, I should almost have been tempted to fancy that all the events of that marvelous November midnight were the fragments of a dream.

This was my adventure—the first and last that ever crossed the pathway of my life.

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