

The Dalton Mystery
by Anna Sheilds

I knew there was a mystery in Ralph Dalton's house, a shadow over his life, as certainly as I knew that he loved me, and tried to conquer his love. It was a miserable joy to me to encounter him, to make him fall in love with me over again, when I knew he had been hiding away, battling with my influence over him, striving—and vainly—to thrust me out of his heart.

It was no boy and girl infatuation, for I was twenty-three when I inherited Wolfston from my uncle; a stately old house, with extensive grounds, named from some old-world estate in our family. I found a housekeeper, and brought with me a companion, a widow of sixty, Mrs. Latimer, and we settled down in the new house very happily. There was no lack of pleasant society, and I had attention from many gentlemen residing near us. But the first person to welcome me was Ralph Dalton, who had been my uncle's close friend for years, and who lived upon the next place to mine. He held for me some private letters, some jewelry of my grandmother's, and other little matters uncle felt it best to confide to private keeping, and after his trust was over he came again and again, until we loved each other. Then he ceased his visits, and I met him only by chance, if a persistent effort on my part could be called so.

What did I love in him? He was many years older than myself—forty I should judge—without great personal attraction. His features were large and gave an impression of strength; he was tall and broad-shouldered. I have heard him called an ugly man, but his large, melancholy brown eyes were beautiful. He was grave to sadness, and reserved to a fault; yet once the ice of his reticence was broken, he could converse easily and gracefully upon any topic, passing far beyond my poor attainments in the scope of his study and the wide range of his reading. He was as gentle as a woman, and his voice, full, rich and exquisitely modulated, was perfect music. I loved him utterly—I who had been cold to all suitors, and self-resolved to maintain ever my maiden freedom.

What did he love in me? Something that was a reflex of his own nobility, for I was commonplace enough elsewhere. With him I wakened to new thoughts of philanthropy, of self-culture, and my whole soul was elevated and found strength in intercourse with his. I was fair of face, they told me who wooed me, and I was glad if Ralph's eyes found pleasure in my beauty,

But I had not been a week at Wolfston before I heard of some mystery in Ralph's home.

It had never received a pretty name, but was spoken of simply as "Dalton's." The house was large, yet no visitor ever stopped there. Ralph was reputed wealthy, yet he offered no hospitality, even one meal, to his friends.

He found rest and pleasure with us, knowing we could not visit him, and I think our intercourse was a bright, happy one to him, lifting him out of some habitual melancholy, until he wakened to the knowledge that he loved me, and was terror-stricken.

Just in one flash of his soft eyes, one inflection of his harmonious voice, I read his secret, and answered it. In a moment he was ice! He apologized for having forgotten the respect due to me, and with stiff, white lips, and a choked, hard tone I had never heard pass his lips before, he bade me farewell and was gone.

I was stunned, then enraged! How dared he, I thought, win my love to scorn it! Then I wept for him. I knew my pain was less than his, because his nature was deeper, more intense in all things than mine.

I would not pine for any man, I thought, and dashed into every gayety available in our circle. But my flirtations were wasted, as he did not see them, and my heart was sick for a look from his tender eyes. I blushed for myself when I stole out at dusk and crossed our garden to look in at the window of his study to watch him. He was paler, graver than ever, bending over his books for an hour at a time without turning a leaf, or walking up and down with folded arms and bowed head, musing painfully, as I could see by his rigid lips and stern brow.

I had been six months at Wolfston, and the snow covered the ground when Mrs. Latimer imparted to me the first piece of gossip I ever heard fall from her lips.

“You remember that Mr. Dalton who came here so often when we were first here?” she asked me, as we lingered over a late breakfast.

I nodded assent.

“My dear, he has a crazy wife shut up in that gloomy house of his.”

“Nonsense!” I said, sharply, while my brain seemed aflame.

“But Mrs. Reynolds told me! She says that Mrs. Dalton has a whole suit of upper rooms, two women to wait upon her, every care and indulgence, but that she is a violent maniac.”

“But he would not pass himself off for a single man—” I began.

“Who ever heard him say whether he was married or single?” was the reply. “He never talked about himself.”

Which was strictly true.

So this was the solution of the mystery! This was the reason why, when we met in the woods or lanes, he was restrained and cold, until, little by little, I woke the love-light in his eyes, the tender tones of his voice, and was happy, until some warning roused him to his own happiness, and he would leave me abruptly, as if caught in some net hard to break.

A mad wife! Truly I had played a noble part to win the love that belonged to the poor creature wasting her life a prisoner in her own house! I was humbled to the very dust, though conscious of my own innocence of any intention of wronging her. My heart ached for both, for his generous devotion, his involuntary faithlessness; and for her—oh, how I pitied her—his wife, and mad!

But I had my task now—to conquer the miserable love in my own heart, to tear away, one by one, the sweet dreams I had cherished of the time when I would break down the barrier that separated us, and win from Ralph the assurance of his love. I would not cross a grave to my own happiness, and what but death could free him?

I would not love him, but oh, how my heart ached for his misery! If only he could be my brother, that I might assure him of my sympathy, comfort him, give him some womanly care in his desolated home. I would wake sobbing from dreams of his pain. I stole often to the hedge in the garden and watched how he grew paler and sadder, and my prayers for him were more earnest than they had ever been for myself.

It was after the New Year festivities, and I had shaken hands with Ralph at my reception, and smiled into his haggard face with what I felt was a very wintry imitation of joyous greeting. I had crept away to weep after all my guests were gone, and Mrs. Latimer had told me—“It was all quite perfect, my dear; but you look pale and tired. You had better sleep late to-morrow.”

And I had tossed sleeplessly till dawn. A bright winter dawn, with the sun beating on the hard, frozen ground, and not a breath of wind stirring. I was up early and out. The room seemed to stifle me.

“I stole down stairs, before even the servants were out of their rooms, and wrapping myself in a heavy cloak, and with a fleecy white scarf about my head, I went to walk. Perhaps this feverish unrest would be quieted in the crisp winter air.

I struck into a grove of trees that stood on my own grounds, and was pacing slowly forward, when I heard a stealthy step beside me, and turning quickly, saw a woman keeping near me, watching me.

My very heart seemed to cease its pulsations, for she was richly dressed in a loose, flowing garment of silk, quilted and warm, but bare-headed, and with only thin slippers on her slender feet. Her eyes, restless and wild, told of mental wandering, and her hair heavily streaked with gray, her wrinkled cheeks and bent figure seemed to tell an eloquent story of premature age and suffering. Every detail confirmed me in my recognition of Mrs. Dalton.

“Hush!” she said, coming close to me. “If you make a noise they will find me and shut me up. And I cannot go to Ralph if I am shut up. Day and night he calls me to come to him, and the

doors are barred so that I cannot go.”

I put my hand upon her arm, saying gently:

“But if you go home Ralph is there.”

“No, he went away, long ago—so very long. They told me he was dead.” She whispered. “Did you hear he was dead?”

“No, he is not dead,” I answered.

“Why does he not come, then?”

I heard, still far off, a step I knew well.

“Perhaps he will come soon,” I said. “Shall we wait here for him?”

The step came nearer, then turned into another path.

“Does he know we are here?” she asked, with wistful, pleading eyes.

“Suppose you call!” I answered.

In a moment she obeyed me.

“Ralph, dear Ralph. I am here!” she cried.

Quickly the steps followed the voice, and Ralph Dalton came towards us.

But the woman clung to me, sobbing out:

“He will shut me up!”

Then Ralph spoke, gently, tenderly:

“Mother, you will be ill again! Come home with me!”

Mother! His mother! I could not help it. My heart gave such a glad bound, my lips would follow its dictates.

“Oh, Ralph, is this your mother?” I cried.

“Yes,” he answered, gravely, “my widowed mother, who searches in vain for her husband, dead ten years ago.”

“He is not dead!” Mrs. Dalton cried. “How could he call me if he was dead? You told me he was not dead!” she said, looking at me.

“I thought she meant you,” I answered to Ralph’s questioning eyes, “when she said Ralph.”

“I was named for my father,” he answered. “Come, mother, come with me.”

But she clung to me, and I whispered:

“Lead the way; we will follow you,” and so, supporting his mother, now feeble with fatigue, I entered Ralph’s house for the first time.

Past the rooms where he lived, cheerless and cold, we went up the stairs to a floor luxuriously furnished, where two women were already pouring out apologies for their neglect of their charge.

Ralph, with a few stern words, left them, and I remained with his mother until she slept, worn out with wandering for hours, as we ascertained later.

Then I went down stairs to the library. Ralph was there; and upon his face was the light of some new resolve. In short phrases, full of deep earnestness, he told me at last of his love.

“My father was fatally hurt, my mother injured, as you see, by a railway accident,” he said; “but before he died my father exacted from me a promise to care for my mother myself. He lived several days after receiving the wounds that caused his death, and in that time we knew that my mother’s reason was gone for life. To-day she is quiet, to-morrow she may be violent, raving, a sight of horror. Could I ask any woman I loved to share my life, my care?”

“Yes,” I answered frankly; “for if she loved you, it would be her happiness to give you comfort, to lighten this burden of pain.”

He saw that I was in earnest, that it was no girlish enthusiasm, but a woman’s devotion I offered him, and clasped me by the hand.

“Can you bear it?” he asked.

“Loving you, I can,” I answered.

But, after all, it was not required of me. Mrs. Dalton took a heavy cold from that night of exposure and wandering, and in less than a month from that January morning, her life-seeking was over and she had gone to find her “Ralph” in a brighter world.

But my Ralph has been my husband for five long years, and his face has lost its careworn

gravity, his voice its monotone of pain, and Wolfston is a home of peace and happiness, where there is no sorrow, no painful mystery.

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