

The Ball At Dithmar's

The name of Dithmar has been known in N— almost from its foundation, and members of that family had filled with honor many responsible positions in its gift. At the time of which I write, the head of the family was one Joseph Dithmar, a retired manufacturer of about sixty, a gentleman of culture as well as fortune. Mr. Dithmar's household circle, besides himself, then consisted of his wife, by some years his junior, his son, Arthur, a young man of twenty, and two daughters, Helen and Mary. Helen was twenty-six, and though by no means ill-favored, bade fair always to remain a spinster of her own volition.

Mary, on the contrary, though much younger than her sister, did not share this strange aversion to marriage, and that was perhaps the reason that I had maintained for so long my acquaintance with and my friendship for the family. Mary was the belle of N—, and well merited the position on the score both of personal and intellectual beauty. She had numerous gentlemen friends, as was natural, but none that I considered my rivals.

There was, indeed, a certain Harry Duff—a sort of brainless, fashionable popinjay—who aspired to her favor, but his pretensions appeared so ridiculous to me that I did not give either him or them much thought or consideration. Besides, I had old Mr. Dithmar's favor, and that went a long way toward strengthening my position and my complacency. Mary, too, seemed to lean toward me.

This was the state of affairs, when, one day in the winter of 1867, I received an invitation to a ball at Dithmar's. Now, this invitation was nothing uncommon, but the fact that the note was written and signed by Mary Dithmar herself was significant—at least so I thought.

Time wore on, and at length the eventful evening of the ball came round, and I was in my room at home dressing for the occasion.

Suddenly the door bell rang, and in a moment after the servant announced that Mr. Duff was below and wished to see me.

He came into the chamber and threw himself heavily down in an easy chair, stretching his legs out upon the carpet in front of him, and resting his hands by the thumbs in the arraholes of his waistcoat.

I was shaving, and as I turned round, razor in hand, I saw that Mr. Duff was flushed in the face, and had evidently been drinking somewhat deeply. I was astonished, for I knew that he, too, had been invited to the ball.

“Simpson,” said Duff, in thick tones, “been to a dinner party and miscalculated capacity. Can't go to ball, and so come to pair off with you.”

“Duff,” said [I] advancing half way into the intervening space between us, “my good fellow you are out of your senses! Do you think that we are members of Congress or United States Senators?”

“I don't think anything of the kind,” he replied, with a drunken laugh, “but I want to pair off with

you.”

At first I was rather amused at the situation, and talked soothingly to the man, but at length, my stock of patience growing exhausted, I became slightly angry; and, turning from my visitor, I abruptly continued my preparations for departure. When I was ready to go, I said to Duff:

“If you have been a fool I can’t help it; and if by pairing off you mean that you want me to stay away from Dithmar’s tonight because you have made an ass of yourself, I tell you frankly that I do not mean to gratify you.”

I held the door open as I spoke, and hat in hand waited for him to get up.

He did not move.

“Duff,” said I, “don’t you see I’m waiting for you?”

But the heat of the chamber had been too much for him, and even as I spoke Duff’s head sank forward upon his breast—he was asleep. I left him where he was, and telling the servant not to disturb him, went to the ball.

The sisters never looked more beautiful, or appeared to greater advantage than on that night, and Mary especially shone a brilliant star.

At length supper was over. I had accompanied Mary to the room and from it, and was standing again with her in the ballroom apart from the rest. We were conversing in whispers. What we said I will not repeat; it is enough to say I played Romeo, and that a kind Juliet was not wanting.

Suddenly at the upper end of the room there was a struggle and some confusion, and in the midst of it all a stout, shaggy-headed, elderly man, pushing aside the hands that sought to stay him, strode into the place, and stood like a rock in the center of the apartment, gaping from side to side with a harsh, disagreeable leer. The ladies screamed, and several of them fainted. Mary Dithmar shrank back and clung to me in sheer terror.

“Who is it?” I asked, when I had recovered from my temporary astonishment.

But Mary could not reply. Speechless and pale as a ghost, she gazed at the intruder like one turned to stone. The whole Dithmar family stood as if transfixed.

“Bah!” cried the man, sternly, “so this is what you do while you think me dead, eh, Joseph Dithmar? But you see I am alive yet, and am come at last to denounce your crimes and those of your fiendish family. You thought you had murdered me, eh? Well, it wasn’t your fault that I am alive. Your hired assassins betrayed you. Why don’t you welcome me? Where’s your hospitality?”

The guests stared at one another and at their host at this speech, in stupid amazement. At length Dithmar grew in a measure calm, and addressing his friends, said, in an unsteady voice:

“Gentlemen, ladies, friends, this is an unfortunate scene; try to forget it. I will explain at another

time. Now please leave us.”

Still the intruder stood undisturbed and frowning in his position, and Arthur, who had sprung forward toward him as if to eject him or administer personal chastisement, was caught and held midway by his father. It was a strange and incomprehensible affair and the guests evidently did not know what to make of it, as by ones and twos they slowly departed.

“Mary,” said I to my companion, “let me take you into the air—anywhere from here. This is awful.”

“No,” she replied, firmly, “I must remain with my family and share the worst with them.”

And with gentle force she led me to the outer door. I went home astounded. What could all this mean? Had there been fraud and attempted murder by the family I had so long revered? I could not believe it. I resolved to have my doubts cleared by personal explanation the following morning.

Duff had vacated my apartments during my absence, and, thank Heaven! I was alone with my thoughts and my sorrows. I went to bed and dreamed. My dreams were in the last degree awful.

I awoke in a cold sweat, and found that it was daybreak. I rose, dressed myself, and hurried to Dithmar’s. Judge of my surprise, on approaching the house, to find it open, and the lights of the night before all still burning; the house had evidently been open ever since the sudden exodus of the guests. I shuddered, and a nameless presentiment of evil fastened on me as I entered the mansion. It was deserted. I went into the ball-room; it was silent and empty. I searched chamber after chamber—all vacant. I called aloud on Mary, on all the late occupants; no response; and I threw myself down in a chair and groaned.

Just then I heard a heavy step near me, and in marched the intruder of last night in Dithmar’s dressing-gown and slippers, calmly smoking a short, black, stupid-looking clay pipe. He took the pipe from his mouth and surveyed me coolly and deliberately, but said not a word. All of the anger in my nature was aroused at the sight of this accursed wretch, and I went toward him with a look of rage. He put his pipe back into his mouth, and, folding his arms over his breast, continued his survey, still without a word.

“Devil!” I cried, “who are you, and what is your fiendish power over this house and this family?”

The smoker smiled, and only said:

“Do you like music?”

Was ever such a question asked at such a time! I was thunderstruck, and remained with my hands clenched, silently staring.

“Do you like music?”

The question was repeated; and without waiting this time for an answer, the strange being glided to the open piano, and sitting on the stool, pipe still in mouth, played gracefully and elegantly

some of the wild, stormy music of “Robert le Diable.” Then, having concluded his instrumentation, he sang, in a soft and almost feminine voice, “*Robert, Robert toi que j’aime,*” from the same great work of Meyerbeer. The man was evidently forgotten in the musician; for when the performer opened his lips to give vent to the first words of the song, his pipe tumbled from between his teeth, and was dashed to fragments on the floor. I remained wonder smitten and still. At length the song being concluded, the man turned toward me as if for approbation.

Among my other qualities I was an enthusiast in music; and full of horror for the individual before me as I was, I could not help inwardly admiring his mastery over the science of harmony; but this feeling was but momentary, and as soon as I could sufficiently collect myself I demanded where the Dithmars had gone to so suddenly, and reiterated my inquiry as to who he was. He wheeled round on the piano stool and looked at me fixedly.

“Is it possible you don’t know *me*?” he said, in a tone of quiet surprise.

I assured him that he was a perfect stranger to me. He appeared puzzled, and then replied:

“I am the real Joseph Dithmar.”

“Who then, pray, was he who until last night was known here by that name?”

“Bogus, bogus,” answered the man, turning to the piano and drumming with his hand.

“Where is he, and where is his family?”

“How should I know? They treated me ill; but now that I am restored to my rights they may escape—yes, they may escape.” He said this with a dreamy air, and still drumming.

I knew not what to think, what to do. Could this man’s story be true? Certain it was that the Dithmars, one and all, had flown, and that was in favor of its truth; besides, I remembered the effect on the family of the intruder’s first appearance—the blank amazement, the utter crush, Dithmar’s unquestioning submission, the dismissal of the guests, Mary’s last words at parting with me—and I, too, began to admit suspicion and doubt. Then I reflected that this was cruel and unkind in me, and in a second I bethought me of legal aid. Just at that instant one of the outer windows was raised from without and at it appeared the head and shoulders of Duff.

“Hallo!” cried the worthy, “what’s up?”

I went to him and whispered:

“Not a word. Come in and watch this man until I return.”

Duff, amazed, and not knowing what to make of the aspect of things, obeyed. I ran for the constable. I found that officer, and armed with the requisite authority, we were soon on our way back to the Dithmar mansion to solve the problem that had been presented by law. At the door, much to my surprise and joy, I met Mrs. Dithmar in her bonnet.

“Mr. Simpson,” said she, in a voice that yet had a tremble in it; “I am so glad you’ve come. It’s

all over; he's gone."

I dismissed the constable on Mrs. Dithmar's assurance that there was no further need of his services, and went in. Duff and the lady were the only persons present. My late companion, the intruder, was nowhere to be seen.

"What's become of him?" I asked.

Duff made answer with a laugh:

"His keepers took him off."

"What?" cried I, with a look that demanded explanation.

"Mr. Simpson," said Mrs. Dithmar, "that poor creature who has so sorely troubled us is my husband's demented brother. He has been confined in a lunatic asylum for some years, and none of our children have ever seen him before. Yesterday he escaped and came direct to N—, and at night, attracted by the lights, he broke in upon us here. His coming to our house was purely accidental, for he did not know, until he saw us, that we resided at N—. Once among us, his malady (which takes the form you saw) broke out afresh; and knowing from experience that the poor man is sometimes as fierce and bloody-thirsty as a savage, we dismissed the guests and then left the house temporarily, while Mr. Dithmar went to the asylum for the keepers. Fearing to alarm or arouse the maniac, we let the lights burn, and left him in possession. The rest is soon told. The keepers, Mr. Dithmar and the lunatic, have just this instant gone, and now, if you please, you and Mr. Duff may go and bring the girls home. They are at E—'s, on the main street."

Thus ended the strange story—the curious adventure that sprang out of the "Ball at Dithmar's"—and now, after lapse of years as I think of it, I shudder as I speculate on what might have chanced had fortune not favored me while I was alone with him and was striving with all my might to irritate a dangerous and unscrupulous maniac.

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