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The Haunted Hotel

TO
MR & MRS SEBASTIAN SCHLESINGER*
IN REMEMBRANCE OF MUCH KINDNESS
AND OF MANY HAPPY DAYS

THE FIRST PART

I

IN THE YEAR 1860, the reputation of Doctor Wybrow as a London physician reached its highest point. It was reported on good authority that he was in receipt of one of the largest incomes derived from the practice of medicine in modern times.

One afternoon, towards the close of the London season, the doctor had just taken his luncheon after a specially hard morning's work in his consulting room, and with a formidable list of visits to patients at their own houses to fill up the rest of his day, when the servant announced that a lady wished to speak to him.

"Who is she?" the doctor asked. "A stranger?"

"Yes, sir."

"I see no strangers out of consulting hours. Tell her what the hours are, and send her away."

"I have told her, sir."

"Well?"

"And she won't go."

"Won't go?" The doctor smiled as he repeated the words. He was a humorist in his way, and there was an absurd side to the situation which rather amused him. "Has this obstinate lady given you her name?" he enquired.

"No, sir. She refused to give any name – she said she wouldn't keep you five minutes, and the matter was too important to wait till tomorrow. There she is in the consulting room – and how to get her out again is more than I know."

Doctor Wybrow considered for a moment. His knowledge of women (professionally speaking) rested on the ripe experience of more than thirty years: he had met with them in all their varieties – especially the variety which knows nothing of the value of time and never hesitates at sheltering itself behind the privileges of its sex. A glance at his watch informed him that he must soon

begin his rounds among the patients who were waiting for him at their own houses. He decided forthwith on taking the only wise course that was open under the circumstances. In other words, he decided on taking to flight.

“Is the carriage at the door?” he asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“Very well. Open the house door for me without making any noise, and leave the lady in undisturbed possession of the consulting room. When she gets tired of waiting, you know what to tell her. If she asks when I am expected to return, say that I dine at my club and spend the evening at the theatre. Now then, softly, Thomas! If your shoes creak, I am a lost man.”

He noiselessly led the way into the hall, followed by the servant on tiptoe.

Did the lady in the consulting room suspect him? Or did Thomas’s shoes creak and was her sense of hearing unusually keen? Whatever the explanation may be, the event that actually happened was beyond all doubt. Exactly as Doctor Wybrow passed his consulting room, the door opened – the lady appeared on the threshold and laid her hand on his arm.

“I entreat you, sir, not to go away without letting me speak to you first.”

The accent was foreign – the tone was low and firm. Her fingers closed gently, and yet resolutely, on the doctor’s arm.

Neither her language nor her action had the slightest effect in inclining him to grant her request. The influence that instantly stopped him on the way to his carriage was the silent influence of her face. The startling contrast between the corpse-like pallor of her complexion and the overpowering life and light, the glittering metallic brightness in her large black eyes, held him literally spellbound. She was dressed in dark colours, with perfect taste; she was of middle height, and (apparently) of middle age – say a year or two over thirty. Her lower features – the nose, mouth and chin – possessed the fineness and delicacy of form which is oftener seen among women of foreign races than among women of English

birth. She was unquestionably a handsome person – with the one serious drawback of her ghastly complexion, and with the less noticeable defect of a total want of tenderness in the expression of her eyes. Apart from his first emotion of surprise, the feeling she produced in the doctor may be described as an overpowering feeling of professional curiosity. The case might prove to be something entirely new in his professional experience. “It looks like it,” he thought, “and it’s worth waiting for.”

She perceived that she had produced a strong impression of some kind upon him, and dropped her hold on his arm.

“You have comforted many miserable women in your time,” she said. “Comfort one more today.”

Without waiting to be answered, she led the way back into the room.

The doctor followed her and closed the door. He placed her in the patients’ chair, opposite the windows. Even in London the sun, on that summer afternoon, was dazzlingly bright. The radiant light flowed in on her. Her eyes met it unflinchingly, with the steely steadiness of the eyes of an eagle. The smooth pallor of her unwrinkled skin looked more fearfully white than ever. For the first time for many a long year past, the doctor felt his pulse quicken its beat in the presence of a patient.

Having possessed herself of his attention, she appeared, strangely enough, to have nothing to say to him. A curious apathy seemed to have taken possession of this resolute woman. Forced to speak first, the doctor merely enquired, in the conventional phrase, what he could do for her.

The sound of his voice seemed to rouse her. Still looking straight at the light, she said abruptly: “I have a painful question to ask.”

“What is it?”

Her eyes travelled slowly from the window to the doctor’s face. Without the slightest outward appearance of agitation, she put the “painful question” in these extraordinary words:

“I want to know, if you please, whether I am in danger of going mad.”

Some men might have been amused, and some might have been alarmed. Doctor Wybrow was only conscious of a sense of disappointment. Was this the rare case that he had anticipated, judging rashly by appearances? Was the new patient only a hypochondriacal woman, whose malady was a disordered stomach and whose misfortune was a weak brain?* “Why do you come to *me*?” he asked sharply. “Why don’t you consult a doctor whose special employment is the treatment of the insane?”

She had her answer ready on the instant.

“I don’t go to a doctor of that sort,” she said, “for the very reason that he *is* a specialist: he has the fatal habit of judging everybody by lines and rules of his own laying down. I come to *you* because my case is outside of all lines and rules, and because you are famous in your profession for the discovery of mysteries in disease. Are you satisfied?”

He was more than satisfied – his first idea had been the right idea, after all. Besides, she was correctly informed as to his professional position. The capacity which had raised him to fame and fortune was his capacity (unrivalled among his brethren) for the discovery of remote disease.

“I am at your disposal,” he answered. “Let me try if I can find out what is the matter with you.”

He put his medical questions. They were promptly and plainly answered, and they led to no other conclusion than that the strange lady was, mentally and physically, in excellent health. Not satisfied with questions, he carefully examined the great organs of life. Neither his hand nor his stethoscope could discover anything that was amiss. With the admirable patience and devotion to his art which had distinguished him from the time when he was a student, he still subjected her to one test after another. The result was always the same. Not only was there no tendency to brain disease – there was not even a perceptible derangement of the nervous system. “I can find nothing the matter with you,” he said. “I can’t even account for the extraordinary pallor of your complexion. You completely puzzle me.”

“The pallor of my complexion is nothing,” she answered a little impatiently. “In my early life I had a narrow escape from death by poisoning. I have never had a complexion since – and my skin is so delicate I cannot paint without producing a hideous rash. But that is of no importance. I wanted your opinion given positively. I believed in you, and you have disappointed me.” Her head dropped on her breast. “And so it ends!” she said to herself bitterly.

The doctor’s sympathies were touched. Perhaps it might be more correct to say that his professional pride was a little hurt. “It may end in the right way yet,” he remarked, “if you choose to help me.”

She looked up again with flashing eyes. “Speak plainly,” she said. “How can I help you?”

“Plainly, madam, you come to me as an enigma, and you leave me to make the right guess by the unaided efforts of my art. My art will do much, but not all. For example, something must have occurred – something quite unconnected with the state of your bodily health – to frighten you about yourself, or you would never have come here to consult me. Is that true?”

She clasped her hands in her lap. “That is true!” she said eagerly. “I begin to believe in you again.”

“Very well. You can’t expect me to find out the moral cause which has alarmed you. I can positively discover that there is no physical cause of alarm – and (unless you admit me to your confidence) I can do no more.”

She rose and took a turn in the room. “Suppose I tell you?” she said. “But, mind, I shall mention no names!”

“There is no need to mention names. The facts are all I want.”

“The facts are nothing,” she rejoined. “I have only my own impressions to confess – and you will very likely think me a fanciful fool when you hear what they are. No matter. I will do my best to content you – I will begin with the facts that you want. Take my word for it, *they* won’t do much to help you.”

She sat down again. In the plainest possible words, she began the strangest and wildest confession that had ever reached the doctor’s ears.

“IT IS ONE FACT, SIR, that I am a widow,” she said. “It is another fact that I am going to be married again.”

There she paused, and smiled at some thought that occurred to her. Doctor Wybrow was not favourably impressed by her smile – there was something at once sad and cruel in it. It came slowly, and it went away suddenly. He began to doubt whether he had been wise in acting on his first impression. His mind reverted to the commonplace patients and the discoverable maladies that were waiting for him with a certain tender regret.

The lady went on.

“My approaching marriage,” she said, “has one embarrassing circumstance connected with it. The gentleman whose wife I am to be was engaged to another lady when he happened to meet with me abroad – that lady, mind, being of his own blood and family, related to him as his cousin. I have innocently robbed her of her lover and destroyed her prospects in life. Innocently, I say, because he told me nothing of his engagement until after I had accepted him. When we next met in England – and when there was danger, no doubt, of the affair coming to my knowledge – he told me the truth. I was naturally indignant. He had his excuse ready: he showed me a letter from the lady herself, releasing him from his engagement. A more noble, a more high-minded letter I never read in my life. I cried over it – I who have no tears in me for sorrows of my own! If the letter had left him any hope of being forgiven, I would have positively refused to marry him. But the firmness of it – without anger, without a word of reproach, with heartfelt wishes even for his happiness – the firmness of it, I say, left him no hope. He appealed to my compassion – he appealed to his love for me. You know what women are. I too was soft-hearted – I said, ‘Very well – yes!’ In a week more (I tremble as I think of it) we are to be married.”

She did really tremble – she was obliged to pause and compose herself before she could go on. The doctor, waiting for more facts, began to fear that he stood committed to a long story. “Forgive me for reminding you that I have suffering persons waiting to see me,” he said. “The sooner you can come to the point, the better for my patients and for me.”

The strange smile – at once so sad and so cruel – showed itself again on the lady’s lips. “Every word I have said is to the point,” she answered. “You will see it yourself in a moment more.”

She resumed her narrative.

“Yesterday – you need fear no long story, sir: only yesterday – I was among the visitors at one of your English luncheon parties. A lady, a perfect stranger to me, came in late – after we had left the table and had retired to the drawing room. She happened to take a chair near me, and we were presented to each other. I knew her by name, as she knew me. It was the woman whom I had robbed of her lover, the woman who had written the noble letter. Now listen! You were impatient with me for not interesting you in what I said just now. I said it to satisfy your mind that I had no enmity of feeling towards the lady on my side. I admired her, I felt for her – I had no cause to reproach myself. This is very important, as you will presently see. On her side, I have reason to be assured that the circumstances had been truly explained to her, and that she understood I was in no way to blame. Now, knowing all these necessary things as you do, explain to me, if you can, why, when I rose and met that woman’s eyes looking at me, I turned cold from head to foot and shuddered and shivered, and knew what a deadly panic of fear was for the first time in my life.”

The doctor began to feel interested at last.

“Was there anything remarkable in the lady’s personal appearance?” he asked.

“Nothing whatever!” was the vehement reply. “Here is the true description of her: the ordinary English lady; the clear, cold blue eyes; the fine rosy complexion; the inanimately polite manner; the

large, good-humoured mouth; the too-plump cheeks and chin – these and nothing more.”

“Was there anything in her expression, when you first looked at her, that took you by surprise?”

“There was natural curiosity to see the woman who had been preferred to her, and perhaps some astonishment, also, not to see a more engaging and more beautiful person – both those feelings restrained within the limits of good breeding, and both not lasting for more than a few moments, so far as I could see. I say, ‘so far’ because the horrible agitation that she communicated to me disturbed my judgement. If I could have got to the door, I would have run out of the room, she frightened me so! I was not even able to stand up – I sank back in my chair. I stared horror-struck at the calm blue eyes that were only looking at me with a gentle surprise. To say they affected me like the eyes of a serpent is to say nothing. I felt her soul in them, looking into mine – looking, if such a thing can be, unconsciously to her own mortal self. I tell you my impression in all its horror and in all its folly! That woman is destined (without knowing it herself) to be the evil genius* of my life. Her innocent eyes saw hidden capabilities of wickedness in me that I was not aware of myself, until I felt them stirring under her look. If I commit faults in my life to come – if I am even guilty of crimes – she will bring the retribution without (as I firmly believe) any conscious exercise of her own will. In one indescribable moment I felt all this – and I suppose my face showed it. The good artless creature was inspired by a sort of gentle alarm for me. ‘I am afraid the heat of the room is too much for you – will you try my smelling bottle?’ I heard her say those kind words, and I remember nothing else – I fainted. When I recovered my senses, the company had all gone – only the lady of the house was with me. For the moment I could say nothing to her – the dreadful impression that I have tried to describe to you came back to me with the coming back of my life. As soon as I could speak, I implored her to tell me the whole truth about the woman whom I had supplanted. You see, I had a faint hope

that her good character might not really be deserved, that her noble letter was a skilful piece of hypocrisy – in short, that she secretly hated me, and was cunning enough to hide it. No! The lady had been her friend from her girlhood, was as familiar with her as if they had been sisters – knew her positively to be as good, as innocent, as incapable of hating anybody as the greatest saint that ever lived. My one last hope, that I had only felt an ordinary forewarning of danger in the presence of an ordinary enemy, was a hope destroyed for ever. There was one more effort I could make, and I made it. I went next to the man whom I am to marry. I implored him to release me from my promise. He refused. I declared I would break my engagement. He showed me letters from his sisters, letters from his brothers and his dear friends – all entreating him to think again before he made me his wife, all repeating reports of me in Paris, Vienna and London which are so many vile lies. ‘If you refuse to marry me,’ he said, ‘you admit that these reports are true – you admit that you are afraid to face society in the character of my wife.’ What could I answer? There was no contradicting him – he was plainly right: if I persisted in my refusal, the utter destruction of my reputation would be the result. I consented to let the wedding take place as we had arranged it – and left him. The night has passed. I am here, with my fixed conviction: that innocent woman is ordained to have a fatal influence over my life. I am here with my one question to put, to the one man who can answer it. For the last time, sir, what am I – a demon who has seen the avenging angel, or only a poor madwoman, misled by the delusion of a deranged mind?”

Doctor Wybrow rose from his chair, determined to close the interview.

He was strongly and painfully impressed by what he had heard. The longer he had listened to her, the more irresistibly the conviction of the woman’s wickedness had forced itself on him. He tried vainly to think of her as a person to be pitied – a person with a morbidly sensitive imagination, conscious of the capacities for evil which lie dormant in us all, and striving earnestly to open

her heart to the counter-influence of her own better nature: the effort was beyond him. A perverse instinct in him said, as if in words, "Beware how you believe in her!"

"I have already given you my opinion," he said. "There is no sign of your intellect being deranged, or being likely to be deranged, that medical science can discover – as *I* understand it. As for the impressions you have confided to me, I can only say that yours is a case (as I venture to think) for spiritual rather than for medical advice. Of one thing be assured: what you have said to me in this room shall not pass out of it. Your confession is safe in my keeping."

She heard him, with a certain dogged resignation, to the end.

"Is that all?" she asked.

"That is all," he answered.

She put a little paper packet of money on the table. "Thank you, sir. There is your fee."

With those words she rose. Her wild black eyes looked upward with an expression of despair so defiant and so horrible in its silent agony that the doctor turned away his head, unable to endure the sight of it. The bare idea of taking anything from her – not money only, but anything even that she had touched – suddenly revolted him. Still without looking at her, he said, "Take it back – I don't want my fee."

She neither heeded nor heard him. Still looking upward, she said slowly to herself, "Let the end come. I have done with the struggle: I submit."

She drew her veil over her face, bowed to the doctor and left the room.

He rang the bell and followed her into the hall. As the servant closed the door on her, a sudden impulse of curiosity – utterly unworthy of him, and at the same time utterly irresistible – sprang up in the doctor's mind. Blushing like a boy, he said to the servant, "Follow her home, and find out her name." For one moment the man looked at his master, doubting if his own ears had not deceived him. Doctor Wybrow looked back at him in silence. The

submissive servant knew what that silence meant – he took his hat and hurried into the street.

The doctor went back to the consulting room. A sudden revulsion of feeling swept over his mind. Had the woman left an infection of wickedness in the house, and had he caught it? What devil had possessed him to degrade himself in the eyes of his own servant? He had behaved infamously – he had asked an honest man, a man who had served him faithfully for years, to turn spy! Stung by the bare thought of it, he ran out into the hall again and opened the door. The servant had disappeared – it was too late to call him back. But one refuge from his contempt for himself was now open to him – the refuge of work. He got into his carriage and went his rounds among his patients.

If the famous physician could have shaken his own reputation, he would have done it that afternoon. Never before had he made himself so little welcome at the bedside. Never before had he put off until tomorrow the prescription which ought to have been written, the opinion which ought to have been given today. He went home earlier than usual – unutterably dissatisfied with himself.

The servant had returned. Doctor Wybrow was ashamed to question him. The man reported the result of his errand, without waiting to be asked.

“The lady’s name is the Countess Narona. She lives at—”

Without waiting to hear where she lived, the doctor acknowledged the all-important discovery of her name by a silent bend of the head, and entered his consulting room. The fee that he had vainly refused still lay in its little white paper covering on the table. He sealed it up in an envelope, addressed it to the “Poor Box” of the nearest police court and, calling the servant in, directed him to take it to the magistrate the next morning. Faithful to his duties, the servant waited to ask the customary question, “Do you dine at home today, sir?”

After a moment’s hesitation he said, “No, I shall dine at the club.”

The most easily deteriorated of all the moral qualities is the quality called "conscience". In one state of a man's mind, his conscience is the severest judge that can pass sentence on him. In another state, he and his conscience are on the best possible terms with each other in the comfortable capacity of accomplices. When Doctor Wybrow left his house for the second time, he did not even attempt to conceal from himself that his sole object, in dining at the club, was to hear what the world said of the Countess Narona.

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