

A Fascinating Detective Story by Horace Hutchinson

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she would have one more try to fool me. "It" she said. "Oh, I was just going for a little stroll. It's such a wonderful night, isn't it?"

"Yes," I said. "It's a very wonderful night. It's such a wonderful night that your lover Vibart's come all the way down from London again to enjoy it—that is, if he ever went there—the man who swore he'd never see you again—the man you swore you'd never see again. And here I find you now on your way out to meet him!"

She waited a minute then before she answered. I thought she would be down on the ground, on her knees, begging me. Instead of that she burst out and said, "Yes, I am going to meet him. Why shouldn't I go to meet him? I'm not going to submit to your tyranny"—she called it tyranny.

She went on then, she let herself go. I expect all she said was true, though God knows I had never come near suspecting a word of it before. God knows how I had been fooled. But she did not give me much chance of being fooled any longer. She tore all the pretence down then.

She told me she loved this man, she had loved him long before she ever knew me, she would have married him if he had any money or been able to support her, she never would have dreamt of marrying me if it had not been for the money and the position. How could I be such a fool as to think she would? But it was finished; it was all finished now.

There was the key, the key of my terrible house, the house she hated. She would never use it again. She never meant to come back. Whether she had really meant to elope with him or not I don't know, but she took the key and threw it away among the trees.

I don't know what happened to me. I don't think I was conscious what I was doing. I had gone out with murder in my heart, just as I had the knife to commit it with in my pocket. I went out intending to commit murder, but I intended to murder Vibart. I swear to God that I had not thought of murdering her, my wife, even then, as I snatched the knife from my pocket and struck.

I had no consciousness, as I say, of what I was doing. It was as if it was someone else that was acting and as if I was looking on and seeing it done. But I know that I struck and I know too—I had killed too many wounded animals not to know that the knife went right to the heart. I could not tell you whether at that moment I loved her or hated her the more. I loved her still—I know that—and in a way I hated both her and also hated myself because I still loved her. I despised myself for loving her.

But after the stroke she just gave a gasp and a sort of jump and fell. Her limbs hardly moved after she fell, she was dead in a moment.

And then, quite quietly, I drove the knife into the earth to clean the blood off it. I passed it a little through some grass. And then I put it back into the sheath again and into my pocket, and walked back to the house, quite quietly and collectedly.

When I went into the library I put the knife back into the drawer in the oak bureau, in its usual place, and as I shut the drawer I turned and saw Grainger in the room. When he came in I don't know; what he had seen I don't know.

I did not think of the knife again any more that night, but the next morning, after locking the library door, I took it out to see whether all traces of what I had done with it were gone, and I saw that it had been newly cleaned, probably that morning. And then I remembered that Grainger looked as if he had not been to bed the night before when Livesay gave the alarm. I think he must have been sitting up expecting something, perhaps expecting just what did come. I don't know how much he saw or how much he suspected.

I looked at his face and asked him a question once or twice, to lead him to tell me what he knew, but he never would, and his face is always like a mask. I believe he knows pretty well all, but he would never tell, not even if a dozen men were going to be hanged for the murder which he knew I did.

I know I committed murder, but so far as God's judgment of me goes it will be for Vibart's murder,

who is still alive, that He will condemn me. I was guilty of that, I know, for I went out purposely to kill him. I as good as murdered him. But my wife I did not murder in the sight of God, though I did in the judgment of men, for though I struck her with a knife and killed her I swear that I had no consciousness at the time of what I did. I have said so before, and I will say it again and again.

All the same, I did not feel any great sorrow for it as soon as I had done it. When I saw the dead body lying there at my feet all thought of Vibart in the Summer-house went out of my head. I quite forgot the job I had started out to do. I went back to the library, as I have said, and after Grainger had gone out—he had been bringing in the whiskey and syphon—I sat in the armchair and thought.

I thought and thought and gradually, I suppose, out of the dead state that my mind had been in, I began to think more clearly again. And as I began to think more clearly my love for my wife came back to me again, and none of the hate with it. I began to think of her as I had known her first, or I suppose I ought to say, as I had fancied her, so young and loving, or at least affectionate, or seeming affectionate to me. She was so young and lovely, and that brute—it was all his fault—he had that influence over her which she could not resist.

And then I began to think of her young dead body lying out there like that with the dew falling upon it and the night creatures, insects and mice and horrible things crawling about it. I could not bear it. It was awful to think of. I could not leave it lying there. Besides, I did want to see it again—the face and that young body that I had loved and did love. I couldn't bear to think of it lying there.

So I went out again. I had a silly idea that when I got to the turn I might not find it, after all—that it might turn out to be all a mistake, like a dream. But it wasn't. There was the body, the white figure.

I stooped over it. There was not a great deal of blood. It was all on the dress. It had taken it up so that the grass was not stained at all. I was able to lift her up, she was slender and light, and carry her easily without any of the blood coming on my clothes.

So I carried her to the Summer-house. I had no thought at all of Vibart, whether he would be there or not. He had gone altogether from my thoughts. As a matter of fact, he had left the Summer-house hours before, but I did not know that. I did not know how long I had been sitting in the library.

I laid my wife's body on the floor of the Summer-house. She would be safe there from the horrible creatures. And I did not suppose that she would be found till morning. Then I went back and went to bed and came out again when Livesay rang at the front door. He must have found her very soon after I laid her there.

That is all I have to write. But I will add this, that when I carried my wife's body, as I say, to the Summer-house, I had no idea of putting the suspicion of her death on Captain Vibart. He had gone clean out of my thoughts. I did



"Then I found out something about my wife and this man Vibart, which not only confirmed my suspicions, but made them all the worse—as bad as they could be."

not think of putting the blame on him or anyone else. I thought that the body would be found and no one would be proved to have killed her, and it would go down with a verdict of "Murdered by some one unknown." And that is how it would have been if it had not been for the girl, Matilda Manson, seeing Vibart there. He would never have been suspected at all if it had not been for that.

But then, when I saw that Vibart was in the trap, I thought I would leave him there for a time. I mean to leave him there till the last moment and then I shall make a full confession. If I am killed or anything before he is executed, then this will be read, and it can be put in evidence and he will be let off. But the law would not punish him for the wrong that he has done, so I am going to let it punish him, by mistake, for a wrong that he has not done.

It will serve him only right to be kept in prison and to think that he is going to be hanged, and I am glad that all this should happen to him. But I do not want him to be hanged for what I did, though I don't know that it would be any more than he deserves if he were to be. I do not think it would.

That is all I have to say.

There followed uncle's signature and the date.

CHAPTER XIX.

The End.

WHEN I had read this extraordinary confession I sat for a long time in the window seat without saying a word, just thinking over its revelations.

It made all the details absolutely clear; it did not leave a dusty corner in the whole. And a curious thing is that, as I read, and as I learned by degrees and sentence by sentence, the full horror of poor Uncle Ralph's act, it still did not occur to me to blame him very greatly in my mind.

An immense pity for him was the over-powering feeling. He was so infinitely better, and in every moral sense bigger, than either of these two people, one of whom he had set out to murder and the other of whom he actually had murdered. Yet both of them seemed to me like the sinners, and he, relatively, the saint.

And then it was so curious that a person so entirely simple and un-subtle as my uncle, writing in such very unpolished and un literary phrase, should have posed such really subtle moral and legal problems—his moral guilt of the murder of a man still alive, his moral blamelessness for the death of a woman, his own wife, whom he had murdered.

That was one curious problem, and another was his legal fiction by which he conceived the law doing so much better than it knew, achieving something like equity by its own portentous error, awarding to a malefactor the punishment he deserved, in the form of the preliminaries for the final penalty, decreed on him for a crime of which he was guiltless.

I had been so absorbed in reading and afterward in thinking that it was only gradually that the recollection came to me of the manner in which Uncle Ralph's confession—if that is the right word to use for it—had been brought to me. I glanced round. The little man in gray was sitting in his own immobile way in the depths of the armchair. He was scarcely visible.

Nevertheless he was the first to speak, although he had not said a word until now, from the moment when I began reading. He knew that my thought was turning to him and he said, to meet it:

"I have been mistaken in many cases before, Miss Carlton, but I have never been so entirely misled by the evidence as I have been in this case."

"It must have been Uncle Ralph, after all," I replied, "that I saw going out over the gravel that night. He was going to lay her body in the Summer-house."

"Undoubtedly it was," he agreed, "and it was Sir Ralph, too, when he first went to the Summer-house,

who made the first footprint beneath the window, the footprint that I ascribed to Grainger. At every turn of this affair, Miss Carlton, your intuition has been better than my reasoning."

"Unfortunately," I said, "but tell me, please, what does it mean—this?" I indicated Uncle Ralph's manuscript. "It was given to you. What shall you do with it?"

"It will have to be submitted, in the first place, to Captain Vibart's lawyers, and it will mean, without doubt, his free pardon. There can be no question of its authenticity. Sir Ralph handed it to me himself before he went to France, and you, if needed, or a hundred others, can testify to his handwriting and signature."

"And it will be made public—everybody will know what uncle did—after the way he died?"

"I don't know," said the little man. "In an ordinary way I should say it would all have to be made public. But the case is an extraordinary one, the times are extraordinary. Sir Ralph's end was extraordinary. So far as lies with me, but that means very little, I will try that it shall be kept secret."

"To the best of my knowledge it was 'The Mystery of the Summer-house,' as the papers had called it, remained a mystery, and a mystery which, for the public, was only deepened by Captain Vibart's free pardon. The press might not so willingly have let it go as a mystery unsolved had not the space of every paper been more than fully occupied with events that were unmaking and remaking the world."

And only a few months after his pardon and release Captain Vibart, too, met the death of a soldier and of a brave man in France.

THE END.

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