

The Storyteller

THAT DREADFUL NIGHT

On we rolled pleasantly, leaving little by little every trace of not only town but of human habitation behind, until I began to suspect that my cabby had lost his way, as might easily happen, and would go wandering on for hours.

I was just on the point of calling to him to inquire if he were quite sure of his road, when I shrank back, appalled by the appearance of two threatening-looking tramps, who, slouching along in the aimless way peculiar to their tribe, came quite close to the cab window, and stared into my face, sending cold chills down my spine and inspiring in me a sudden distaste for this lonesome neighborhood and its horrible frequenters. All the frightful tales of the doings of these gentry in lonely districts hovered about me, like a flock of ill-omened birds, as we went on and on, and my nerves were in such a flutter that by the time my driver suddenly pulled up with a jerk at the gate of the house I had conceived a fear even of the honest cabby, and was determined to get rid of him at once, and await Elinor safe within four walls at any rate.

I tremblingly took out my purse—rather expecting to have it snatched out of my hand—told him not to wait, as I was to meet my friends—I thought the plural sounded better—and hastily opening the gate looked towards the house with a vain hope that I might see Elinor's face at the window. But there was no Elinor. The house, handsome and imposing, the pretty grounds about—all were silent as the grave. It seemed in its spick-and-span newness and rows of gleaming plate windows an uncanny fairy mansion sprung up at touch of enchanter's wand in this eerie spot.

The cabman was meanwhile thoughtfully regarding me as he settled his lap robe about him, and presently called to me to ask if 'I was quite sure my friends were coming, as it was kind of lonely and was a great place around here for the kind of gents we seem down on the road yonder.'

To which I answered confidently that I expected them every minute, and would be quite safe in the house meanwhile. This seemed to set his mind at rest, and he drove leisurely off, leaving me absolutely alone. I only realised the word's significance as the sound of the retreating wheels died away in the distance. Then I sat down on the lowest step of the house and reviewed the situation.

Supposing—all the blood in my body took a mad race to my head and back again—supposing Elinor did not come. There were always things that might happen, trifling misunderstandings—as to the direction for instance—which might lead and often did lead to terrible results. Should she not come, how was I to get home? The distance would have counted for little. I should have thought nothing of walking several miles in an ordinary frequented place, but to walk calmly along a tramp-infested road, much of it lying through the woods, would have been to court disaster. But on the other hand—to stay! I turned with a sick horror to look up at this already hated house, and as I did so a twig falling from a tree lent me sufficient energy to stumble nervously up the steps, and to put into the keyhole the key which Dick had left so ostentatiously on my desk only this morning. It turned easily, and the heavy door swinging on its oiled hinges disclosed a handsome hall boasting an artistic overmantel and red-tiled fireplace—long coveted splendors that were but as dust and ashes to me in this hour of anxious dread.

I closed the hall door, which shut with a spring, and timidly pushing open a side door near by found myself in a large, well-shaped room, containing a few isolated pieces of furniture, a sofa placed across the corner near the bow window, a little table, and a common kitchen chair.

I suppose any other woman but myself would at least have begun the inspection of the house she had come so far to see, but so overcome was I by the terrible conviction that Elinor had in some unaccountable way failed me, and that I was caught like a mouse in a trap for one awful night at least, that I could only stand tensely at the window, my eyes straining towards the road, while I tried to pray for deliverance from my dreadful situation. And meanwhile the afternoon relentlessly waned, and as I looked at my watch I saw that it was close to half-past four and the sun beginning to go down behind some dark poplars in a distant field. Lower it sank, gleaming out a dull, threatening red, then

a lurid purple, then behind me heavy shadows gathered and shrouded the room and shut me in to an awful silence and darkness.

What a strange weird thing to have happened to me, I thought shudderingly. And what would Dick think, off there in Milford, if he could see his poor little coward wife crouching pitifully against the window in this terrible house, shivering with cold and horror miles away from every one. He of course could not possibly imagine my situation for a moment, but there was a chance that Elinor would go over to my house to explain her non-appearance, and discovering my absence, would come at once in search of me. I think it was this faint hope that prevented my utter collapse.

'She may come, she may come,' I repeated over and over to myself, and at length utterly worn out I groped my way to the sofa and sat down, burying my face in my hands to shut out the unbearable darkness. I think I must have fallen into a deep sleep from very exhaustion. Whether or not I can never be sure, but it seemed to me as if I had been awakened by a sound, far-off and faint and yet distinct enough for my sorely tried nerves. I sat up all on the alert, all my senses concentrated into the one of hearing. It seemed to me that some one was coming stealthily along the gravel path in front of the house, while at the same time a creaking of the stairs far above in the house itself announced another nearer danger from that quarter. Some one—it was not imagination—was coming down the stairs of this presumably empty house! Who?

There is no use trying to describe my feelings. I was conscious of one, a frantic wish to hide myself. There was nowhere to go, nothing else to do. I slipped hastily behind the sofa, and, crouching on the floor in a huddled heap, listened breathlessly to the continued sounds which steadily approached this very room where I lay. Years might have elapsed, counting by my mental agony, when I saw distinctly a gleam of light beneath the closed door, which presently opening disclosed a young man, pale and haggard and unkempt-looking. He looked about the room, set on the table a candle he carried, and appeared to listen to the cautious steps outside. They mounted the stairs, and the turning of the door handle was heard. The young man going into the hall, carefully opened the door, and came back followed by a tall old gentleman who, without any attempt at a greeting, advanced to the table and stood silently looking at the younger man.

'Well, now that I am here,' he said at last in a troubled voice, 'what is it? What new extortion? I have put myself out no little in coming here to-night, and don't want to be kept waiting. What is it you want?'

'Ridiculous question,' the young man answered with an attempt at swagger. 'Money, of course. I see all those accounts of Kate's entertainments in the society papers, don't I? I can read as well as another about her dresses and jewels and all that, while I am simply hunted from one place to another.'

'Just because you never let me have money enough to live right, nor Kate either. Both of you kept your purse strings so tight where I was concerned. But it's all Kate, Kate.'

'It's a wonder you dare to speak of her,' the old man said angrily, 'she whose life you have made so miserable, and has yet with her child been to me all that you—'

The contemptuous pause told the whole sad story. 'There's no use going over that old lecture,' the young man said sharply, biting savagely at his nails. 'I'm sick of it.'

'You know my bargain. You promised to make it worth my while to keep out of the way, and by—you don't. I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll disgrace you and your peerless Kate. I'll drag her off with me and the child too. I'll give the society papers an interesting little bit of family history when I get safely out of the country, I promise you. So now I want money and a lot of it, and you know the alternative.'

'There is another alternative,' the old man said fiercely. 'Come near Kate; give her the slightest annoyance, and I'll give you up, if I have to drag you to the police station myself. I made the marriage for her, God help me! thinking it might save you, and I only sacrificed the dear, good girl I had promised her father to protect. But I'll protect her now, late as it is. Better all should come out—I have been coming to that conclusion for some time—than to endure this secret misery any longer. Oh! to think that I was once proud of you, my only son,' the old man groaned, while his son listened, sullenly staring at the ground.

'Now my only hope is that I may never see you again.'