

AN AFFAIR
OF DISHONOR

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BY

WILLIAM DE MORGAN

AUTHOR OF "JOSEPH VANCE," "ALICE-FOR-SHORT,"
ETC.



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CHAPTER I

FIVE o'clock by the sundial on the lawn, and the man that had to fight the duel at seven was sound asleep and dreaming. He was dreaming about a place that must have been in existence, of course, when he was a boy, or how could it be there now? And there it was, sure enough, with the great marble fountain in the centre, and the yew-hedges clipped into the form of dancers all round. And there in the fountain-basin were the huge fish that must have been there then, human heads and all. And the six globes of solid gold on each angle of the hexagon parapet that skirted it and held the water in. None of these things had ever been brought to the Hall in his time—he was sure of it.

Then of a sudden it dawned upon him that this strange place was only Pan's Garden, familiar to his boyhood. But there was no such fountain in those days. That was all new. Nothing was there then but a shallow stone basin where the paths crossed, with a foursquare parapet just above the ground, a mere lip-rim of acanthus-leaf, with a bare relic of the God in the centre, washed for ever by the water-trickle that still kept a memory of the purpose of its youth. But how came he never to have noticed this new fountain? That was the oddity of it. He did not trouble about the human heads on the fish.

It was not as if the Box Walk, so called, that led to it was one that he had shunned in those days. On the contrary, the fact that he and his brothers were forbidden to play there, in order that the box-hedges it took its name from should flourish unspoiled, had always served as a stimulus to close investigation whenever guardian eyes could be evaded. He could recognise every lane and alley, every slightest feature, of the rose-garden it bisected as he walked along it but now. And then to find in the very middle of it, where he could remember nothing but the moss-grown masonry, with its trace of Pan, a change like this!

If he were to see any of his people about, how could he ask them to explain it? How was he to confess his ignorance—he, the owner of Croxley Hall for twenty years, whose forbears had owned it for nigh two-hundred? How could he say to old Nicholas, if he were to see him now: “Speak up, you old dotard, and tell me who placed this fountain here—I or my father.”

If he were to see anyone about who did not know him, then he might ask. There was a veiled lady walking towards him from a very great distance off—walking with a limp slowly, slowly—as soon as she could reach him he could ask her. He knew no lady at Croxley who walked with a limp. His mother limped, certainly; but then she died when he was just of age, eighteen years ago. The lady with the limp came on very slowly.

Quite suddenly she reached him, and her voice was his mother’s. It sounded stifled, behind the veil, but it was his mother’s.

“Dumb son—dumb son! Try to speak—try to speak! Oliver—Oliver!”

And then Sir Oliver tried to find his voice, but his

teeth jammed close, and no word would come. A frightful nightmare horror was upon him, and he felt powerless. But he raised one hand with a great effort, and caught at the veil before him. He pulled it aside, and saw no face; but a sort of woodwork of intersecting splints; that could cause, as it fell suddenly to pieces, a jerking laugh.

And then the man that had to fight the duel at seven was awake, cold sweat upon his brow; but from his dream, not from the knowledge in his mind of what manner of day was to come. And then a belated clock struck five: it was close enough, though, on the heels of the sundial.

He left blind and shutter untouched as he slipped secretly away to find the clothes he left overnight in another room. If the woman awoke it would spoil all.

He stole down the broad staircase, shrinking from the ground beneath at every creak; glancing round and backward, round and backward, none the easier in his mind that risk grew less at every step; too full of manly confidence in victory, of faith in the powers of his own sword-arm, to cherish stealthy longings for detection. Small fear of a mishap with that opponent, even if his own cause had not been so bad as to make the Devil's friendship sure: there was that Providence at least that he could trust in.

Across the dry firm foothold of the dewless turf, and through into the covert. The mid-June sun had given its earliest message to the daisies long since, but no cloud had come between them yet. The thrushes on the lawn were disappointed at the weather, as they knew the worms would stay below. Was it true, Sir Oliver found it in him to wonder, that the thrush can hear the sound

of the worm underground, and knows from it where to watch for an unsuspecting head? The sound of the mole, too, he knows, and can imitate; and uses his skill to quicken the worm's pace. So Sir Oliver's mother had told him long ago . . . Ugh!—that intolerable dream! The very recollection of it made the cold sweat start from his brow.

Three horses and two men were silent in the shadow of the copper-beeches—three horses who knew nothing of the work on hand; two men who knew, and were to know more soon. One, Sir Oliver's second, a tried old friend, a good fellow, one who flinched from no debauchery and profligacy that might add a lustre of achievement to the career of a man of fashion of the days of the Restoration; a man of wit and wits—who needed them, indeed, for lack of much else to live upon. The other a tried old groom, a bad fellow like his father before him, but like him, too, with one redeeming virtue—an equivalent one, perhaps—of unchangeable devotion to the Raydons of Croxley Thorpe.

A seven-mile ride to the tryst, half-way to her father's house—for it is her father he is to cross swords with; not husband, lover, brother, merely her father, half as old again as his opponent. That is what makes Sir Oliver so confident, makes his foot spring so lightly to the stirrup, makes him exult in his saddle on the turf. For they choose the grass-land, to be noiseless, and pass by the Mausoleum in the Park.

Croxley Park is no poor enclosure in a three-mile ring-fence. You may ride through a clear two miles of scattered oak and beechen covert before you find the Mausoleum in its central solitude. When you do, you may wonder at its horrible ugliness of form, but you will

forgive it for its colour and its lichens. Its architect was surely guilty of a crime against the stone his handiwork kept out of a place in some beautiful building. But it is patient, and will wait for admiration, which will come in the course of the ages that are needed to brew an Antiquity.

“Good for the Day of Judgment, Raydon!”

“Better than the Judgment itself, for some of them.” And then they both laughed, and said never a word more.

But it cheered them up, and made them feel manly, to show that they dared to blaspheme a little. Because, remember!—light speech about the Day of Judgment, that seems a small matter to us, supplied good impiety for men of that time, who had had a Creed flogged into them at a public school.

Sir Oliver credited damnation to some of his ancestors; for though they were permitted to sleep under that stone until their resurrection, were there not among them taints of forbidden heresies—errors of doctrine, that would be much more likely to procure it for them than plain sins, murder, or cruelty, tyranny to the weak or treachery to the unsuspecting—far, far more than gentlemanly vices that even their victims would forget sometime? But he rode faster than before to pass the Mausoleum, for his mother was there—she herself, asleep in a leaden coffin—and Sir Oliver had misgivings what she would think, if she were to awake, about the errand that carried him so near her.

That brought him back his nightmare dream again, with the gibberish the dream-thing that neither was nor was not his mother had used, and left him as a legacy. The words seized on the rhythm of his horse's hoofs on

the turf and beat monotonously with them. He could not escape them now. He could only quicken his pace to get it over. And then Colonel Mainwaring would have it they must not ride hard: a little exercise was well enough, but the duellist should come fresh to his work. This was not to be a bloodless duel—an encounter to be averted by a word of contrition, or arrested by a formal satisfaction to offended Honour. It was a fixture for a Murder—there in the summer woodlands, and all the blue of Heaven athrill with the music of the lark. A fixture for a Murder, with a doubt of which of two men should play the corpse.

The more reason, so, for scanty speech; the fewer words the better! The ground was chosen yesterday by the seconds: in yonder copse, fifty yards away, a farmer's cart is ready by their appointment to bear away what cannot walk or sit a horse—what may never do either again. Delay is only risk of interruption, and the two swords are of a length. Strip the men to their shirts, and to it at once!

A village boy, a youngster of eleven, had been shrewd enough to see that this cart, starting in the early morning furtively, must portend something to be seen, something of interest and excitement. Else why should a gentleman he knew to be no farmer accompany it—the village surgeon who had bound up a cut hand for him and stopped the blood? He had followed on, boy-like, always wondering the more as the cart went farther; had hidden awhile that two horsemen should pass him by; had seen them overtake the cart, and now slipped up to the scene of action undetected. But he is young, and cannot bear intent to kill. The swift glitter of the crossed swords is a terror to him, and he stops his ears that he may not hear

their slicing ring and sharp metallic click. For all that, he is held spell-bound; and must see it through, now.

He is young, but he can see and understand—enough, at any rate, to see that the older man is keen to kill, if he may. Keener than the younger and shorter man, who seems to this boy to hold his opponent in play, keeping well behind his own strong guard. A glorious art, thinks the boy through his terror, that can make of a mere quick-moving point an impassable steel wall. And he watches, still spell-bound, and is aware that the older man, warmer and warmer to his work, is taxing the swordsmanship of his opponent, albeit he himself is the lesser swordsman.

The ringing of the swords quickens, strengthens. A strong rally and a swift! . . . What is that?

The sword-point of the older man, struck upward from a well-delivered thrust, has reached his opponent's forehead, glancing off. Both seconds have interposed. Blood is streaming across his eye from the cut, and he wipes it impatiently away.

"It is nothing—a bare scratch!" he says. But the sight of the blood has broken the spell the boy was under, and he goes sick, and runs, hesitating now and again, and half-turning back. Then presently the swords begin anew, and he is half-sorry for himself, not to be there to see. . . . Yes, he will have a man's courage, and go back, come of it what may!

The seconds had looked at one another as the two principals held back with dropped points, Sir Oliver still brushing away the blood-drops as they came.

"I tell you, it is a scratch," he repeated. "Give me a handkerchief." He wound one, handed to him by his second, round his head. It served to stop the blood from

reaching his eye, and left his sight clear. Then the other second said to Colonel Mainwaring: "Do we proceed? How is that?" And then, as they spoke together aside: "We have the technical right to stop this, I believe."

"It is at least a moot point," said Colonel Mainwaring.

"Listen to me, Mainwaring," said the other. "If the quarrel were some slight word spoken at cards or dice—or about some gay wench upon the town—I should say that Honour was satisfied, but . . ."

"But in the matter of a man's daughter, you would say, of course it is different. That is so. But there is no wish to withdraw, on my side. Nevertheless, if Mr. Mauleverer is satisfied, I have no doubt Sir Oliver will be content."

"Can we not stop it of our own right? It is a bad business." The speaker left the impression that his own co-operation was against his will.

"Your man is the challenger," said Mainwaring. "If he is satisfied . . ." He paused, and walked over to his principal, who was awaiting, with his sword-point dropped, the result of the colloquy. So was his opponent, whom his second approached, and spoke with in an undertone.

"This quarrel is none of my provocation, Mainwaring, and you know it. This man's daughter is her own mistress—a free agent. She has suffered no wrong at my hands. If Mr. Mauleverer is *satisfied*, need I say I am?" Did Sir Oliver mean the other to overhear his words—to attach an exasperating meaning to them? If not, why that raised voice and mocking manner?

Mauleverer's second had urged him to accept what had passed, as amends for the wrong done him. He had wavered, was wavering, before the earnest pleadings of

his friend, when the tone of Sir Oliver reached him, if not his actual words. Then he spoke in a quick undertone to his second, who again approached Colonel Mainwaring.

"Mr. Mauleverer will consent to press this matter no farther now, in consideration of Sir Oliver Raydon's temporary disablement. But Sir Oliver will no doubt be ready to meet Mr. Mauleverer again as soon as it is removed."

Colonel Mainwaring appeared to consider for a moment, seeming to refer to the many rings on his left hand for enlightenment; then looked up and said curtly: "I need not consult Sir Oliver. I can answer for it that he will not avail himself of Mr. Mauleverer's indulgence."

And almost before the signal was given the swords had crossed once more, and the encounter was renewed. But this time on other lines. Whatever slight remorse of conscience had made the younger combatant hang back, possibly with a wish to steer clear of killing the man he had wronged, whose hospitality he had most villainously abused—for you can guess the story of it—that was a remorse so unstable that it could not overlive the pain of a sword-scratch on the forehead. And all the evil of a wicked heart was in the half-grin and the blood-smeared eye and the set jaw of Sir Oliver as he turned again to his work in earnest.

But not to triumph at once. Not till the fifteen or twenty years there is between him and his opponent begins to tell in his favour. Then, as he becomes aware that the sword that opposes him is fainter in its resolution, that the breath comes shorter and shorter still of the man who wields it, the growing fierceness of his own attack follows him remorselessly as he falls back, and ends the long encounter with a thrust.

He who receives it is wounded to death. The surgeon who is waiting with the cart can do nothing—no surgeon can—to stop the blood that is welling out inside the shirt he cuts with scissors to detach it. All the lint the world can supply would be useless there. But on no account move or raise him yet.

He is trying to speak, and his second kneels beside him, puts his ear down to catch the faint words. "He asks to speak to Sir Oliver Raydon," is the report. His murderer then kneels, and the words he stoops down to hear are: "Oliver Raydon, I leave you to God and your conscience."

Then the father of the woman who is sleeping through it all is dead; and the dead face tells the bystanders that this man was older than they thought him. For the serenity of his strength and confidence, and the flush of strong health, had made him seem no unfit opponent for his slayer. What will the woman say?

What tale can be told to the woman? Which of the three who can tell it will be the teller? The sound of their horses on the turf dies soon, and now nothing is left but to carry the dead man home.

Then the surgeon says to the second, under his breath: "He was wounded twice. I can answer it."

"Can you say what time apart the wounds were?" is the reply.

"Not over close together. The first would have bled slow, but there was much blood from it. He fought after he was wounded."

"Make me sure of that." Both examine the body again; and presently, all being ready, the cart departs, with its burden, and the two horses follow some little way behind, one ridden, one riderless. Then the song of

the lark and the cuckoo's note come back into the stillness, and there is no other sound? . . . Yes!—there in the bushes the voice of a boy crying bitterly for the horror of what he has seen, not daring to go home for knowledge of the thing that he must tell, or live concealing.

CHAPTER II

SIR OLIVER's horse shied at the Mausoleum, coming back, and he beat the animal furiously—called it an accursed brute. This was because his own heart shied at it—flinched from it—had suggested to him that he should propose another road back. But his doing so would have involved an admission that he wished to avoid the Mausoleum. He had no reason for wishing to do so—not he!

That being so, why was he glad to get past it? He denied this gladness, to himself, as soon as it was safe behind him. But what set him on denying it? Why formulate belief or disbelief except at the bidding of doubt or fear?

When he had got well past the Mausoleum his mind changed, and he began to feel forgiving towards his own mental discomfort about it. Did not this discomfort, an absurd consequence of a dream-hallucination, show how free he was from another and a worse one? He was already on the watch against Guilt—already brewing prophylactics against pangs of Conscience. And he was convinced his Conscience must be at rest when an unreality like that could supersede it. There, there!—*he* was safely entrenched: who could doubt it? Had he never killed a man before, that he should fret about anticipated remorse before it came?

The stable-yard they rode the horses into, to minimise publicity, was walled towards the garden. Over beyond

that grey stone roll that crested its coping was the place of the dream-fountain—the place where no fountain was or had been. Sir Oliver, on the watch for a serpent's tooth in the vitals of his soul, caught himself again being glad at heart that an idiotic dream should have power to monopolize it. Little need to fear the days to come, if his work of this morning could give place to a thing like that!

He was at great cost to prove to himself that he was not beginning to be sick at heart.

"No—no; no warm water! Fill the pail at the pump. You are a cursed fool, Rackham! Who wants the tale-pyets in the kitchen to know . . . ? Where's the warm water to come from?—answer me that!" Rackham the groom had seen thus far, that his master would not care to take his blood-patched forehead into the house unwashed, but not far enough to be beforehand with a reason why he should ask the housekeeper for warm water. He provided the pail, and stood by immovably while Colonel Mainwaring carefully detached the clotted handkerchief and helped Sir Oliver in his washing.

Mr. Rackham did all things immovably. The immobility of his close-shaved jaw gave a keynote to the conduct of his life, and sanctioned the presence of a reptile's eyes in a human head, from the Devil's point of view. These eyes were much of a colour with the greyest of the beard-crop's cleaned-off soil, and made his head a monochrome throughout, or very near it. But they had just expression enough in them to say, "Say nothing!" to an observant stable-boy who led away the horses with him, each leading one, and leaving Colonel Mainwaring's—expression enough, too, to make Sir Oliver feel he could entrust his sword to him, with his murder fresh on it, to

smuggle away out of Lucinda's sight. It would not do to carry it indoors now. And yet, in days like these, few would have ridden out unarmed.

The two men left alone spoke together, little above a whisper—Sir Oliver morosely, his friend equably. He had done his duty as a friend, you see, and now the time was near for him to wash off the blood from his memory, as he was already cleaning away the finger-taint in a fresh pail of water. The slight wound had stopped bleeding—showed for little.

"*She* must be told, I suppose," Sir Oliver muttered grudgingly.

"How can it be kept from her?" The speaker's voice said plainly: "I have done *my* part now. *That* is *your* affair."

But the murderer had no stomach for speech with his victim's daughter. Could he not devolve that work on his friend? His view of the obligations of friendship were those we hold, all of us, when we stand to win by a liberal interpretation of them.

"Look at this, Mainwaring! This Lucinda has to be told—it cannot be avoided. Think how much more easily you can tell her than I!"

"Warily ho, Sir Oliver! Where do you find it part of your second's duty to go to confession on your behalf? Put a good face on it, man! Speak for yourself."

"Mainwaring!—I thought you a better friend than that. What would you have me say to her?—think of it!"

"Faith!—I know nothing of what may be to be said, in a like plight. All I know is, it's none of mine to say it. The girl is no mistress of mine. Tell her yourself.