

The Woman Who Didn't

Victoria Cross

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CHAPTER I

BUT why not pay them? We may just as well now as when we reach the ship.'

The words came in a clear, cultivated woman's voice through the foggy duskiness of an Egyptian night, from the farther end of the boat, which swayed slightly from side to side on the smoothly heaving water.

It was an Aden boat loaded with passengers impatient to return to their ship. At least presumably they were impatient, but it was simply their refusal to pay the clamouring African boatmen their legitimate fee that kept us all waiting there, rocking in the unsteady wooden shell, with the semicircle of lights on the shore rising and falling before us through the hot sulphurous mist. The boatmen deferentially but firmly refused to loose the boat from the stage till each passenger had paid the due eightpence for his fare. The passengers clamoured and yelled, and swore that damned swine as they were, they should be paid when they reached the ship, and not before.

This sort of thing had been going on for half an hour while I sat smoking in the stern, watching the Scorpion in the jewelled sky above sinking slowly to the pointed rocks, and listening idly to the storm of oaths that was showered on the impassive blacks for daring to ask for their pay. I had already given my fare when I first stepped into the boat, so that the controversy did not concern me beyond my feeling bound to interfere when the man sitting next me, the British missionary, sprang to his feet with an oath that cannot be written, and raised his walking-stick to strike one of the boatmen in the face. I had just caught the heavy stick and forced him down again on to our cross bench when those clear tones came down to me.

They produced a distinct sensation of pleasure, and I threw a keen, scrutinising glance up the boat. In the thick yellow air, rendered all the more dazzling to the eyes by the broken, flaring light of the boatmen's torches, I saw sitting erect in the bows a long figure and the pale outlines of a face. The form was muffled in a dark voluminous cloak, and a hood was drawn over the head.

'I should pay now; if you mean to at all.'

The voice was certainly a fascinating one, and the last phrase had a supercilious scepticism in it that amused me.

I knew, as well as the boatmen did, the British passengers' honourable fashion of getting conveyed to their ship under promise to pay, and then huddling away upon it, leaving the boatmen to demand their money of the empty

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air, and evidently the possessor of the voice was familiar with that fashion too.

A burst of resentful ejaculation followed the suggestion.

'What! pay them?'

'And now, after their insolence?'

'Give in to these damned scoundrels!'

'Well,' the cold voice broke in again, 'I am going to pay mine, and I strongly advise you to, or we may lose our ship. What can it matter to you whether you pay now or afterwards?'

Again that delightful satire in the cutting tone.

There was a general murmur and muttering amongst the passengers, but the truth of the remark on losing the ship went home, and the murmur was followed by a simultaneous getting up of several forms, as everybody began fumbling sulkily for the necessary pence, grumbling and swearing as they did so.

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'Have you any change?' 'Oh, thanks,' 'Pay you on board,' 'Filthy pigs,' and other broken remarks were exchanged during another ten minutes, until finally the money was collected and each passenger had put his fare into the black extended hand above us.

'Now, have you all the fares?' asked the voice gently.

'Yes, madam; thanks to you, madam; thank you, madam,' answered the glib tones of the native.

'Then push off.'

The master-boatman gave the command and the natives on the stage pushed with a will. Our boat shot out rocking on the smooth bay.

'Good-night, madam,' called the boatman respectfully to the figure in the bows.

'Good-night,' it answered, and I was struck now by the note of sweetness in the voice.

Chorus of passengers:

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'How could you answer those insolent rascals?'

'They were not the least insolent, and they were perfectly justified in demanding their money.'

The voice said no more, and the figure relapsed into the shadows at the end of the boat. I could see nothing more of it. All the other passengers were engaged in commiserating themselves and each other for having been obliged to pay their fare. I sat back and smoked in silence, watching the lights and great outline of our ship grow larger as we slid over the water towards it. When the boat ground against the lowest step of the ladder I kept my seat and

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let the other passengers scramble past me. Twice I was respectfully requested to disembark by the boatmen, as my seat was nearest of all to the ladder, and twice I politely declined, and sat on waiting.

The boat completely emptied itself, and then at last the figure in the bows rose and came easily down the unsteady craft towards me. The long coat reached to the feet and fell in black rigid lines, but the form was a wonderfully symmetrical one, and I got up with alacrity and looked eagerly round the hood into the face as the figure approached me.

'Can I assist you?' and I held out my hand.

The boat was jarring up and down against the ship's ladder uncertainly. A couple of Egyptians held it with their hands to the lowest rung waiting for us.

Two curiously light, brilliant eyes met mine from the pale smooth face enclosed by the hood.

'Oh, thanks, very much,' she said in a pleasant, half-derisive way, and a hand came on mine and held it firmly, and we both stepped from the rocking seat on to the steps. They were a broad flight, with a rope on either side, and I and my companion swung ourselves slowly up together.

My whole idea now was to say something which would elicit some information about her, but the tall form beside me in its impenetrable clothing seemed to exercise a confusing influence over me. My thoughts mixed themselves inextricably, and at last, when we were near the top of the ladder, I remarked simply:

'I don't think I've seen you before?'

'No, I have been ill with fever since we started. I have not emerged from my cabin.'

'Are you near the centre of the ship?'

'Yes, close to the centre on the left side.'

'Left side? That's the men's side,' I remarked carelessly.

'Oh, they don't divide us very distinctly in these French boats!'

Confound it! Here we were at the head of the ladder.

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'Shall we stroll round the deck?' I said. 'It's really a lovely night. That fog is only just on the surface of the water.'

She turned to me with a gleaming smile; the light from the deck saloon windows fell full on the face, across the scintillating eyes and brilliant well-turned mouth.

'Yes, I've no objection,' came the careless answer, and we stepped over the loose coils of rope, passed through the opening in the chain, and stood side by side on the deck. I noticed my companion's shoulder was somewhat beneath my own.

I wished it had been rough weather, or our ship out of gear and rolling, but we were lying motionless in the bay, and there was no possible excuse for offering one's arm.

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'Would you object to my smoking?' I said, as we turned towards the first-class passengers' end, where, under the stretched awning, in shadowy obscurity, stood deck-chairs of all descriptions, some vacant and some occupied.

My companion laughed. It was rather an affected, effeminate sort of laugh, and it irritated me. Perhaps it meant she smoked herself.

I got out my cigar-case and handed it first towards her.

'Thanks, but I don't smoke.'

That was more encouraging. I lighted up, and we strolled on, my eyes keenly observant of her under dropped lids.

A wonderful carriage and walk, easy and self-reliant almost, but not quite to the point of arrogance, and, I felt sure, a lovely and seductive form under that hideous shapeless garment.

'When do we leave to-night, do you know?' she asked after a few minutes.

'Midnight, I fancy,' I answered.

'Well, it 's close to that now, I should think. I am going down, so that I can have a chance of settling to sleep before we start.'

'Oh, don't go down this minute,' I urged. 'I don't suppose we shall really set off much before morning.'

'Why did you just tell me midnight then?' she said amusedly, and then added: 'I believe you've had too many pegs!'

I laughed. All the time we had been walking towards the companion-stair, and I did not want to see her disappear down it.

'Look at the beauty of the night!' I persisted. 'Surely it's a pity to waste it by going below decks!'

'Yes, it is beautiful,' she said, stopping with her hand on the stair-rail and casting a long glance round the encircling purples of sky and sea; 'so beautiful that you should contemplate it in silence and alone. Good-night.'

'Oh, let me see you to your cabin,' I said hastily.

'And what about the beauty of the night? Surely it's a pity to waste it by coming below decks!'

'Orpheus descended even into Hades on a memorable occasion,' I returned. She was already half-way down the stairs, and I followed her to the lower passage.

At the foot of the steps she stopped and turned.

'Do you know my name?' she asked, with a faint intonation of surprise.

'No,' I said promptly; 'I wish I did!'

'Well, but what made you say that then?'

'Say what?' I asked.

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'Why, about Orpheus!'

'I don't know what you mean,' I said in astonishment. 'You're not called Orpheus surely!' and we both laughed.

'No, but ... Eurydice ... I thought perhaps you knew and ...'

'Oh no,' I said hastily; 'I had no idea! What a curious coincidence! Is it really Eurydice? It's an awfully pretty name!'

'Not with the surname,' she answered, laughing. 'Eurydice Williamson! Isn't it a frightful combination!'

'I don't think so,' I maintained unblushingly, though the seven syllables in conjunction positively set my teeth on edge.

Down here there was a good deal of confusion, and evident signs of approaching departure; luggage that had not yet been transferred to its owner's cabin or the hold stood blocking up the fairly broad space between the lines of cabins on either side of the vessel; the rafters were close over our heads; behind us thudded the engine, sending down streams of oil-scent and hot air through the thick atmosphere.

There was no light but that which fell through the dim, smoke-stained glass of a lamp swung to a cross-beam over our head. It enabled us just to see where to put our feet and avoid the piles of luggage, odd oil-cans, and loose coils of rope lying in all directions.

No one seemed down here. The passengers had for the most part disappeared into their cabins. The crew seemed wholly occupied on deck. Over our heads tramped perpetual hurried footsteps, chains were dragged, orders shouted, and goods pushed along the boards; but down here all was an obscure, heated, smoke-filled dusk.

'That is my cabin, I think,' my companion said, and I saw a white painted door a little ahead of us with No. 36 printed on it.

Another minute and she would have passed through it, not to reappear for another twelve hours. I felt quite annoyed at the thought.

I glanced at the covered head and neck and shoulders beside me in a succession of rapid nervous glances, and each time rejected an importunate idea that kept suggesting itself again and again with maddening persistency.

Then we were standing at the white-painted door, and she stretched her hand to the handle.

'Good-night,' she said, and she turned the pale contour of her face and its shining eyes upon me.

I felt dizzy with sudden excitement; the face whirled before my eyes in the dingy air.

I bent over her on a mischievous, jesting impulse, pinned one shoulder against the cabin door, and leant my lips down to hers. She drew her head back violently to avoid them, and I heard the sharp blow of the skull on the woodwork.

The next second both her hands struck my chest, and pushed me backwards with desperate force.

She opened the door behind her, and the next instant its white boards were between us.

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I looked at them savagely for a second, then I collected myself and turned with a laugh to find my way out of this stifling, murky, circumscribed space.

I hurried up the companion–stair and turned on to the deck into the still, hot night.

Just as I did so the figure of my travelling companion came down towards me.

'I say! Dickinson!'

'Hullo!'

'Do you know who that person is, Williamson the name is, in No. 36 cabin?'

Dickinson stopped and stared at me.

'What have you been up to?' he said laconically after a minute's survey.

'Why?' I said evasively, feeling myself colour. 'How do you mean?'

'Well, you look rather excited. Come and have a drink.'

'Yes, I think I will,' I answered. 'But really, have you seen this passenger Williamson? Upon my honour the dress was most extraordinary.'

'What on earth are you talking about?' Dickinson returned. 'I don't know whom you mean. All the passengers I've seen are a most ordinary lot.'

I saw he knew nothing about it, and that I could not get any information from him, and it suddenly occurred to me it was unwise to interest him too much in the Unknown. Dickinson was a good–looking fellow, and piqued himself on his skill and experience with women.

When he returned to the charge a minute later, as I kept silence, with 'Well, what's the joke? Come along, let's have it,' I answered: 'Oh, bother! I don't know. Let's get those drinks before the stewards go.'

Dickinson got the impression I was a little screwed, and I let him keep it. I took a couple of brandies and sodas with him in the saloon, talked a lot of nonsense to avoid rational conversation, and then got away to my own cabin, bolted the door, turned on the electric light, and flung myself on the couch under the window.

I made myself comfortable with a cushion under my head, and a first–rate Aden cigarette in my teeth, and stared up through the great square open port–window at the brilliant sky, which changed as the ship moved onward as a turning kaleidoscope.

I was thinking of the dead failure of that kiss, and I laughed outright as I recalled the sharp blow of the head on the woodwork.

'Fearful crack it must have been!' I thought. 'I shall be in for some terrific apology to–morrow, I expect.'

Of course my conduct had been terribly flippant and my levity quite reprehensible, but then a hard–worked Indian officer, going home on his first leave, is apt to be afflicted with a buoyancy of spirits. It is not a malady that attacks us very frequently in this life, but I had it badly just then.

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Six years of honest hard labour in the East lay behind me.

One year's idleness at home, gilded with a thundering good income just come into, lay before me. In these circumstances, who would not feel a certain irresponsible gaiety?

I lay back contentedly, with my thoughts wandering to England and all I would do there, and with a comfortable conviction I was the luckiest fellow going.

The next morning I was at the breakfast-table punctually at nine, and I scanned the line of faces on either side with eager eyes, but the one I sought was absent.

For the whole two hours during which breakfast was served to relays of passengers I sat waiting with exemplary patience; but she did not appear, and when the stewards came to remove the cloth I went up-stairs, feeling vexed and disappointed.

'Ill again, I suppose,' I thought, and began to walk slowly up the deck.

Then as I glanced along the polished boards, shining in the morning sunlight, suddenly I saw her. My heart beat suddenly.

I felt the blood come to my face, and I turned aside and leant over the rail, that I might see for a moment without being seen. Iron supports ran up from the side-railing to which the awning was attached, and beside one of these, round which a loose piece of canvas furled and unfurled in the salt breeze, I stood and looked along the deck.

She was sitting in a long chair reading. The fierce light beating through the yellow canvas fell warmly round her.

She was dressed in white serge, and the form I had divined last night I clearly and exactly realised with my vision now. Thin, as I had thought, but incomparably graceful, with a turn of the shoulder and a pose of the neck, that, as my eye caught it, seemed to arrest my very pulses.

She was wearing no hat, and the stray gleams of sunlight coming at intervals under the awning glittered on the dark hair, making it a confusion of gilt and ebony.

I paused a second or two to get rid of the look of triumphant pleasure I felt must be on my face, and then, summoning the most dejected expression I could, I walked hastily up towards her with a sort of contrite, desperately anxious air.

She continued to read till I was close beside her chair. I stopped and looked down upon her, and she glanced up at me.

Such a look came upon me from under the lids!

Sabres unsheathed, knives in the sunlight, and fires burnt blue, were none of them in it with that look, and as she transferred her eyes immediately to the book again, I almost expected to see the page shrivel under them. I felt rather shrivelled.

'Will you ever forgive me for last night?' I said in my gentlest tone. 'I have no words to say how I regret it.'

There was no response. I waited, watching the delicate angry scarlet receding and returning, glowing and suffusing itself, under the pale skin. I felt keenly, as it were, extra conscious of everything, of the heat smiting down on us through the canvas, of the glare from the shimmering sea, of the buoyant roll of the ship as it cut

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through the blue turbulent water.

'What is there I can say or do? How can I earn your forgiveness?'

No answer.

The long figure and the satin head beneath me remained motionless.

'To forgive,' I murmured, 'is the divinest prerogative of the human being.'

'On the contrary,' and the tone of the cold voice seemed literally to cut the sunny air, 'to respect itself.'

'One cannot respect oneself if one has no charity and no mercy,' I returned.

A slight shrug of the shoulders was the only answer.

I stood wondering what argument would tell with her most; then, taking my cue from her last words, I said in a low voice:

'At least there's one extenuation, not of my error perhaps, but of the injury to you: I did not succeed.'

The scarlet under her eyes deepened a little, and she answered curtly:

'No. If you had, I never could have forgiven you.'

My heart beat.

'But now you will?' I said, bending a little lower and throwing the most reverential anxiety into my tone.

She was silent a few seconds, then she said decisively:

'Yes. Let us say no more with reference to it. I wish to forget such a thing was even possible.'

I was rather surprised at her summary dismissal of the subject. It was more a masculine than a feminine way of treating it.

I expected her to forgive me, but I thought that, like most women, she would have potted round the matter at least half an hour first.

However, the surprise was pleasant, and I felt on the whole admiration for the way she had treated me. She had forgiven me, but she had made me feel distinctly that pardon was no invitation to err again, and her brief disposal of the matter seemed to me more convincing of her real anger than if she had maintained a show of implacable resentment.

I stood looking down upon her in silence, noting the tranquil forehead with not a line to mar it, from the sweep of the long eyebrows to the black silk-like rings of the hair at the pale oval of the face, lighted by the fleeting scarlet tints in the cheeks and the curious lustre of the eyes.

I turned and drew an empty chair up beside hers at the side of the deck and threw myself into it.

There was silence between us, and I made no effort to break it.

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For those moments I delivered myself over to that sense of keen simple pleasure in life that comes upon all created beings at times, even the most wretched, like an unexpected gust of wind. The realisation comes suddenly that they live, and Life itself, distinct from circumstance and environment, is pure rapture.

I leant back in the mellow light under the sun-smitten awning, the freshening breeze urging on the flying steamer, the blue undulating billows rolling and swelling exuberantly as they bore us on. I felt the keen salt wind, full of vital life-giving principle, blow against my face, and I looked at this beautiful living object beside me in silence, realising the joy of existence.

'I did not see you at breakfast this morning?' I said at last.

'No,' she answered, with the slow brilliant smile I had noted last night. 'I was ill. It is an horribly unpoetic thing to suffer from, sea-sickness the sort of thing one would like to be specially exempted from by Providence, but I'm not, unfortunately.'

'I don't agree with your line of thought at all,' I said, laughing. 'I think those people that are above the ordinary weaknesses of human nature are hateful: people with seraphic constitutions, that never catch an honest cold, nor have toothache, are never sea-sick, and never look seedy. It's annoying to ordinary mortals.'

The girl laughed.

'Men don't generally like a woman to look seedy.'

'I don't know. I think pain and suffer