

The Case of Mr. Helmer

Robert W. Chambers

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He had really been too ill to go; the penetrating dampness of the studio, the nervous strain, the tireless application, all had told on him heavily. But the feverish discomfort in his head and lungs gave him no rest; it was impossible to lie there in bed and do nothing; besides, he did not care to disappoint his hostess. So he managed to crawl into his clothes, summon a cab, and depart. The raw night air cooled his head and throat; he opened the cab window and let the snow blow in on him.

When he arrived he did not feel much better, although Catharine was glad to see him.

Somebody's wife was allotted to him to take in to dinner, and he executed the commission with that distinction of manner peculiar to men of his temperament.

When the women had withdrawn and the men had lighted cigars and cigarettes, and the conversation wavered between municipal reform and contes drolatiques, and the Boznovian attaché had begun an interminable story, and Count Fantozzi was emphasizing his opinion of women by joining the tips of his overmanicured thumb and forefinger and wafting spectral kisses at an annoyed Englishman opposite, Helmer laid down his unlighted cigar and, leaning over, touched his host on the sleeve.

"Hello! What's up, Philip?" said his host cordially; and Helmer, dropping his voice a tone below the sustained pitch of conversation, asked him the question that had been burning his feverish lips since dinner began.

To which his host replied, "What girl do you mean?" and bent nearer to listen.

"I mean the girl in the fluffy black gown, with shoulders and arms of ivory, and the eyes of Aphrodite."

His host smiled. "Where did she sit, this human wonder?"

"Beside Colonel Farrar."

"Farrar? Let's see" he knit his brows thoughtfully, then shook his head. "I can't recollect; we're going in now and you can find her and I'll "

His words were lost in the laughter and hum around them; he nodded an abstracted assurance at Helmer; others claimed his attention, and by the time he rose to signal departure he had forgotten the girl in black.

As the men drifted toward the drawing-rooms, Helmer moved with the throng. There were a number of people there whom he knew and spoke to, although through the increasing feverishness he could scarce hear himself speak. He was too ill to stay; he would find his hostess and ask the name of that girl in black, and go.

The white drawing-rooms were hot and over-thronged. Attempting to find his hostess, he encountered Colonel Farrar, and together they threaded their way aimlessly forward.

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"Who is the girl in black, Colonel?" he asked; "I mean the one that you took in to dinner."

"A girl in black? I don't think I saw her."

"She sat beside you!"

"Beside me?" The Colonel halted, and his inquiring gaze rested for a moment on the younger man, then swept the crowded rooms.

"Do you see her now?" he asked.

"No," said Helmer, after a moment.

They stood silent for a little while, then parted to allow the Chinese minister thoroughfare a suave gentleman, all antique silks, and a smile "thousands of years old." The minister passed, leaning on the arm of the general commanding at Governor's Island, who signaled Colonel Farrar to join them; and Helmer drifted again, until a voice repeated his name insistently, and his hostess leaned forward from the brilliant group surrounding her, saying: "What in the world is the matter, Philip? You look wretchedly ill."

"It's a trifle close here nothing's the matter."

He stepped nearer, dropping his voice: "Catharine, who was that girl in black?"

"What girl?"

"She sat beside Colonel Farrar at dinner or I thought she did "

Do you mean Mrs. Van Siclen? She is in white, silly!"

"No the girl in black."

His hostess bent her pretty head in perplexed silence, frowning a trifle with the effort to remember.

"There were so many," she murmured; "let me see it is certainly strange that I cannot recollect. Wait a moment! Are you sure she wore black? Are you sure she sat next to Colonel Farrar?"

"A moment ago I was certain " he said, hesitating. "Never mind, Catherine; Ill prowl about until I find her."

His hostess, already partly occupied with the animated stir around her, nodded brightly; Helmer turned his fevered eyes and then his steps toward the cool darkness of the conservatories.

But he found there a dozen people who greeted him by name, demanding not only his company but his immediate and undivided attention.

"Mr. Helmer might be able to explain to us what his own work means," said a young girl, laughing.

They had evidently been discussing his sculptured group, just completed for the new façade of the National Museum. Press and public had commented very freely on the work since the unveiling a week since; critics quarreled concerning the significance of the strange composition in marble. The group was at the same time repellent and singularly beautiful; but nobody denied its technical perfection. This was the sculptured group: A vaquero, evidently dying, lay in a loose heap among some desert rocks. Beside him, chin on palm, sat an exquisite

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winged figure, calm eyes fixed on the dying man. It was plain that death was near; it was stamped on the ravaged visage, on the collapsed frame. And yet, in the dying boy's eyes there was nothing of agony, no fear, only an intense curiosity as the lovely winged figure gazed straight into the glazing eyes.

"It may be," observed an attractive girl, "that Mr. Helmer will say with Mr. Gilbert, "It is really very clever, But I don't know what it means.""

Helmer laughed and started to move away. "I think I'd better admit that at once," he said, passing his hand over his aching eyes; but the tumult of protest blocked his retreat, and he was forced to find a chair under the palms and tree ferns. "It was merely an idea of mine," he protested, goodhumoredly, "an idea that has haunted me so persistently that, to save myself further annoyance, I locked it up in marble."

"Demonic obsession?" suggested a very young man, with a taste for morbid literature.

"Not at all," protested Helmer, smiling; "the idea annoyed me until I gave it expression. It doesn't bother me any more." "You said," observed the attractive girl, "that you were going to tell us all about it."

"About the idea? Oh no, I didn't promise that "

"Please, Mr. Helmer!"

A number of people had joined the circle; he could see others standing here and there among the palms, evidently pausing to listen.

"There is no logic in the idea," he said, uneasily "nothing to attract your attention. I have only laid a ghost "

He stopped short. The girl in black stood there among the others, intently watching him. When she caught his eye, she nodded with the friendliest little smile; and as he started to rise she shook her head and stepped back with a gesture for him to continue.

They looked steadily at one another for a moment.

"The idea that has always attracted me," he began slowly, "is purely instinctive and emotional, not logical. It is this: As long as I can remember I have taken it for granted that a person who is doomed to die, never dies utterly alone. We who die in our beds or expect to die surrounded by the living. So fall soldiers on the firing line; so end the great majority never absolutely alone. Even in a murder, the murderer at least must be present. If not, something else is there.

"But how is it with those solitary souls isolated in the world the lone herder who is found lifeless in some vast, waterless desert, the pioneer whose bones are stumbled over by the tardy pickets of civilization and even those nearer us here in our city who are found in silent houses, in deserted streets, in the solitude of salt meadows, in the miserable desolation of vacant lands beyond the suburbs?"

The girl in black stood motionless, watching him intently.

"I like to believe," he went on, "that no living creature dies absolutely and utterly alone. I have thought that, perhaps in the desert, for instance, when a man is doomed, and there is no chance that he could live to relate the miracle, some winged sentinel from the uttermost outpost of Eternity, putting off the armor of invisibility, drops through space to watch beside him so that he may not die alone."

There was absolute quiet in the circle around him. Looking always at the girl in black, he said:

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"Perhaps those doomed on dark mountains or in solitary deserts, or the last survivor at sea, drifting to certain destruction after the wreck has foundered, finds death no terror, being guided to it by those invisible to all save the surely doomed. That is really all that suggested the marble quite illogical, you see."

In the stillness, somebody drew a long, deep breath; the easy reaction followed; people moved, spoke together in low voices; a laugh rippled up out of the darkness. But Helmer had gone, making his way through the half light toward a figure that moved beyond through the deeper shadows of the foliage moved slowly and more slowly. Once she looked back, and he followed, pushing forward and parting the heavy fronds of fern and palm and masses of moist blossoms. Suddenly he came upon her, standing there as though waiting for him.

"There is not a soul in this house charitable enough to present me," he began.

"Then," she answered laughingly, "charity should begin at home. Take pity on yourself and on me. I have waited for you."

"Did you really care to know me?" he stammered.

"Why am I here alone with you?" she asked, bending above a scented mass of flowers.

"Indiscretion may be a part of valor, but it is the best part of something else."

That blue radiance which a starless sky sheds lighted her white shoulders; transparent shadow veiled the contour of neck and cheeks.

"At dinner," he said, "I did not mean to stare so but I simply could not keep my eyes from yours "

"A hint that mine were on yours, too?"

She laughed a little laugh so sweet that the sound seemed part of the twilight and the floating fragrance. She turned gracefully, holding out her hand.

"Let us be friends," she said, "after all these years."

Her hand lay in his for an instant; then she withdrew it and dropped it caressingly upon a cluster of massed flowers.

"Forced bloom," she said, looking down at them, where her fingers, white as the blossoms, lay half buried. Then, raising her head, "You do not know me, do you?"

Know you?" he faltered; "how could I know you? Do you think for a moment that I could have forgotten you?"

"Ah, you have not forgotten me!" she said, still with her wide smiling eyes on his; "you have not forgotten. There is a trace of me in the winged figure you cut in marble not the features, not the massed hair, nor the rounded neck and limbs but in the eyes. Who living, save yourself, can read those eyes?"

"Are you laughing at me?"

"Answer me; who alone in all the world can read the message in those sculptured eyes?"

"Can you?" he asked, curiously troubled. "Yes; I, and the dying man in marble."

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"What do you read there?"

"Pardon for guilt. You have foreshadowed it unconsciously the resurrection of the soul. That is what you have left in marble for the mercilessly just to ponder on; that alone is the meaning of your work."

Through the throbbing silence he stood thinking, searching his clouded mind.

"The eyes of the dying man are your own," she said. "Is it not true?"

And still he stood there, groping, probing through dim and forgotten corridors of thought toward a faint memory scarcely perceptible in the wavering mirage of the past.

"Let us talk of your career," she said, leaning back against the thick foliage "your success, and all that it means to you," she added gayly.

He stood staring at the darkness. "You have set the phantoms of forgotten things stirring and whispering together somewhere within me. Now tell me more; tell me the truth."

"You are slowly reading it in my eyes," she said, laughing sweetly. "Read and remember."

The fever in him seared his sight as he stood there, his confused gaze on hers.

"Is it a threat of hell you read in the marble?" he asked.

"No, no thing of destruction, only resurrection and hope of Paradise. Look at me closely."

"Who are you?" he whispered, closing his eyes to steady his swimming senses. "When have we met?"

"You were very young," she said under her breath "and I was younger and the rains had swollen the Canadian river so that it boiled amber at the fords; and I could not cross alas!"

A moment of stunning silence, then her voice again: "I said nothing, not a word even of thanks when you offered aid. . . . I was not too heavy in your arms, and the ford was soon passed soon passed. That was very long ago." Watching him from shadowy sweet eyes, she said:

"For a day you knew the language of my mouth and my arms around you, there in the white sun glare of the river. For every kiss taken and retaken, given and forgiven, we must account for every one, even to the last.

"But you have set a monument for us both, preaching the resurrection of the soul. Love is such a little thing and ours endured a whole day long! Do you remember? Yet He who created love, designed that it should last a lifetime. Only the lost outlive it."

She leaned nearer:

"Tell me, you who have proclaimed the resurrection of dead souls, are you afraid to die?"

Her low voice ceased; lights broke out like stars through the foliage around them; the great glass doors of the ballroom were opening; the illuminated fountain flashed, a falling shower of silver. Through the outrush of music and laughter swelling around them, a clear far voice called "Françoise!"

Again, close by, the voice rang faintly, "Françoise! Françoise!"

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She slowly turned, staring into the brilliant glare beyond.

"Who called?" he asked hoarsely.

"My mother," she said, listening intently. "Will you wait for me?"

His ashen face glowed again like a dull ember. She bent nearer, and caught his fingers in hers.

"By the memory of our last kiss, wait for me!" she pleaded, her little hand tightening on his.

"Where?" he said, with dry lips. "We cannot talk here! we cannot say here the things that must be said."

"In your studio," she whispered. "Wait for me."

"Do you know the way?"

"I tell you I will come; truly I will! Only a moment with my mother then I will be there!"

Their hands clung together an instant, then she slipped away into the crowded rooms; and after a moment Helmer followed, head bent, blinded by the glare.

"You are ill, Philip," said his host, as he took his leave. "Your face is as ghastly as that dying vaquero's by Heaven, man, you look like him!"

"Did you find your girl in black?" asked his hostess curiously.

"Yes," he said; "good night."

The air was bitter as he stepped out bitter as death. Scores of carriage lamps twinkled as he descended the snowy steps, and a faint gust of music swept out of the darkness, silenced as the heavy doors closed behind him.

He turned west, shivering. A long smear of light bounded his horizon as he pressed toward it and entered the sordid avenue beneath the iron arcade which was even now trembling under the shock of an oncoming train. It passed overhead with a roar; he raised his hot eyes and saw, through the tangled girders above, the illuminated disk of the clock tower all distorted for the fever in him was disturbing everything even the cramped and twisted street into which he turned, fighting for breath like a man stabbed through and through.

"What folly!" he said aloud, stopping short in the darkness. "This is fever all this. She could not know where to come "

Where two blind alleys cut the shabby block, worming their way inward from the avenue and from Tenth Street, he stopped again, his hands working at his coat.

"It is fever, fever!" he muttered. "She was not there."

There was no light in the street save for the red fire lamp burning on the corner, and a glimmer from the Old Grapevine Tavern across the way. Yet all around him the darkness was illuminated with pale unsteady flames, lighting him as he groped through the shadows of the street to the blind alley. Dark old silent houses peered across the paved lane at their aged counterparts, waiting for him.

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And at last he found a door that yielded, and he stumbled into the black passageway, always lighted on by the unsteady pallid flames which seemed to burn in infinite depths of night.

"She was not there she was never there," he gasped, bolting the door and sinking down upon the floor. And, as his mind wandered, he raised his eyes and saw the great bare room growing whiter and whiter under the uneasy flames.

"It will burn as I burn," he said aloud for the phantom flames had crept into his body.

Suddenly he laughed, and the vast studio rang again.

"Hark!" he whispered, listening intently. "Who knocked?"

There was some one at the door; he managed to raise himself and drag back the bolt.

"You!" he breathed, as she entered hastily, her hair disordered and her black skirts powdered with snow.

"Who but I?" she whispered, breathless. "Listen! do you hear my mother calling me? It is too late; but she was with me to the end."

Through the silence, from an infinite distance, came a desolate cry of grief "Françoise!"

He had fallen back into his chair again, and the little busy flames enveloped him so that the room began to whiten again into a restless glare. Through it he watched her.

The hour struck, passed, struck and passed again. Other hours grew, lengthening into night.

She sat beside him with never a word or sigh or whisper of breathing; and dream after dream swept him, like burning winds. Then sleep immersed him so that he lay senseless, sightless eyes still fixed on her. Hour after hour and the white glare died out, fading to a glimmer. In densest darkness, he stirred, awoke, his mind quite clear, and spoke her name in a low voice.

"Yes, I am here," she answered gently.

"Is it death?" he asked, closing his eyes.

"Yes. Look at me, Philip."

His eyes unclosed; into his altered face there crept an intense curiosity. For he beheld a glimmering shape, wide-winged and deep-eyed, kneeling beside him, and looking him through and through.