

The Devil Stone

Beatrice Heron-Maxwell

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It was in the dusky, tepid twilight of a particularly hot, vaporous, drowsy day at Aix–les–bains, in Savoy, that I passed through the hotel garden, and prepared to take a languid stroll through the streets of the little town. I was tired of having nothing to do and no one to talk to; the other people staying at the Hotel de l'Europe were mostly foreigners, and, apart from that, entirely uninteresting; and as to my father, he was almost a nonentity to me at present, till his "course" was completed. From early morn to dewy eve he was immersed in the waters, either outwardly or inwardly, or both; and beyond occasional glimpses of him, arrayed in a costume resembling that of an Arab sheikh, being conveyed in pomp and a sedan chair to or from the baths, I was, figuratively speaking, an orphan until table d' hôte.

As I crossed the verandah some one rose from a long chair, and, throwing his book down, said, "Where are you going, Miss Durant? May I come too?"

"If you like," I answered, politely but indifferently; "I am only going to look for spoons."

"For ?"

"Spoons. I am collecting, you know; it is something to do and one can always give them away when one is tired of them."

So we sauntered along, side by side; and as we did so I began to feel less bored, and more reconciled to the trouble of existence, and finally amused and interested and flattered.

For this quiet–looking middle–aged man to whom my father had introduced me two days before, as an old friend of his, and whom I had mentally summed tip as "Rather handsome, clever perhaps, conceited possibly, and married probably" was making himself agreeable as only a cultivated, polished man of the world, who wishes to make a favourable impression, can; and gradually I found myself acknowledging that his dark, intellectual face, with its crown of waving, iron–grey hair, was something more than handsome, and that his cleverness was sufficient to carry him beyond conceit, while apparently it did not set him above a very evident enjoyment of a girl's society and conversation. He had already learnt most of my tastes and occupations, and drawn from me, by a magnetic sympathy, some confessions as to my inmost thoughts and aspirations, telling me in return that he was travelling wearily in search of rest, authoritatively ordered by his doctor; and he was deploring his lonely bachelorhood, when my attention was attracted by some quaint spoons half hidden amongst other dull silver things in a forsaken–looking little shop to which our wanderings had led us through narrow, dingy byways.

"I wonder how much they are," I said; and, asking me to wait outside, Colonel Haughton disappeared into the obscure interior. I remained gazing through the window for a moment, then, impelled by what idle impulse I know not, I walked slowly on.

The sound of a casement opening just over my head and a feminine laugh arrested me, and I looked up. It was a curious laugh, low and controlled, but with a malicious mockery in it that seemed a fit ending to some scathing

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speech; and just inside the open lattice, her arms resting on the sill and chin dropped lightly on her clasped hands, leant the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. It was but a glimpse of auburn hair on a white forehead, of eyes like brown pansies, and parted lips that looked like scarlet petals against the perfect pallor of her rounded cheeks, but it is photographed for ever on my brain. For, as I looked, a man's hand and arm, brown, lean, and very supple, with nervous fingers, on one of which a green stone flashed, clutching a poniard, came round her neck, and plunged the dagger, slanting—wise, deep down into her heart. The smile on the beautiful lips quivered and fixed, but no sound came from them, and the eyes turned up and closed; and as she swayed towards the open window, the spell that was upon me broke, and with a shuddering cry I fled. On, on blindly, madly, desperately with no sense or thought or feeling save an overwhelming horror. A red mist seemed to close round me and wall me in, and as I fought against it I felt my strength fail, and all was dark and still.

Somewhere in the darkness a voice speaking, the touch of a hand on my face, a glimpse of light, a sense of pain that some one was suffering, then consciousness and memory. My father's anxious face bent over me, and his voice, as though from a distance, said, "Theo, are you better, dear? No, don't get up rest, and take this." And, sinking back, I vaguely understood that I was in my own room at the hotel, and that a stranger, a doctor no doubt, was present. He enjoined absolute quiet till he saw me again, and asked that he should be informed at once if there was any recurrence of fainting. Later, when I was in a condition to explain the origin of this attack, he would be able to prescribe for me. The light of dawn was struggling through the curtains, and I knew that I must have been unconscious for many hours. With the effort to banish all recollections of the terrible scene I had witnessed, came lethargy, and later, deep and dreamless sleep.

Some days of seclusion and rest partially restored my health and spirits, and I began to feel that what had passed had been a sort of evil dream, a terror that were best forgotten. My father when he heard my story was at first incredulous; then, impressed in spite of himself by my earnestness, he gave an unwilling belief to it, but he entreated me to mention it to no one save himself. He could find no account of a murder in the local papers, nor could he ascertain whether the tragedy I saw was known to have taken place, and as he did not wish my name to be introduced in any inquiry he allowed the matter to drop. To him I spoke of it no more, but the remembrance of it would not be wholly banished. I was haunted by the sight of that lovely face, and the sound of that laugh with its dreadful sequel. And a strange fancy had come to me also that the face was in some way familiar to me; I would lie with closed eyes for hours, seeking in vain to recall the resemblance that just eluded me. One day meditating thus I roused myself from my reverie, and met my own reflection in a mirror that hung opposite. Breathless I gazed, while a new terror took possession of me. There was the resemblance I had sought: there were the auburn hair, the deep dark eyes, the colourless face with scarlet lips just parted. Not so beautiful, perhaps, as the one I had seen at the window; indeed, as I gradually comprehended it was myself I gazed upon, I could see no beauty in the familiar features; but so like so wonderfully, terribly like! And then for the first time I began to doubt the reality of my vision, and to long eagerly for the power to put it from me. I determined to rest and dream no longer, and that afternoon I descended to the garden.

"At last!" said Colonel Haughton, taking both my hands. "I thought we were never going to see you again. I have been reproaching myself with having overtired you that day with having left you: I had no intention of remaining away from you for more than a moment, and I want to explain what detained me. When I came out and found you gone, I concluded you had returned here, and hurrying on I was fortunate enough to reach you just before you fainted. Your father tells me you have had a touch of malaria, and I hope But I distress you, Miss Durant; I am tiring you. Let me find you a comfortable chair and leave you to rest."

"No, no," I cried eagerly; "stay; I will sit here. Tell me, where did you get that ring?"

On his finger shone a curious green stone, that seemed the counter—part of the one I had noticed on the hand that held the dagger.

Smile: This text was originally posted at HM dot com and was re—posted here illegally.

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"That is exactly what I want to tell you," he said. "After getting your spoons for you, I noticed, resting on a carved bracket, this ring. It is a very curious stone. You see it looks quite dull now, yet it can sparkle with all the brilliancy of a diamond. And on the back of it is cut part of the head of a snake. I have only seen a ring like this once before, and that was long ago in a hill temple in India. They called it the Devil Stone, and worshipped it, and they told me the tradition of it. Centuries before, this stone had been discovered by a holy man, embedded in a sacred relic, and he made a shrine for it, whence it was stolen by robbers. The next stage in its history was its division into two equal parts by a Maharajah, who had them set into rings, one of which he wore always himself, and the other he bestowed on his Maharanee, whom he loved greatly. One day he found it missing from her finger, and in a fit of jealousy he killed her, afterwards destroying himself. His ring passed into the possession of the Brahmins, but hers could never be traced.

They say that eventually the two will be reunited, and that until this happens the lost ring will fulfil its mission. It is supposed to impel its wearer to deeds of violence, and to his own destruction; and when the evil spirit within it is gratified, it flashes and sparkles. They say, too, that if you cast it from you, you throw away with it the greatest happiness of your life and lose the chance of it for ever. Yet, if you wear it, it dominates your fate. The instant I saw it, I recognised the lost ring, and asked the man his price for it. He refused to tell me said it was not for sale; and I left the shop, because I did not wish to keep you waiting longer; but I returned next day, and succeeded in obtaining it. The old man, a curious old Italian, was very reticent about it, but he seemed to have gathered some knowledge of the tradition, and said it had the "evil eye," and was neither good to sell nor to wear. It had been sold to him by a compatriot, he said, who had a dark history a man who was ever too ready with his knife, and who had come to a bad end. I told him I would steal it, and he might charge me what he liked for some other purchases, so we settled it that way."

"Are you not afraid to wear it?" I asked. "It makes me shudder to look at it. There is some deadly fascination about it, I am sure."

"I am afraid of nothing," he said lightly, "except your displeasure, Miss Theo. If it annoys you I will not wear it, but I confess it has a very great fascination for me. I do not believe in superstition, but I like the stone for its antiquity and strange history. Some day I will send it to my friends the Brahmins; meanwhile it inspires me with no evil propensity, and since it has interested you I am grateful to it so far."

So I resolved to put the ring and its story out of my mind, and to occupy myself only with the new interest that had dawned upon my life. The next few days went by so happily, and it seemed so natural to me that Lionel Haughton should be always at my side, that I did not stay to ask myself the reason for our close companionship yet I think within my heart of hearts I knew.

And each day, each hour I spent with him, was bringing us nearer together and binding us with ties that would not easily be broken.

"Haughton is very much improved," said my father one day, "since I knew him many years ago his brother was my great friend, and I did not, see much of this one he seems to have spent a good deal of his life in India, and I fancy it has affected his health. I suppose he won't return there. I must persuade him to come and pay us a visit when we go home, eh, Theo?"

One evening, when our stay was drawing to a close, we proposed to go to the Casino, where I wished to try my luck at gambling. "I am always lucky if things go by chance," I said, "and I have neglected my opportunity here sadly. Let us go and gamble tonight, and I will win fortunes for all of us." Colonel Haughton did not, however, join us as usual at table d'hôte that evening, and a note handed to me afterwards from him told me that he had been feeling ill, but was now better, and would meet us later at the Casino. It was the first time I had ever played, and before long it became apparent that my prophecy about my luck was being fulfilled: I won, and won, and won again, till a heap of gold and notes was in front of me, and I was the centre of all eyes at the table. I played

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recklessly, and yet I could not lose, till suddenly my attention was distracted by the arrival of Colonel Haughton, who leant over my shoulder and placed his stake next to mine. As he did so the ring seemed me to emit a faint sparkle, and I felt as if my careless good fortune had deserted me. I wanted to win now, whereas before I had played for the excitement only, with the true gambler spirit. And yet from that moment I lost. He also lost, heavily so heavily that I wondered if he were rich enough to take it as philosophically as he appeared to.

Nevertheless so large a sum had I won at first that, though much diminished, it was still a small fortune that I gathered up when we left the tables.

"You brought me bad luck," I said to Colonel Haughton, as we walked back to the hotel. "Do you know, I think it was your ring."

"I would never wear it again if I thought that," he answered. Then as we reached the garden, and my father passed on to the salon, "Theo," he continued, "stay a moment. I have something to tell you My darling, I love you; I love you more than life: will you try to care for me a little in return? I want you for my wife. I worship you!"

Ah, Lionel! beloved! it scarcely needed the assurance of your love for me to bring me the certainty of mine for you! If ever the gates of Heaven open to mortal eyes, they stood ajar for us that night; the starlit garden was changed into a veritable Eden, and we walked with wondering joy therein, and thought not of an angel with flaming sword, who waited silently to drive us from our Paradise into outer darkness.

It was scarcely noon, the following day, when we began the ascent of the Dent du Chat, one of the mountain peaks that tower above Aix.

"I feel as if I had wings, and must soar into a higher atmosphere," I had said gaily; "and since we cannot fly, let us climb. I want to reach the top of that mountain with you, and leave the world behind us. Let us go."

We were to ride up to a certain distance, and then dismount and gain the highest point on foot.

Three guides accompanied us, following leisurely, talking and gesticulating to each other, and paying little heed to us, save an occasional frantic rush at the mules when we approached an awkward corner of the zigzag pathway, which had the effect of adding a momentary uncertainty and danger to our otherwise tranquil ascent. We were not sorry when, after two or three hours of this progress, the guides told us we must halt, and that they would remain in charge of the mules till we returned to them. It was rather a toilsome climb, and the sun was beating fiercely down upon us; but we felt rewarded when, not far from the top, we reached a plateau where we could rest, while a cool breeze from the distant snowy peaks revived us.

"Here is an arm-chair all ready for you," Lionel said, leading me to where a soft couch of mossy turf lay beneath the shadow of an upright, projecting piece of rock. A yard or two farther on, the precipitous side of the mountain descended, sheer and impassable down almost to its foot, terminating in a dark and narrow gorge between two ridges. Away on the left far below us nestled Aix, and by its side the Lac du Bourget, with its island monastery surrounded by water as blue as Geneva's own.

"How lovely it is!" I exclaimed; "I never knew before how beautiful life could be."

"Nor I," he answered; "I have been waiting for my wife to teach me." And then he told me of his life in India, and of many adventures he had had, and finally we spoke again of the ring and of my strange and sudden illness on that day.

"Some day I will tell you all about it," I said, "and why I have such a curious feeling against the ring. I wish you would not wear it; yet now that you possess it I have a sort of superstitious dread that if you part from it, it will

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revenge itself upon you in some way. I am sure I saw it sparkle last night when the cards went against us. You were so terribly unlucky."

"Unlucky at cards, lucky in love," he quoted; but I noticed a shadow on his face. "What have you done with all your wealth, little gambler? you have not had time to spend it yet."

"Here it is," I answered, drawing out my pocket-book, in which I had stuffed the notes; "but I have taken a dislike to it I shall give it away, I think. I would rather be lucky in another way,"

and I laid it down beside me on the grass.

"I will send the ring to India on my wedding day," Lionel exclaimed; "till then will you wear it for me?" and, drawing it from his finger, he was about to place it upon mine.

But I would not allow him to do so, and laying it on the bank notes I said, "There's a contradiction! Good luck and bad luck side by side! Let us leave them there," I added, half laughing, half in earnest, "and start again fresh."

He turned suddenly away, and, fearing he was vexed, I laid my hand upon his arm; but he shook it gently off and then I saw he was singularly pale, and that his breathing was quick and short, and his eyes had a strangely troubled and intent look. "Lionel, you are ill," I cried. "Oh, what is it, love? what can I do for you?"

"It is nothing," he said faintly, but his voice was changed: "it will pass off. I will return to the guides and get some water. Wait here till I come back."

"Let me come with you," I entreated, but he shook his head, and said he was better and would be quite well if I would do as he wished; then he began the descent. I watched him for a few moments, till he was lost to view at a bend of the mountain, before returning to my seat. But the sun had gone in, and it seemed cold and dark, and a dull heavy weight rested on my heart. I was lonely there without him, and the moments dragged on slowly and drearily, till I felt the suspense and stillness unendurable.

I decided I would wait only five minutes more and then I would follow him, and, leaning back wearily, I closed my eyes. A sort of faintness came over me for I was tired, and the sudden change from perfect happiness to this anxiety, this vague alarm, had chilled and stupefied me.

It may have been a few moments after, or longer (I cannot tell), but I became aware suddenly that, although no sound of footsteps had reached me, there was some one near. I remained absolutely still and listened intently, and though there was no tangible movement or sound, there was an impalpable stir in the stillness round me, some vague breath that seemed to speak of danger. I felt paralysed with the same powerlessness that had seized me when the tragedy at the window was enacted before my eyes. It flashed into my mind that perhaps it was a thief, attracted by the notes and ring lying beside me, who had crept behind believing that I slept. My hand was almost touching them, and as I glanced down to see if I could reach them without moving, I noticed with a thrill of indescribable horror that the green stone was sparkling brilliantly with a thousand rays of scintillating light.

And then something stirred behind me, and round my neck crept a hand, holding a short sharp knife such as Indians carry, and poised it over my heart as if to strike. With an instantaneous desperate throb of agonised revolt against my impending fate, I grasped the ring and flung it towards the precipice. As it flashed through the air the knife dropped, and the murderer sprang to the edge in a vain effort to catch the stone ere it fell. He stumbled, missed his footing, and, with one terrible cry and his hands grasping the air wildly, he fell backwards into the abyss.

And it was Lionel my beloved!

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When the guides came to look for us I told them smilingly that the English gentleman had dropped his ring and in trying to find it had slipped and fallen over the precipice.

They led me down the mountain with reverent care and hushed steps and voices; for they said to each other, "Figure to yourself this English colonel was in love with the beautiful young lady, and he has perished before her eyes, it is a terrible thing, and it has turned her brain."

And when my father told me gently, some days after, that they had found him and he was to be buried that day in the little cemetery, I laughed outright.

But I have never smiled since and I am quite sane now only I think I have done with laughter for the rest of my life. And I some-times wonder why these things should have been; and if there is any explanation of them, save one.