The Mad Lady

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CERTAINLY there was a house there, half−way up Great Hill, a mansion of pale cream−colored stone, built with pillared porch and wings, vines growing over some parts of it, a sward like velvet surrounding it; the sun was flashing back from the windows but Why? Why had none of the Godsdale people seen that house before? Could the work of building have gone on sheltered by the thick wood in front, the laborers and the materials coming up the other side of the hill? It would not be visible now if, overnight, vistas had not been cut in the wood.

The Godsdale people seldom climbed the hill; there were rumors of ill−doing there in long past days, there were perhaps rattlesnakes, it was difficult except from the other side, there was nothing to see when you arrived, and few ever wandered that way. Why any one should wish to build there was a mystery. As the villagers stared at the place they saw, or thought they saw, swarthy turbaned servitors moving about, but so far off as to be indistinct. In fact, it was all very indistinct; so much so that Parson Solewise even declared there was no house there at all. But when Mr. Dunceby, the schoolmaster, opened his spy−glass and saw a lady who, he said, was tall, was dark, was beautiful, with flowing draperies about her of black and filmy stuff come down the terrace−steps and enter a waiting automobile that speedily passed round the scarp of the hill and went down the other side, the thing was proved. Mr. Ditton, the village lawyer, also saw it without having recourse to the spy−glass; but as Mr. Ditton had but lately had what he called a nip, and indeed several of them, he was in that happy state of sweet good nature which agrees with the last speaker.

Every day for several days, even weeks, the lady was seen to enter the automobile, and be taken round the side of the hill and down to the plain intersected by many roads and ending in a marsh bounded by the great river. The car would go some distance, and then, apparently at an order given through the long speaking−tube, would turn about and take a different course, only to be as quickly reversed and sent to another road on the right or on the left. Sometimes it would seem to certain of the adventurous youth coming and going on the great plain that the chauffeur remonstrated, but evidently the more she insisted, and the car went on swiftly in the new direction, wrecklessly plunging and rocking over deep−rutted places as if both driver and passenger were mad. Indeed they came to call the woman the Mad Lady. She seemed to be on a wild search for something that lay she knew not where, or for the right road to it in all the tangle of roads. One day, it was Mr. Dunceby and Mr. Ditton who, coming from a fishing−trip Mr. Ditton's flask quite empty saw a ride which they averred was the wildest piece of daredeviltry ever known, or would have been but for the black tragedy at its end.

The car was speeding down Springwood way, as if running a race with the wind, when suddenly it swerved, backed, and turned about, going diagonally opposite into Blueberry lane, crossed over from that by a short cut to Commoners, only to reverse again the lady inside, as well as they could see, giving contradictory and excited orders and after one or two more turns and returns and zigzags, the car shot forward with incredible swiftness, as if the right way were found at last, straight down the long dike or causeway over which the farmers hauled their salt hay from the marsh in winter the marsh now swollen to a morass by the high tides and recent rains. And then, as if in the accelerating speed the chauffeur found himself helpless, they saw the car bound into the air at least Mr. Ditton did the lady fling the door open, crying: "It is here! It is here!" pitching forward at the words and tossed out like a leaf, the chauffeur thrown off as violently, and all plunged into the morass, sucked down by the quicksand, and seen no more.

When a deputation of the Godsdale people, the constable, the parson, the schoolmaster, Mr. Ditton, and some others, climbed the path to Great Hill top, they found the house there quite empty, no living soul to be seen, and without furnishing of any kind. Was it possible that every one had absconded during the time in which the people had exclaimed and discussed and delayed, and that they had taken rugs and hangings and paintings and statuary with them? Or, as Parson Solewise conjectured, had there never been anything of the sort there? Yet there were others who, on returning to the village, vowed that the rich rugs, the soft draperies, the wonderful pictures they had seen were something not known by them to exist before, and that turbaned slaves were packing them away with celerity.

One thing certainly was strange: a wing of the house had vanished, the porch and the eastern wing were there, but there was no west wing; if there ever had been the grass was growing over it. The schoolmaster said it was due to the perspective; they would see it when down in the village again. And so they did. Mr. Ditton, however, went back to review the case; but, on the spot again, there was no western wing to that strange building.

The automobile was raised by some friendly hands, chiefly boys, cleansed, and taken up Great Hill and left in its place. After that, for some years the good people of Godsdale talked of the mansion, and marvelled, and borrowed the schoolmaster's spy−glass to look at it. But at last it was as an old story, and half forgotten at that; and then one and another had died; and no one came to claim the place; and other things filled the mind.

It so chanced that Mary Solewise, the old parson's daughter, one afternoon in her rambles with her lover, came out on the half−forgotten house and, stepping across the terrace, looked in at one of the windows that at a little distance had seemed to stare at them. Her lover was the young poet who had come to Godsdale for the sake of its quiet, that he might finish his epic to the resonance of no other noise than the tune in his thought. The epic is quite unknown now; but we all know and sing his songs, which are pieces of perfection. But he himself said Mary Solewise was the best poem he had found.

With a little money, some talent, and plenty of time, he was content till this song of Mary began to sing in his heart; and then when he found she was his for this life and all life to come, he found also that his small income needed to be trebled; it was too narrow a mantle to stretch over himself and Mary too. He could, after a fashion, make the little money sufficient, perhaps his verses would bring in something verse had made more poets than Tennyson rich but there was no roof to shelter her. And so in the midst of his happiness he was wretched. He could not enjoy the sunshine for fear of a weather−breeder. Of course if he chose to go back, if he chose to submit but that sacrifice of honor was not to be dreamed. He lived in the hope that his epic would bring immediate fame and fortune, but, alas, his life and thought were so taken up by Mary that he could not work on the epic at all. They went off and sat down on the edge of the terrace. The great house, in the flickering afternoon sunshine through the shadows of leaves, seemed to tremble. One felt it might melt away. There was to the poet something really appealing about it. "This forsaken place has a personality," he said. "It seems as if it were asking some one to come and companion it, to save it from itself and the doom of forsaken things."

It was very evidently, indeed, by way of falling to pieces: bricks had toppled from the chimney−stacks, spiders had spun their webs everywhere, and one might expect to find a brother to dragons in the great halls. "To live in it?" asked Mary. "Why, the very thing! Let the creepers cover all the main part and hold it up with their strong ropes if need be. But there in the east wing the rooms are reasonable. You have such a knack with carpentry and machines and things, you could turn that long window into a door, we could bolt off the main part and and there we are!"

"It is God−given!" said the lover. "But would you not be afraid of ghosts? This is a place to be known of these shadowy people."

"I would give anything to see one!" she exclaimed, and then began to shiver as if fearing to be taken at her word. Her hair had fallen down in her struggles with bushes and boughs and briers on the way up; she was braiding it in

a shining rope of gold.

"It will grow and shroud you in gold in your grave," he said, passing a tress of it across his lips.

The color mounted in her cheeks, exquisite as that on a rose−petal; nothing could be more the opposite of ghostliness than she, the very picture of vital strength.

All at once it seemed to the poet that here was a way to put fresh being into this dead place, to suspend its decay, till it gathered force and new meaning and became instead of a suspected apparition a thing glowing with life. He went to the window and looked in; it gave way under his hand, and he stepped across. "This shall be the door," he said.

"And this the living−room," she replied. And they went through the wing.

"It is quite ample enough," he exclaimed.

"More than enough," she said.

"It will do very well," he continued. "I will come up with old Will and brooms and pails, and clear out the dust and cobwebs and litter, and mop and scour. I can do it."

"And I can help. Oh, how I can help!"

"Here will be your sewing−room. Here will be my writing−room only you will sit there, too. Here is our own room. How fine a great fire roaring up this chimney will be! Here can be pantry and kitchen. See there is water running from some spring higher up the hill. It is really quite perfect. Why did we never think of it before? No one claims it. We shall be married now the moment it is ready to receive a bride. A fine place, those great halls, for children to romp in. I hear them now with their piping silver voices!"

"And I will have a garden on this side, with rows of lilies, with rows of roses, with white sweet−william against blue larkspur, with gillyflowers and pansies oh, why didn't we think of this before!"

"We will need some furnishing "

"Not a great deal. Mother and father will give us things they don't use. And we can make tables and dressers you can."

"And I shall be paid for my verses the Magazine of Light accepted, some time."

"And there is the old automobile though I don't know if I would like to ride in that, even if I could."

"I think I can furbish it up. I'll take a look at it. I always had a way with tools. Oh, yes, you will like to ride in it. It won't be quite the same may need some new parts."

"But the poor Mad Lady won't we be afraid?"

"Of what? She wouldn't hurt us if she could, and she couldn't if she would. She will be glad to have her limousine give pleasure to a young wife and her adoring man−at−arms. Oh, Mary, we have a home! But it's too good to be true. Come, let us hurry down before the whole thing fades like a dream!"

The parson and the schoolmaster and Mr. Ditton all went up the next day to look over the possibilities, and they all agreed that the plan was feasible. "The main building," said the schoolmaster, "could be used for a boarding−school," and he pictured himself a delighted headmaster there in no time.

"A fine place for one of those retreats where people invite heaven into their souls," said the parson.

"A place for much revelry unseen by the curious. I wonder it has not been utilized," said Mr. Ditton. And then they all did their kind best to help the poet and his sweetheart.

It was the prettiest wedding under the sun. All the village took note, and part of the people followed the pleasant procession up the hill. They had turned out in a body two or three weeks before and made the path up the hill wide and smooth; and all the furnishings and belongings had been taken up some days ago. The bridegroom, dark and straight, prouder that morning than if the Iliad had been his achievement, walked with his wife who, a little pale, found some strength in leaning on his arm, her veil flowing about her, half veil, half scarf, the rose in her hair the beginning of a long garland of roses that the school−children had braided for her, that fell on her shoulder and trailed to her feet. A group of the children followed, marshalled by the schoolmaster, all prettily demure, but full of the suspended spirit of gambol and outcry. Then came the glad young friends and companions, and next them the parson and his wife, solemn as if they were ascending the mount of sacrifice, which indeed they were doing in giving their child to an almost unknown man. After these came all who wished them well sufficiently to climb the steep; while the music of a flute−blower went all the way along from the sheltering wood.

A passing cloud obscured the main building, but the sun lay full on the east wing, which seemed to give a smiling welcome. On the terrace was a fine banquet spread, and a wedding−cake for the bride to cut; and after the dainties had been enjoyed and Billy Biggs's pockets stuffed as full as his stomach, and the flute−blower had come out of the wood, they all swarmed through the east wing and over the great house; and the schoolmaster formed a class there and told them in his own way the story of a wedding where one of the guests, a person of deific quality, had turned jars of water into wine. "That," said he, "is what marriage does. It gives to those who have drunk only water the wine of life." It is to be doubted if the little people understood him, but the poet did.

After this came dancing; and presently sunset was casting ruby fires over all the world. And the old parson went to the new husband and wife, and blessed them as if all power were given him to bless, and he kissed them both, and led the way home.

Then Mary went inside and divested herself of her lovely finery, and made the tea, and they supped together, and then sat on the door−stone and watched the moon come up and silver the great morass in the distance; and at last they went inside, and the husband locked the door. "Oh," said Mary, "when I heard you turn the key I knew that we had left the world outside!"

"And that you and I are one!" said her husband.

The poet did not do much with his epic, after all, that year; but he gave us that charming masque of "Mornings in Arcady" that haunts its lovers as remembered strains of music do. And he made the beginnings of his wife's garden, and he wrought with his carpentry tools, and did some repairing on the motor−car; sooth to say, it needed a good deal of renewing, and it took all the amount of the check for his poem to replace the useless parts, and from other verses, too.

And by and by came the little child, as if a small angel had wandered out of heaven. And Mary began to have a strange foreboding about the main building, as of some baleful influence there that might harm the child. So her husband took the child with her and went all over the main building, and showed her there was nothing there but emptiness, not even gloom; for how could gloom live in a place flooded with sunshine through all its many windows? After the twin babies came, Mary had the clothes hung there to dry.

Sometimes now they had the flute−blower come up, and all their friends from the village, to make merry in the spacious places of the main building, which seemed to put on a brighter face in welcome. And again, when there was rumor of war the women gathered there to scrape lint and roll bandages, while their children played about. Sometimes in summer the Sunday−school received their lessons there and sang their hymns, and had their festa. And the poet had his wish of seeing his children at play there. Once in a while the visiting village children found themselves storm−bound there, staying for days together, and the wide rooms rang with their glad voices. The place was full of life.

One day when her mother was there, the poet came to his wife, heralded by a great puffing and blowing, sliding to the door in the motor−car. "It is quite regenerated," he said. "I have run it down the road and back to make assurance doubly sure. Now mother will keep the babies, and we will follow the poor Mad Lady's way. Oh, I have had motors before. I could have them again if I chose to accept the conditions."

"Oh, I shall be afraid!" she said.

"Of what?" he asked, as he had asked before. "The machine is all right. Shabby, but can go like blazes. A pity I had not attended to it when we first set up our gods here. What a thing it is to have a wife!" as she obediently took her seat.

"What a thing it is to have a limousine," she answered, "and a chauffeur!"

As the car slid along Mary idly took up the speaking−tube through which one gives orders to the man outside. It seemed to her that she heard murmurs in it like a voice. At first faint, then the murmurs swelled till they were not only distinct but startling. Mary dropped the tube, but caught it up again, and put it to her ear. It was a woman's voice evidently. "Down this way," it seemed to say. "No, no, try the first turn to the left. Oh, did I say the left? I mean the right. Don't go by it! Now, straight ahead. Oh, stop, stop, let me think this is not right! The Springwood way, the Commoners, now the third from the forks. Why should it be so difficult to reach the road where they bring in the hay? Oh, shall we never arrive? Shall we never find it? It might be lost! It might be water−soaked! It is at the roots of the big tree that leans over the marsh. Oh, here, here! Put on more speed! Hurry, hurry, faster! It is precious, it is priceless, lives depend upon it!"

It was Mary's turn to try to say "Stop!" But she could not bring herself to use that speaking−tube. She flung herself against the glass between herself and her husband. He turned and saw her terror, and stopped instantly. "What is it, what is it?" he cried. "Oh, Mary, what is the matter?"

"The car is haunted! By the Mad Lady's voice!" she exclaimed. "I hear it in the tube there! Oh, it is dreadful!"

"Nonsense, my darlingest! It is the wind you hear. Let me try it. I hear nothing. You see we are not moving now."

"Then move!" cried Mary, "and put your ear where you would hear me if I used it. I will go and sit with you."

She did so, and he reseated himself, and the car moved on, and the poet listened. "By George, it is saying something," he exclaimed presently. "'The third from the forks.' Why, that is just where we are. 'It is such a small thing it might be lost.' By George, Mary, what does this mean? There it goes again, 'Speed, hurry, hurry, it is precious, it is priceless, lives depend ' This is the weirdest thing I ever came across," he said, as he wiped his forehead. "Look here, suppose we obey the directions, go where she says and see what will happen?"

Mary was trembling in every limb; her teeth chattered, but she tried not to have it seen. They began to go forward, turning the corner, coming out on the straight road to the marsh.

It was a season of low tides, and except for a short but terrific thunder−storm there had been no rain for weeks, so that the marsh had visibly shrunk. "There's no danger, we won't go out on the marsh, of course. That chauffeur, the Mad Lady's, must have lost control, he was going at such a horrific rate, they say."

"There is the big tree on the edge!" cried Mary, still in a tremor, her very voice shaking.

"Let us look. We will find some sticks and turn up the earth," said her husband.

"Oh, it is the most awful thing!" murmured Mary. "I feel as if we were meddling in some terrible conspiracy, as if as if "

"As if the Prince of the Powers of the Air had it in for you. Never fear, sweetheart, I'm here."

He worked out the foot−rest of the car and began to break with it the soil about the roots of the tree. And then he saw that the earth had been torn up by a thunderbolt fallen there not long since, stripping the bark off the tree, too, but making his work more easy.

"There's nothing there at all!" cried Mary. "It's all our imagination."

"There's nothing like effort," he replied. "Aha, what is this?" And there resounded a slight metallic clang, and he wrenched out and brought to light a small japanned box covered with rust and mould.

"It may contain a fortune in priceless stones," he said.

"She said it was priceless," Mary answered. But they had nothing with which to open it; and he turned the car and they went home, feeling as if they had a weight of lead with them.

The parson had come up for his wife, and was as interested as Mary and the poet. It took only a few minutes with a chisel to open the box. Inside was a fast−locked ebony casket. "It is too bad to break it," said Mary.

"There is nothing else to do," he said, prying it open. They found then a lock of curling hair, a slender gold ring, and a piece of thin parchment on which was written something illegible, neither name nor place being decipherable, but yet which had an air of marriage lines.

"Now what does this mean?" asked the poet. "A house takes shape out of the air apparently, a woman lives in it, and drives round wildly in search of this box that has perhaps been stolen from her, whose contents were needed to prove innocence, descent, rights to property, and what−not, and loses her life searching for it. We must get out of this, Mary! The whole thing is a baseless fabric and will melt away, and for all I know melt us with it."

The schoolmaster and Mr. Ditton coming up on their afternoon stroll in which they usually discussed points of the cabala, had heard the poet's words. "You are doubting the stability of the house?" said the schoolmaster. "You need not. It is written in the Zohar that thought is the source of all that is, and searching the Sephiroth we find that matter is only a form of thought. In fact the soul builds the body "

"Many a castle in the air has been made solid by putting in the underpinning," said Mr. Ditton.

"My children," said the parson, "if the Mad Lady was able to project herself and her palace to this spot, for reasons of her own, you have projected into it yourselves. Your innocent and happy lives have filled it with vitality, and have fixed a dream into a home. It is as strong as the foundations of the earth. Stay here in safety, the house and the home are permanent. The poor Mad Lady! Come, wife."

But Mary was still trembling a little.