

The Postmaster's Daughter

by Louis Tracy

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Chapter I.

The Face at the Window

John Menzies Grant, having breakfasted, filled his pipe, lit it, and strolled out bare-headed into the garden. The month was June, that glorious rose-month which gladdened England before war-clouds darkened the summer sky. As the hour was nine o'clock, it is highly probable that many thousands of men were then strolling out into many thousands of gardens in precisely similar conditions; but, given youth, good health, leisure, and a fair amount of money, it is even more probable that few among the smaller number thus roundly favored by fortune looked so perplexed as Grant.

Moreover, his actions were eloquent as words. A spacious French window had been cut bodily out of the wall of an old-fashioned room, and was now thrown wide to admit the flower-scented breeze. Between this window and the right-hand angle of the room was a smaller window, square-paned, high above the ground level, and deeply recessed—in fact just the sort of window which one might expect to find in a farm-house built two centuries ago, when light and air were rigorously excluded from interiors. The two windows told the history of *The Hollies* at a glance. The little one had served the needs of a “best” room for several generations of Sussex yeomen. Then had come some iconoclast who hewed a big rectangle through the solid stone-work, converted the oak-panelled apartment into a

most comfortable dining-room, built a new wing with a gable, changed a farm-yard into a flower-bordered lawn, and generally played havoc with Georgian utility while carrying out a determined scheme of landscape gardening.

Happily, the wrecker was content to let well enough alone after enlarging the house, laying turf, and planting shrubs and flowers. He found *The Hollies* a ramshackle place, and left it even more so, but with a new note of artistry and several unexpectedly charming vistas. Thus, the big double window opened straight into an irregular garden which merged insensibly into a sloping lawn bounded by a river-pool. The bank on the other side of the stream rose sharply and was well wooded. Above the crest showed the thatched roofs or red tiles of Steynholme, which was a village in the time of William the Conqueror, and has remained a village ever since. Frame this picture in flowering shrubs, evergreens, a few choice firs, a copper beech, and some sturdy oaks shadowing the lawn, and the prospect on a June morning might well have led out into the open any young man with a pipe.

But John Menzies Grant seemed to have no eye for a scene that would have delighted a painter. He turned to the light, scrutinized so closely a strip of turf which ran close to the wall that he might have been searching for a lost diamond, and then peered through the lowermost left-hand pane of the small window into the room he had just quitted.

The result of this peeping was remarkable in more ways than one.

A stout, elderly, red-faced woman, who had entered the room soon after she heard Grant's chair being moved, caught sight of the intent face. She screamed loudly, and dropped a cup and saucer with a clatter on to a Japanese tray.

Grant hurried back to the French window. In his haste he did not notice a long shoot of a Dorothy Perkins rose which trailed across his path, and it struck him smartly on the cheek.

"I'm afraid I startled you, Mrs. Bates," he said, smiling so pleasantly that no woman or child could fail to put trust in him.

"You did that, sir," agreed Mrs. Bates, collapsing into the chair Grant had just vacated.

Like most red-faced people, Mrs. Bates turned a bluish purple when alarmed, and her aspect was so distressing now that Grant's smile was banished by a look of real concern.

"I'm very sorry," he said contritely. "I had no notion you were in the room. Shall I call Minnie?"

Minnie, it may be explained, was Mrs. Bates's daughter and assistant, the two, plus a whiskered Bates, gardener and groom, forming the domestic establishment presided over by Grant.

"Nun-no, sir," stuttered the housekeeper. "It's stupid of me. But I'm not so young as I was, an' me heart jumps at little things."

Grant saw that she was recovering, though slowly. He thought it best not to make too much of the incident; but asked solicitously if he might give her some brandy.

Mrs. Bates remarked that she was “not so bad as that,” rose valiantly, and went on with her work. Her employer, who had gone into the garden again, saw out of the tail of his eye that she vanished with a half-laden tray. In a couple of minutes the daughter appeared, and finished the slight task of clearing the table; meanwhile, Grant kept away from the small window. Being a young man who cultivated the habit of observation, he noticed that Minnie, too, cast scared glances at the window. When the girl had finally quitted the room, he laughed in a puzzled way.

“Am I dreaming, or are there visions about?” he murmured.

Urged, seemingly, by a sort of curiosity, he surveyed the room a second time through the same pane of glass. Being tall, he had to stoop slightly. Within, on the opposite side of the ledge, he saw the tiny brass candlestick with its inch of candle which he had used over-night while searching for a volume of Scott in the book-case lining the neighboring wall. Somehow, this simplest of domestic objects brought a thrill of recollection.

“Oh, dash it all!” he growled good-humoredly, “I’m getting nervy. I must chuck this bad habit of working late, and use the blessed hours of daylight.”

Yet, as he sauntered down the lawn toward the stream, he knew well that he would do nothing of the sort. He loved that time of peace between ten at night and one in the

morning. His thoughts ran vagrom then. Fantasies took shape under his pen which, in the cold light of morning, looked unreal and nebulous, though he had the good sense to restrain criticism within strict limits, and corrected style rather than matter. He was a writer, an essayist with no slight leaven of the poet, and had learnt early that the everyday world held naught in common with the brooding of the soul.

But he was no long-haired dreamer of impossible things. Erect and square-shouldered, he had passed through Sandhurst into the army, a profession abandoned because of its humdrum nature, when an unexpectedly “fat” legacy rendered him independent. He looked exactly what he was, a healthy, clean-minded young Englishman, with a physique that led to occasional bouts of fox-hunting and Alpine climbing, and a taste in literature that brought about the consumption of midnight oil. This latter is not a mere trope. Steynholme is far removed from such modern “conveniences” as gas and electricity.

At present he had no more definite object in life than to watch the trout rising in the pool. He held the fishing rights over half a mile of a noted river, but, by force of the law of hospitality, as it were, the stretch of water bordering the lawn was a finny sanctuary. Once, he halted, and looked fixedly at a dormer window in a cottage just visible above the trees on the opposite slope. Such a highly presentable young man might well expect to find a dainty feminine form appearing just in that place, and eke return the greeting of a waved hand. But the window remained

blank—windows refused to yield any information that morning—and he passed on.

The lawn dipped gently to the water's edge, until the close-clipped turf gave way to pebbles and sand. In that spot the river widened and deepened until its current was hardly perceptible in fine weather. When the sun was in the west the trees and roofs of Steynholme were so clearly reflected in the mirror of the pool that a photograph of the scene needed close scrutiny ere one could determine whether or not it was being held upside down. But the sun shone directly on the water now, so the shelving bottom was visible, and Grant's quick eye was drawn to a rope trailing into the depths, and fastened to an iron staple driven firmly into the shingle.

He was so surprised that he spoke aloud.

“What in the world is that?” he almost gasped; a premonition of evil was so strong in him that he actually gazed in stupefaction at a blob of water and a quick-spreading ring where a fat trout rose lazily in midstream.

Somehow, too, he resisted the first impulse of the active side of his temperament, and did not instantly tug at the rope.

Instead, he shouted:—

“Hi, Bates!”

An answering hail came from behind a screen of laurels on the right of the house. There lay the stables, and Bates would surely be grooming the cob which supplied a

connecting link between *The Hollies* and the railway for the neighboring market-town.

Bates came, a sturdy block of a man who might have been hewn out of a Sussex oak. His face, hands, and arms were the color of oak, and he moved with a stiffness that suggested wooden joints.

Evidently, he expected an order for the dogcart, and stood stock still when he reached the lawn. But Grant, who had gathered his wits, summoned him with crooked forefinger, and Bates jerked slowly on.

“What hev’ ye done to yer face, sir?” he inquired.

Grant was surprised. He expected no such question.

“So far as I know, I’ve not been making any great alteration in it,” he said.

“But it’s all covered wi’ blood,” came the disturbing statement.

A handkerchief soon gave evidence that Bates was not exaggerating. Miss—or is it Madam?—Dorothy Perkins can scratch as well as look sweet, and a thorn had opened a small vein in Grant’s cheek which bled to a surprising extent.

“Oh, it is nothing,” he said. “I remember now—a rose shoot caught me as I went back into the dining-room a moment ago. I shouted for you to come and see *this*.”

Soon the two were examining the rope and the staple.

“Now who put *that* there?” said Bates, not asking a question but rather stating a thesis.

“It was not here yesterday,” commented his master, accepting all that Bates’s words implied.

“No, sir, that it wasn’t. I was a-cuttin’ the lawn till nigh bed-time, an’ it wasn’t there then.”

Grant was himself again. He stooped and grabbed the rope.

“Suppose we solve the mystery,” he said.

“No need to dirty your hands, sir,” put in Bates. “Let I haul ’un in.”

In a few seconds the oaken tint in his face grew many shades lighter.

“Good Gawd!” he wheezed. At the end of the rope was the body of a woman.

There are few more distressing objects than a drowned corpse. On that bright June morning a dreadful apparition lost little of its grim repulsiveness because the body was that of a young and good-looking woman.

If one searched England it would be difficult to find two men of differing temperaments less likely to yield to the stress of even the most trying circumstance than Grant and Bates, yet, during some agonized moments the one, of tried courage and fine mettle, was equally horrified and shaken as the other, a gnarled and hard-grained rustic. It was he from whom speech might least be expected who first found

his tongue. Bates, who had stooped, straightened himself slowly.

“By gum!” he said, “this be a bad business, Mr. Grant. Who is she? She’s none of our Steynholme lasses.”

Still Grant uttered no word. He just looked in horror at the poor husk of a woman who in life had undoubtedly been beautiful. She was well but quietly dressed, and her clothing showed no signs of violence. The all-night soaking in the river revealed some pitiful little feminine secrets, such as a touch of make-up on lips and cheeks, and the dark roots of abundant hair which had been treated chemically to lighten its color. The eyes were closed, and for that Grant was conscious of a deep thankfulness. Had those sightless eyes stared at him he felt he would have cried aloud in terror. The firm, well-molded lips were open, as though uttering a last protest against an untimely fate. Of course, both men were convinced that murder had been done. Not only were arms and body bound in a manner that was impossible of accomplishment by the dead woman herself, but an ugly wound on the smooth forehead seemed to indicate that she had been stunned or killed outright before being flung into the river.

And then, the rope and the staple suggested an outlandish, maniacal disposal of the victim. Here was no effort at concealment, but rather a making sure, in most brutal and callous fashion, that early discovery must be unavoidable.

The bucolic mind works in well-scored grooves. Receiving no assistance from his master, Bates pulled the body a little

farther up on the strip of gravel so that it lay clear of the water.

“I mum fetch t’ polis,” he said.

The phrase, with its vivid significance, seemed to galvanize Grant into a species of comprehension.

“Yes,” he agreed, speaking slowly, as though striving to measure the effect of each word. “Yes, go for the police, Bates. This foul crime must be inquired into, no matter who suffers. Go now. But first bring a rug from the stable. You understand? Your wife, or Minnie, must not be told till later. They must not see. Mrs. Bates is not so well to-day.”

“Not so well! Her ate a rare good breakfast for a sick ’un!”

Bates was recovering from the shock, and prepared once more to take an interest in the minor features of existence. Among these he counted ability to eat as a sure sign of continued well-being in man or beast.

Grant, too, was slowly regaining poise.

“I hardly know what I am saying,” he muttered. “At any rate, bring a rug. I’ll mount guard till you return with the policeman. There can be no doubt, I suppose, that this poor creature is dead.”

“Dead as a stone,” said Bates with conviction. “Why, her’s bin in there hours,” and he nodded toward the water. “Besides, if I knows anythink of a crack on t’head, her wur outed before she went into t’river.... But who i’ t’world can she be?”

“If you don’t fetch that rug I’ll go for it myself,” said Grant, whereupon Bates made off.

He was soon back again with a carriage rug, which Grant helped him to spread over the dripping body. Then he hastened to the village, taking a path that avoided the house.

The lawn and river bank of *The Hollies* could only be overlooked from the steep wooded cliff opposite, and none but an adventurous boy would ever think of climbing down that almost impassable rampart of rock, brushwood, and tree-roots. At any rate, when left alone with the ghastly evidence of a tragedy, Grant troubled only to satisfy himself that no one was watching from the house. Assured on that point, he lifted a corner of the rug, and, apparently, forced himself to scrutinize the dead woman’s face. He seemed to search therein for some reassuring token, but found none, because he shook his head, dropped the rug, and walked a few paces dejectedly.

Then, hardly knowing what he was about, he relighted his pipe, but had hardly put it in his mouth before he knocked out the tobacco.

Clearly, he was thinking hard, mapping out some line of conduct, and the outlook must have been dark indeed, judging by his somber and undecided aspect.

More than once he looked up at the attic window of the cottage which had drawn his eyes before tragedy had come so swiftly to his very feet. But, if he hoped to see anyone, he was disappointed, though, in the event, it proved that his

real fear was lest the person he half expected to see should look out.

He was not disturbed in that way, however. Fish rose in the river; birds sang in the trees; a water-wagtail skipped nimbly from rock to rock in the shallows; honey-laden bees hummed past to the many hives in the postmaster's garden. These were the normal sights and sounds of a June morning—that which was abnormal and almost grotesque in its horror lay hidden beneath the carriage rug.

To and fro he walked in that trying vigil, carrying the empty pipe in one hand while, with the other, he dabbed the handkerchief at the cut on his face. He was aware of some singular change in the quality of the sunlight pouring down on lawn and river and trees. Five minutes earlier it had spread over the landscape a golden bloom of the tint of champagne; now it was sharp and cold, a clear, penetrating radiance in which colors were vivid and shadows black. He was in no mood to analyze emotions, or he might have understood that the fierce throbbing of his heart had literally thinned the blood in his veins and thus affected even his sight. He only knew that in this crystal atmosphere the major issues of life presented themselves with a new and crude force. At any rate, he made up his mind that the course suggested by truth and honor was the only one to follow, and that, in itself, was something gained.

By the time Bates returned, accompanied by the village policeman, and two other men carrying a stretcher, Grant was calmer, more self-contained, than he had been since that hapless body was dragged from the depths. He was not

irresponsive, therefore, to the aura of official importance which enveloped the policeman; he sensed a certain uneasiness in Bates; he even noted that the stretcher was part of the stock in trade of Hobbs, the local butcher, and ordinarily bore the carcass of a well-fed pig.

These details were helpful. Naturally, Bates had explained his errand, and the law, in the person of the policeman, was prepared for all eventualities.

“This is a bad business, Mr. Grant,” began the policeman, producing a note-book, and moistening the tip of a lead pencil with his tongue. Being a Sussex man, he used the same phrase as Bates. In fact, Grant was greeted by it a score of times that day.

“Yes,” agreed Grant. “I had better tell you that I have recognized the poor lady. Her name is Adelaide Melhuish. Her residence is in the Regent’s Park district of London.”

Robinson, the policeman, permitted himself to look surprised. He was, in fact, rather annoyed. Bates’s story had prepared him for a first-rate detective mystery. It was irritating to have one of its leading features cleared up so promptly.

“Oh,” he said, drawing a line under the last entry in the note-book, and writing the date and hour in heavy characters beneath. “Married or single?”

“Married, but separated from her husband when last I had news of her.”

“And when was that, sir?”

“Nearly three years ago.”

“And you have not seen her since?”

“No.”

“You didn’t see her last night?”

Grant positively started, but he looked at the policeman squarely.

“It is strange you should ask me that,” he said. “Last night, while searching for a book, I saw a face at the window. It was that window,” and four pairs of eyes followed his pointing finger. “The face, I now believe, was that of the dead woman. At the moment, as it vanished instantly, I persuaded myself that I was the victim of some trick of the imagination. Still, I opened the other window, looked out and listened, but heard or saw nothing or no one. As I say, I fancied I had imagined that which was not. Now I know I was wrong.”

“About what o’clock would this be, Mr. Grant?”

“Shortly before eleven. I came in at a quarter past ten, and began to work. After writing steadily for a little more than half an hour, I wanted to consult a book, and lighted a candle which I keep for that purpose. I found the book, and was about to blow out the candle when I saw the face.”

Robinson wrote in his note-book:—

“Called to *The Hollies* to investigate case of supposed murder. Body of woman found in river. Mr. Grant, occupying *The Hollies*, says that woman’s name is

Adelaide Melhuish”—at this point he paused to ascertain the spelling—“and he saw her face at a window of the house at 10.45 P.M., last night.”

“Well, sir, and what next?” he went on.

“It seems to me that the next thing is to have the unfortunate lady removed to some more suitable place than the river bank,” said Grant, rather impatiently. “My story can wait, and so can Bates’s. He knows all that I know, and has probably told you already how we came to discover the body. You can see for yourself that she must have been murdered. It is an extraordinary, I may even say a phenomenal crime, which certainly cannot be investigated here and now. I advise you to have the body taken to the village mortuary, or such other place as serves local needs in that respect, and summon a doctor. Then, if you and an inspector will call here, I’ll give you all the information I possess, which is very little, I may add.”

Robinson began solemnly to jot down a summary of Grant’s words, and thereby stirred the owner of *The Hollies* to a fury which was repressed with difficulty. Realizing, however, the absolute folly of expressing any resentment, Grant turned, and, without meaning it, looked again in the direction of the cottage on the crest of the opposite bank. This time a girl was leaning out of the dormer window. She had shaded her eyes with a hand, because the sun was streaming into her face, but when she saw that Grant was looking her way she waved a handkerchief.

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