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Summer Night.

By MAXWELL GRAY.

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CHAPTER II.

Stephen Adams stood still in the road, the bridle on his bare brown arm, and started stupidly after the doctor's dog-cart. A great sob broke from his broad brown chest, the blue striped shirt on which was open; it was a sob of relief. Then he looked at the cob, and, going over to the old-fashioned inn, relic of past coaching days, the Rose and Crown, called the ostler and helped him rub the cob down, loosening the girths and rinsing the mouth.



There Was a Report.

Somebody gave him a hat which he put on half consciously; and then he called for ale, drank a pint and poured a pint down the cob's throat. "He done it in half an hour. Seven mite," he said, looking hard at the cob. "A rare good goer, gunner," the ostler returned, patting and smoothing the animal's firm-set neck, "and a rare good out to stay. But you've took it all out of en; there ain't 'at a kick in all his four legs."

Adams looked thoughtfully at the cob, considering how much was left in him, and then, taking a parcel the doctor's man had brought him, fixed it to the saddle, feed the ostler and led the horse briskly away, walking him down the street, over the bridge and up the hill before he mounted and trotted along the level, slowly at first, and then more quickly through the cooling dusk, and dewy scents of field and hedgerow.

Hundreds of years seemed to have passed since he started in the evening sunshine on that mad, break-neck gallop, spurred by agonies of fear. He fell to thinking over all that had passed since he went forth in the morning dew that day, bent upon getting that last grass crop, over-ripe as it was for lack of hands to save it, mown. There were still some acres to cart; the

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hands could go on to the carting when the dew was fully dried; in the meantime a quarter of the heavy grass at least must be down—the whole must be down before dewfall, and those acres of well-made hay carted besides. To mow one field and cart the other—that had seemed the whole aim and problem of existence in the morning. And Annie to worry him with her petty wants just then! He had hung off with a snarl, when she raised herself from the

with twenty cows to milk. She would get through a good summer's work first, and by next summer the boy would be grown to a playing good to toss. Of course it would be a boy.

"Stephen," he heard, continually, above the cob's trot on the dusty high-road, "do listen, Stephen. Indeed, it's particular." Of all things he hated a complaining woman; and the querulous tone of Annie's voice irritated him. He knew that he was not good-tempered, was ungracious, taciturn, irritable. Annie should have known it too, and forbore to worry him. A whole day often passed without a word from him; he meant no harm; he hated senseless chatter; she knew it was only his way. Yet he promised his conscience that if Annie were but spared, he would be kinder, more sociable, gentler for ever after. If!

He turned sick, and pressed his heels into the tired horse's side. The possibility was infinitesimal. The cob quickened his weary trot; Stephen thought he might be too late.

The tailor's son was still at the window, watching the street lamps sparkle out on the dusk, and a few silver stars point the pale strip of sky that ran like a river between the black roofs. He saw the untasted supper in the opposite room, where no one remembered to draw the blinds, and caught the gleam of Mrs. Newman's white gown as she passed the open doors, pacing disconsolate in the garden, waiting for her husband.

And always, he saw the spare, stony figure of Stephen Adams; his sun-burnt, hard-featured face, with reddish-brown beard and thick half-matted over his strong, stubborn forehead. Always he heard the words: "Shot through the body." Who was shot, and by whom? "Wife," "loaded gun," were the only words that he could make out in the farmer's hurried, urgent message.

Stephen was hearing that shot over and over again, together with Annie's words, about the cob's foot-falls, the droning of chafers, voice of corn-crakes and chirp of grasshoppers, and then a mist of blood would come before his hot, hazed eyes.

The mowing was at last quite finished, the hay had been carted long before the dews began to fall. The sun was low when he went into the wide brevous or outer kitchen to replace his gun in the rack after firing at rooks in the piece of wheat beyond the orchard. He had fired both barrels, reloaded, and fired again more than once; he had a young rabbit just shot in his hand, and threw it on the table, when Annie came in, white and anxious.

"Stephen, I must speak in private. It's serious; it's about—it's Willis Arley." So far she had panted. He had always despised and disliked

succeeded in anything, who read and wrote when he should have been plowing and sowing, who left his father's farm and set up for a scribbler in London till he was nearly starved. He had that Willis Arley, a fellow who never been one of Annie's numerous sweethearts; Stephen had a vague notion that she favored him at one time before her father stepped between them and forbade Arley the house. It was an old story, so old that it had not occurred to Stephen even to be jealous; Arley had not been near the place for years; there was a rumor that he was gone for a soldier, or to Australia. He was no longer spoken of now, his brother had the farm, his mother lived in a vine-covered stone house near the village church; Stephen seemed to remember that she was very ill; to be sure, Dr. Newman's dog-cart had been seen outside the vine-covered house that afternoon. Yet when Annie spoke the half-forgotten name, he turned with one of his impatient jerks, the gun still in his hand—and how did it happen?—the maid servant was standing by, the only witness—what did she know?—the gun must have been cocked, he must have touched the trigger—there was a report, a cry, Annie was down, there was blood on the stone-paved floor. Then followed cries of alarm and horror, people running in, the saddling and bridling and mad galloping of the cob along the dusty, seven-mile road to the town.

The night sparkled with pale stars, the breath of honeysuckle hung about meadow and garden, when he rode into his own yard and looked anxiously at his house, dimly outlined in the gray summer dusk, that would not deepen before the early dawn reddened the sky.

A dim light showed in the rose-bowered window upstairs, another dim light in the kitchen below; neither window was curtained; all was not yet over. His quick step, heavy with nailed boots, was on the uncarpeted oak stair, where an eight-day clock ticked with steady patience on the landing and vaguely comforted him, quieting the fever of his blood with familiar, home-like voice. Outside the bedroom door he paused, sick at heart; then softly turned the handle and entered.

Annie's face, white and sharp, was on the white pillow, her dark hair, loosened and tangled, lay over pillow and sheet, the doctor was bending above her, doing something to her wounded side, a woman wiped blood from the pale lips, lips softly smiling in spite of the quick, gasping breath that parted them.

Annie's beautiful dark eyes were wide and full of light—such a light as he had never before seen in them, a light directed to the gaze of a tall man in a smock frock standing by the bed in the shadow of the curtains.

What man? His startled glance searched in the shadow and discerned the half-forgotten, thoughtful features of the white-handed dreamer, the wastrel, the ne'er-do-weel Willis Arley. He found himself narrowly observing the clean white smock, worn somehow with a difference. Beneath the evidently unaccustomed garment he detected the narrow red stripe of regimental trousers, above it the trim moustache and otherwise clean-shaven face and close-clipped hair that bespoke the soldier.

A faint shiver went through Arley's frame at Stephen's approach; Annie's eyes lost their light and turned to her husband's face with a piteous pleading.

"I tried hard, Stephen," she panted, in a slow, strained voice that already seemed far off. "If you had a cared for me, if you had a spoken a kind word! And the child and all coming—I could a been—a good wife—" The voice failed into inarticulate mutterings, the dark eyes closed, Stephen and Arley each heard the throbbing of their own hearts and Annie's sibilant breathing; a waft of flower-scented air shook the feeble candle flame, a moth dashed madly through it; the doctor put something to the pale lips; the patient seemed to sleep.

Some seconds passed; Arley stood rigid and erect; cold dews sprang on Stephen's strong, square brow; his mouth was parched.

Then Annie started and sat up. "Forgive me," she cried, gazing into her husband's face drawn, and stretching out her hands to him. The effort brought blood from the wounded lungs to the mouth and she fell back, her eyes turning to Arley and closing with a smile forever.

It seemed not long after that Adams found himself in the kitchen, where a fire had been kindled and a candle burned dimly, but not so dimly that he did not see dark, wet stains on the stone floor. The doctor was holding his arm firmly, Arley was standing be-

fore him with a sullen, defiant gaze in his large, dreamy eyes.

"It's four years since I saw Annie Duke, Mr. Adams," he was saying, "till this afternoon. Mother died at five o'clock. I'd overstayed my leave for a day and they were after me. I slipped along the hedge in the ditch to your orchard, and so through the garden and wood-house, where your wife saw me and took me to the strong beer-cellar and hid me, and gave me the smock frock. There I should have stayed until I could have got quiet in plain clothes. But I heard the shot and the cries and ran out and helped carry her up. That's all I have to say."

"And that's enough," said a deep voice from a dark corner whence issued two soldiers, while a third appeared at the door.

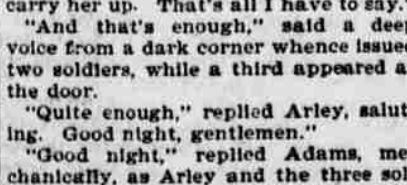
"Quite enough," replied Arley, saluting. Good night, gentlemen.

"Good night," replied Adams, mechanically, as Arley and the three soldiers, each with a "good night," vanished into the pale summer night, where their measured tread gradually died away into silence.

"Her last look was for him, and I killed her," Adams muttered to himself.

"I was never more sorry for anything in my life, Mabel," the doctor told his wife afterwards. "The man was like a stone. The woman told him his

He Softly Turned the Handle.



wife had said she was glad to go, thankful for the shot."

The tailor's son slept but brokenly; sometimes he was glad to hear solitary footsteps echoing along the silent streets and passing into the cool and pleasant night; his spirit seemed to pass into the freshness with the unknown steps. He waked tonight to hear the heavy clock chime the four quarters and strike twice on the deep bell that sounded fuller and more solemn on the silent night. The air stole fresh and sweet through the open window. It was not unpleasant to lie awake in the restful stillness. A quarter chimed and the half hour. The bells were like the voice of a watching spirit, telling that all is well. Then from far off rose the faint roll of wheels and quick beat of hoofs, louder and louder, till the sound ceased at the opposite door, and the doctor drowsily dropped to the pavement. He was cheered by the red light of the shaded candles on the table where the supper was still waiting, cheered still more by the sight of his wife opening the door, flushed with sleep, charming in a cambric dressing-gown with pink ribbons and pink slippers, her shining hair gathered into a long thick plait that fell over one shoulder, her eyes bright with welcome and kindness.

He thought of poor Annie's words: "If I'd said a kind word." So, to keep himself from over softness, he roundly rated Mrs. Newman for being up.

But she only laughed and stopped his mouth in the proper way. [The End.]



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