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OF MYSTERY AND TERROR

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Before the fireplace a coffin was standing.

The Emergency Call

By Marion Brandon

AS the old white elm-shaded house came into view at the turn of the road, I found myself trembling.

"That's it, Tom," I said.

"There's no doctor's sign on it," Tom remarked as he brought the car to a halt at the picket gate.

"Sure it's the right one?"

"Quite sure," I answered as well as my quivering lips would let me.

For Tom's first thought in planning our wedding-anniversary trip had been a visit to this house—and I knew what he would find out! I hadn't been able to tell him myself. How would the knowledge affect him, coming from another?

With a sinking heart I watched

him make his way along the red brick path to the white door, pull the brass bell-knob that I re-

Through the storm and darkness of the night comes a cry for help, and from an even deeper darkness comes an answer.

membered so well, shining now in warm afternoon sunlight instead of the blue flare of lightning. A woman answered his summons, a young pretty woman, in place of the deaf old soul of a year ago. There was a brief conversation that I couldn't hear; and Tom came slowly back to the car.

"He's dead, darling!" he said. "The end of last July, she told me. Must have been right after we were here; that was the twenty-sixth, you know. She's no relation to him; they just bought the place in the fall; and when I asked her the exact date he died she didn't know."

She didn't know! My overstrained nerves gave away under the reaction. I burst into tears.

Tom was beside me in a moment, his arms around me.

"Don't cry, darling!" he remonstrated, "You know he said himself that he hadn't been well for a long time, and he's probably better off as he is. But, darn it!" he added in the boyish way that he has. "I surely wanted to thank him for what he did for us, and never anything that even looked like a bill!"

"It—it just upset me, Tom," I whispered, controlling myself as best I could.

Tom kissed me; and we drove on, leaving behind us the old green-shuttered house, every detail of which will remain forever burned into my memory. But the mere sight of it brought everything back so vividly that, now that we are home again, I am writing out this account of as strange an experience as can possibly befall a human being.

BUT I must go back to that July evening, a year ago, when I knelt, terrified and alone in the sunset light, beside Tom's unconscious form, his blood warm and wet on my fingers, ominous mutterings of approaching thunder in my ears.

We were on our wedding-trip, and had been avoiding traveled highways in favor of remote country back-roads like this one. It was a dreadful road, on which we had encountered no settlement—not even a house—for miles; but the mountain country through which it struggled was glorious. The ascent of the last hill, however, had made the radiator boil, and we had stopped to let it cool.

And then I saw the flower.

To this day, I don't know what it was; but it looked as if a little piece of summer sky had been caught in a bunch of green leaves high above the road on the face of the rocky wall that rose steep and sheer on one side.

"Tom, did you ever see anything so lovely as that flower?" I asked.

Tom's gray eyes followed my pointing finger. "I'll get it for you," he said.

"Tom, you couldn't!" In saying that, of course, I made a bad mistake.

"Couldn't I?" Tom retorted. "We'll see!"

As a matter of fact there was plenty of foothold on the jagged rock-face, we found; and quite a wide ledge just below the spot where the flower stood out in its blue loveliness against the gray-green lichened face of the rock.

"You want a rock-garden, darling," Tom said with his dear teasing smile. "Watch me capture the first inmate!"

There is no use going into details. It makes me sick now even to write of the hideous splitting crash with which the ledge, probably weakened by weathering, gave away under Tom's weight . . . and the more hideous silence which succeeded it.

TOM lay queerly crumpled and still at the bottom, made no movement, uttered no sound. As I

dropped to my knees beside him, I could see that his head was resting on a broken piece of rock, as on a pillow. When I moved it, my fingers were warm and wet—and red. His face was ghastly in the failing light, his eyes closed.

"Tom!" I begged. "Can't you speak to me?"

But my only reply was an ominous rumble of thunder.

I looked back over the valley behind me. Great ragged black clouds were rolling up from the horizon, obscuring in a heavy pall the golden light of the sunset. As I watched, they were rent by a jagged flash of lightning. A drop of rain fell cold on my hand, another on Tom's death-white face.

"Help!" I screamed, hysterically and senselessly. "Help!"

But even through my blind panic, I knew that there was no help. The country was probably as desolate ahead of us as it had been behind.

Another flash of lightning; another roll of thunder, booming hollowly among the hills, nearer this time. The rain was falling in earnest.

Sheer terror finally brought me to my senses, contradictory as that sounds. Tom wasn't dead. I could still feel his heart-beats, so irregular and faint as to make it only too plain that the dividing line between life and death was pitifully thin. And if, in his shocked condition, he were to be drenched and chilled by the impending downpour. . . .

I didn't dare to think further. Desperation must have lent me superhuman strength, for somehow I managed to get Tom's big helpless body—he is six feet high, and heavy in proportion—into the car which I backed as close to him as I could.

I was exhausted and trembling when the task was accomplished, and with Tom's senseless form lying inert and still on the floor in

the back, I could only crouch sobbing on the front seat while such a storm as I hope never to see again broke over us.

It raged for hours, with crashing thunder and such blinding lightning and sluicing rain that I didn't dare to attempt to move the chainless car along the road which looked more like the bed of a mountain stream than anything else in the uncanny blue glare of the lightning flashes.

AT long last, however, the downpour ceased. The storm passed on, but reluctantly, leaving in its wake fitful flashes and intermittent growls of thunder. With shaking fingers I padded the flooring under Tom's head with my coat and sweater, in addition to what I had already put there, and slipping once more into the front seat, started the engine.

The trip along the dark treacherous road seemed endless—a nightmare of skids and side-slips; of jolts that brought my heart to my throat when I thought of Tom's head. In reality the speedometer showed only four miles, and my watch forty-five minutes, when I finally spied a house, withdrawn and lonely-looking. But at last, the weak lamplight in the windows meant people.

But they could do me no good. They had no telephone to call a doctor; nor, they added, had any other of the few scattered houses in the vicinity.

"You'd best push right on to Colmer, ma'am," the man advised me. "It isn't but six miles from here, and there's a doctor. There's one village between here and it; but there's no doctor there—now. More's the pity!"

Could I possibly get Tom there alive? I thought miserably as I started once more into the darkness. His fluttering heart-beats were almost imperceptible.

In my daze of utter misery I noticed nothing, thought of nothing but making the best speed I dared, until the widely scattered houses drew close enough together to make me realize that we were approaching a settlement.

"The one where there isn't a doctor!" I thought wretchedly as the better roadway gave me confidence to press down a little more on the accelerator. But at least there would be telephones!

Just then a dying flash of lightning illuminated the front of a house on the left, and flickered wanly across a brass plate by the door. Jamming on the brakes so that the car skidded entirely around, I leaped to the ground and ran up the path.

"Dr. Barton," read the sign in the light from the glass side-panels of the door.

"Thank God!" I sobbed in my relief and surprise, as I pulled at the old-fashioned bell. Apparently I had been too sunk in my misery to notice the little intermediate settlement; no wonder, if it was as small and straggling as some we had passed through! And this must be Colmer.

EVERYBODY was evidently in bed and asleep; for the only light was the one in the hall, and there was no answer to my frantically repeated summons but the slow strokes of a clock booming the hour of midnight. I could hear the bell ringing quite plainly; but in desperation I beat upon the door with my fists. That still figure out there on the car floor—dying!

As a last resort I tried the door. It gave! I stumbled into the long white-paneled hall. There was the scent of roses on the air.

"Is there nobody to help us?" I cried into the silence. "I *must* have help!"

Silence again for a moment. And

then the door of the room on my left slowly opened, and a tall old man emerged. He had kind, yet penetrating, dark eyes and thick gray hair.

"What is the trouble, my dear?" he asked with the most reassuring sympathetic smile I had ever met. "I'm sorry you were not answered at once; but my housekeeper is stone deaf—and I had gone to sleep."

Incoherently I poured out my story.

"Bring your car into the drive," he directed briefly, "while I go and light up the office."

He was, as I have said, an old man; but he seemed to have the strength of Samson. For when I stopped the car at the door, he lifted Tom's big helpless form as easily as if it had been a baby's, and carrying it into the consulting-room—to the right of the doorway, just opposite the one from which he had come in answer to my cry—and laid it on the examining-table.

With deft skilful-looking fingers he felt Tom's pulse; his body; his head . . . his pulse again.

"My dear," he said finally, "This boy"—the touch with which he moved Tom's curly dark head was very gentle—"is almost—gone." Desperately I gripped at the chair-back behind me to keep from crying out against the awfulness of the verdict, so much worse now, coming as it did from the lips of one who undoubtedly knew! "We'll have to have an immediate operation—here and now," he added. "It's a bad basal fracture, and we haven't a minute to lose."

THERE and then, by a country general practitioner! As I heard the appalling words, the old-fashioned high-ceiled room seemed to reel around me, the lined kindly face of the old man to recede into a mist.

The speaker of them, however, appeared to regard the prospect as a perfectly simple matter.

"It's forty miles to the nearest hospital and surgeons," I could hear, as from some great distance, the quiet voice going on. "The boy wouldn't last the trip out, and the only doctors you'd find between here and there are my kind—country 'medicos.'"

"Have you ever—performed this operation?" I stammered through trembling lips.

"No," he replied simply, as if that didn't matter in the least; "never in my life."

For a moment stark unreasoning panic seized upon me at the thought of having that most dangerous of operations performed upon the person I loved far better than myself, here, in this country office, by someone who had never done it—and didn't seem to think that made any difference! The dreadful thought occurred to me that he might be insane. But as I met the direct dark eyes that were searching mine across Tom's well-nigh lifeless body, something of their calm cool steadiness seemed to flow into my cringing heart.

Tom was dying. The gray pallor, the sunken, pinched features, the heavy sweat-beads on his head and hands, made that hideously plain, even to me, who knew so little. Any chance was worth the trying!

"Please do it, Doctor," I said.

I shall not try to write about the next half hour. It is too hard, even now, after a year has passed. The grisly-seeming preparations. . . . The rows of ugly little instruments laid out in cruel glistening array on a clean towel. . . . The sponges and bandages in readiness.

"Fortunately I had everything laid out after my last emergency operation, a couple of days ago, so we won't have that to do now," the doctor remarked with his kindly

smile as he hung his coat over the back of a chair, and shrugged himself into his white linen jacket, "And we shan't need ether," he added. "Even when this operation is successfully over, it's some little time before consciousness returns, so we'll be spared that delay, too! I'll just have you go out now." He was deftly shaving away Tom's thick hair. "I'll call you if I need help. And this sort of thing isn't easy to watch!"

AT the door I turned to look back. The rain was once more pouring in sheets down the window-panes, for the storm was returning. The picture is forever engraved on my memory: the bare orderly consulting-room, with its brilliant overhead light; the still figure on the table; the intent gray-haired one bending over it . . . the sudden gleam of a knife.

"Good-by, Tom, darling!" I whispered in my heart. And stumbling out into the hall, I dropped onto a chair beside the door.

The minutes dragged leadenly by. I couldn't even listen for movements in the lighted room, for the roar of the renewed downpour drowned every other sound, even when the long peals of thunder died away.

My teeth were soon chattering, for there seemed to be open windows somewhere. Yet I didn't dare move to look for them lest a call come for me to help in some way. . . . And with the deepening chill, the scent of roses that I had noticed on my entrance became more pronounced. The doctor's hobby must be the growing of fine flowers, I thought—as one does think of trifles in dreadful moments.

At last the door opened, and the tall white-coated figure emerged.

"We'll be all right now, I think, my dear," he said with his be-

nignant smile. "He's coming around nicely."

The terrible grayness was indeed leaving Tom's face, I saw, as I entered the room; his breathing, almost imperceptible before, was now plainly to be seen. He had been moved from the table to the big comfortable sofa that stood against the wall and warmly covered with blankets.

"How can I thank you, Doctor?" I stammered through my grateful tears.

"I don't need any thanks," he answered. "The effort to recall people from the gates of death to those who love them is its own great reward—especially a fine boy like this one!" He smiled again. "No one has ever been able to do me a greater favor than bringing me a good hard emergency case to work on! . . . Yes, that pulse is coming along splendidly."

IT was nearly an hour before Tom opened his eyes, clear and sane, for there had been no ether to confuse him.

"Gosh, darling!" he whispered weakly. "I certainly have a head on me! Did I hit something hard?"

"Not so chatty, young man!" broke in the doctor in his kindly way. "You've had a major operation on that head of yours, and it's up to you to keep quiet. I'll just give you something to take the edge off the pain."

"Thank you, sir," Tom said, as the hypodermic plunged into his arm.

"That will make him sleep for twelve hours at least," said the doctor as he pulled the blankets well up around Tom's shoulders. "The undertaker has a good ambulance, and you can get him in the morning to take you to the nearest city hospital; that's Hampton, forty miles from here. And now, if you'll excuse me, I'll go back to sleep.

I've had a long illness—and I have to rest."

I noticed then, for the first time, what I had failed to mark in my terror for Tom: the pallor of the handsome benevolent face, the shadows under the keen dark eyes.

"Oh, do go and rest, Doctor," I begged. "We'll be quite all right."

"Your hands are cold," Tom murmured sleepily, already under the influence of the quick-acting opiate. "Better cover up well."

"I'll be well covered," the doctor answered reassuringly. His pleasant smile took in both of us; but he stooped to lay a hand on Tom's shoulder for an instant before he passed out of the open door.

But he did not go upstairs, I noted with relief as I heard his retreating footsteps pass across the hall and into the room from which I had roused him. There was something about his calm, benevolent, and wholly reassuring presence that made me thankful to have him near.

TOM soon dropped into a heavy, drugged slumber. The night wore on. Beside him, in a big chair, I half-dozed, worn out with the long strain. The storm had died; the house was very still.

Still; that is, except for a shade, or something, that was rattling continually in the room across the hall where there was evidently a window open. For myself, I didn't mind the creeping draft on my feet; but I hated to think that the tired doctor, resting after so delicate an operation, performed when he had been ill, might be roused from his slumber before long if the noise continued. But, half-asleep myself, it was almost dawn before it occurred to me that if I tiptoed quietly in and found and closed the window I could prevent his being disturbed.

Tom always carried a flashlight in his pocket; and by some strange

chance it was quite uninjured by the fall.

Softly I made my way across the hall; softly opened the closed door. The cold air of the room was heavy and sweet with the scent of roses.

Cautiously I flashed the torch.

I was standing in a large old-fashioned parlor, with white-panneled walls and dark walnut furniture. It was the shade of the window directly across from me that was making the disturbance. As I started over to it, I moved the torch slowly around the room—and what I saw brought me to a sudden trembling stop.

Before the fireplace and within a yard of me a coffin was standing, its dark polished surface gleaming dully in the light of the torch. Around the trestle roses were banked, and fresh garden flowers, their odor sweet on the cold air of the room.

And the face on the satin pillow, calm and reposeful in the majesty of death, was the one that had bent so intently over Tom's motionless form, that had smiled so kindly upon both of us . . . so kind still that my impulse to turn and flee was immediately checked.

Incredulously I bent and touched the quietly folded hands. They were icy, with the chill that is not of the world of the living. Shaken and trembling, I dropped upon a chair, my mind a whirling tumult of confused emotion.

HE was dead, that tall old man who had been—asleep; who had been ill, and must rest; whose skilful hands, folded now in marble rigidity, had brought Tom back from the Gate which their owner had already passed. . . .

The room was still cold with the chill of the mountain air; the blind still rattled; the heavy odor of the flowers was well-nigh overpowering. But I was not afraid. Groping

for the light switch, I flooded the silent place with radiance, and dropped on my knees beside the coffin.

"Thank you," I whispered as my tears fell fast on the quiet hands that had saved my husband from the grave. "Oh, thank you—thank you!"

And for a long time I knelt there, awed and overcome by a sense of nearness to unseen things that pass human understanding.

With morning light the old housekeeper came down; she was stone deaf, as the doctor had said.

"My land, but you gave me a start!" she exclaimed as I met her at the foot of the stairs, "You'll have to write what you want to say," she added, "I can't hear a word, and I don't hold with those ear-phones and such."

She seemed quite satisfied with my explanation that my husband had been injured; that, seeing the doctor's sign, I had stopped at the house; and that, receiving no answer to my rings, and finding the door open, I had helped him into the surgery to wait till morning for the doctor.

"My, my! but it would just have suited the doctor!" she said. "Nothing he liked better than to be called up from a good sound sleep for something serious. A real doctor, *he* was! Dead in his bed yesterday morning. . . . Good thing you didn't mistake the front parlor for the office," she added. "He's in there—at least, that's where the undertaker said he was going to put him when he brought him back last night, just as I was going to bed—and you might have got a scare. . . . Though I guess he couldn't scare anyone if he still looks as peaceful as he did when I found him in the morning! I'll get you some breakfast before I go into see him." And the housekeeper hurried off toward the kitchen.

I TOLD the same story to the undertaker when, in response to my telephoned summons, he arrived with his ambulance. What would they both have said, had I told the truth?

We were only a little more than a hundred miles from home, and he agreed to take us the whole distance for a sum which, to my city mind, seemed very reasonable indeed.

"The doctor's funeral isn't till tomorrow," he said; "so it's easy enough for me to go. I'll just step in and take a look around." And he disappeared into the closed room.

"Can you beat that!" he said as he emerged, an odd expression on his face. "That old housekeeper of his has always been fine at her job, but kind of queer in the head. He'd left a note saying that when he died, he didn't want a mourning affair made of it, and not to put a wreath on the door, or do things different in any way. So she wouldn't have anyone in to stay with her, because that would certainly be doing different. And when I came to fix things up in the parlor, just as she was going up to bed last night, she told me not to slip the spring-lock on the front door when I got through, because he'd never locked it in his life. But who in the world would have thought that she'd have the nerve to put his white office-coat on him instead of his best one that he hardly ever wore! She must have come down to look at him after I'd gone. . . . And believe me," he added, "he looks a lot more like himself!"

For an instant dizziness forced me to close my eyes. . . . That tall spare gray-haired figure, shaking itself into the linen jacket!

"Can there ever be a mistake about people being really dead?" I asked, striving to make my tone sound natural. "Could he perhaps

be in some kind of trance, and have got up and wandered around—dazed?"

BUT even as I voiced the words, I realized the ridiculousness of them. "Wandering!" "Dazed!" Those keen searching dark eyes; those deft, sure hands; that super-human strength!

"Mistakes can't be made about death any more," the man replied simply. "We have a test now that is absolutely certain. I don't think I'll say anything about it to her," he added, "I guess people will like to see him just as he looked in the office. I'll just pretend I didn't notice anything."

Nor would the old woman who hadn't seen him in the other coat, notice anything!

On the long trip home, as I sat by Tom's unconscious form on the cot, I learned much about the good old doctor. A man who had loved his profession above everything else in the world, save one thing—his only son, who was to follow in his father's footsteps. The boy had finished medical school; and before beginning on his hospital internship, had gone away on a hunting-trip with a friend. He had fractured his skull in a fall, and died before help could be obtained and the operation that would have saved him performed.

"It broke the doctor's heart, I guess," the undertaker went on. "The boy was all he had, for his wife died twenty years before. And from then on, you could see a little difference in how he felt about his cases. Not that he ever gave anyone anything but the best that was in him, of course; but when it came to young fellows like his boy—and this husband of yours—he'd have been glad to kill himself for them any day. He worked and slaved over them, and sat up nights with them. 'Just to make sure,' he'd

jay! It was overdoing over a young chap with pneumonia that took him off," he added. "He'd had angina for years, and knew he ought to be careful; but instead he worked over the youngster for fifteen hours straight—pulled him through, too—and then came home and went to sleep . . . for good!" The undertaker was quite unashamed of his emotion. "It certainly does seem queer," he added, "to think of a fine young fellow like this one needing his help—and him lying with his hands folded!"

What could I say to that? . . . Nothing!

TOM didn't rouse until after we reached the hospital. Though if he had talked, the undertaker would probably have taken what he said for delirious raving. To the surgeons who examined him, I simply said that it had been an emergency operation, performed by a country doctor.

What else could I have said?

It was a splendidly performed operation, they remarked; and the

results bore out their diagnosis. Tom improved rapidly and steadily, and in a far shorter time than I had dared to hope, was as well as ever.

But I have never told him what I alone have known until my decision to tell it to others, in this fashion and under another name. Who could say what effect the knowledge might have upon him that his rescue from death was effected by hands already dead!

Nor have I any explanation—if explanations mean answers to "hows" and "whys." I have heard it said, however, that after death the soul lingers for a time near the familiar body which housed it for so long. If that is true, and the soul of the good old doctor heard once more, in the silence of the night, the call for help that it had never in life refused, why shouldn't it have been permitted to re-enter that body long enough to—answer?

There are many things in life that we must be content to accept without understanding them. Why not this?