

The Man Who Could Not Believe

by Blanche Theodore



A "DIFFERENT" STORY

HE had been afraid of the chloral. Vachell knew that as he seemed to rise slowly in the air, the fleshy weight of his body nil. Who was he? What was he? And then harshly, pitilessly, the knowledge came to him. He was dead! The big dose of chloral that he had grimly swallowed in a moment of cowardly bravado had done what in that base moment he had half hoped it might do—it had killed him!

But he hadn't really wanted to die!

Vachell knew that too, as he seemed to float more determinedly upward into an atmosphere of almost unbearable warmth. He hadn't wanted to die! That puerile wish had been like a lot of his other wishes; a spawn of his weakness. Dying meant repudiated obligations. And it also meant something else—absolute inability to ever assume them again. While one was alive one could always promise oneself to assume them to-morrow. And dying meant other things.

It meant leaving Rose, it meant renouncing forever the idea of really knowing her—of—

A paroxysm of agony tore Vachell's ghostly frame. Rose, his wife! Now he could never know her, could never be the husband he had promised himself daringly to be when they had stood together at the altar! Now he had done it, had brought his weakness to the point of criminality, had absolutely destroyed the flimsy fabric he had called his character! Now he had done it—utterly, positively, unspeakably—left Rose to the arms of Peter Kane!

The horrid thought held Vachell quiescent. Curiously he seemed not to ascend, but to hang suspended in the fetid atmosphere. Peter Kane. *Peter Kane!* Now he would step in, fine eyes aglow, strong, stern mouth relaxed, cool, capable, resourceful, gather Rose in his arms and be what he, Wilbur Vachell, had ever wanted to be but had never had the courage—the strong man who carries others to peace on

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the resurgent tide of his strength! Peter Kane!

Something inside Vachell snapped. He had the sensation that, his eyes were narrowing, his hands clenching. A thought, mad, riotous, was rushing through his brain. Dead or not he could still think, feel. Maybe there was yet time. Maybe—

He looked deliberately about him.

He was in his own chamber. Now the reason for the unbearable warmth, the fetid atmosphere struck him forcibly. He was just a foot from the ceiling. Below him the steam pipes were popping, the windows tightly closed. Now it came to him how before he had taken the fatal chloral he had closed the windows and turned on the steam. Nobody thought of him! With the house full of servants and the month December he could die of the cold and nobody would care! And he had wanted to die warm. He the consummate coward who had thought to escape his torturing thoughts with the pusillanimous chloral cup!

But he had not escaped them. Abruptly he turned his inspection on himself. What was he anyway?

Ghostly, wraithlike, a trousered form hung some five feet below his bent head. It was of dazzling whiteness, yet distinctly he could see the outline of the trousers he had just taken off, the coat he had thrown on the chair. As he bent his head he had the sensation of the resistance of a starched collar, yet when he put out his hand he could feel no collar. In fact he could feel nothing. Tested at different points his white form seemed to have no substance. Although when he closed his fingers about some part of his body there was the sensation of clutching thin air, there was actually no feeling of finger contact: it was as though only the intellect of him lived, as though he were truly that pleasant phantom of the psychic world—a disembodied spirit. But who had evoked him?

He smiled grimly. To be evoked it would have to be known that he were dead. And no

one knew it. No one cared to know it. As he began slowly to descend he hoped no one would know it. It would spoil his game.

As he descended he saw his wide mahogany bed in one corner of the room. On it was a human body stretched at full length, arm thrown carelessly across the pillow. At the side of the bed was an empty chloral bottle, a glass overturned with a spoon in it.

Vachell recognized the bath-robe first. It was his! And then he recognized the features, the hair, the position! It was himself! He, Wilbur Vachell, the fool who had suicided because he could not win the love of his wife!

He had the sensation of stinging tears. It seemed pitiful, useless, horrible! And he wanted to be alive! He had not meant to die! He had not meant it at all!

He approached the body gingerly. In sudden savagery he clutched the arm of it, intending to turn it over to scrutinize more closely the weak face. But he met unexpected resistance. Like a live thing the body recoiled tenaciously to its original position.

Vachell laughed harshly. What did it matter? Yet as he went through the paneled oak door as if it were nothing there was grim triumph on his face. No, they did not know that he was dead! There was still time!

He was out in the hall.

II.

HIS footsteps made no sound on the thickly carpeted stairs. Unobserved he reached one landing; then the down-stairs hall. Then he became conscious of confusion, of wild running about, of loud voices hysterically pitched. He crouched back of a huge fern in a brass kettle. His lip curled. Did they know that he was dead?

The library door opened suddenly. Forth came Dr. Crest followed by his wife's personal maid, the butler, and the three home maids.

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They were wild, distraught; his wife's maid was wringing her hands in evident frenzy.

"Where's Vachell?" The doctor boomed it thunderously.

Back of the brass kettle Vachell's eyes had the sensation of narrowing. Vachell indeed! In his presence the doctor bowed and scraped and showed him every courtesy. Now in front of the servants he "Vachelled" him. He had always known he was a pompous ass! He had always wanted to forcibly eject him from the house. But Rose had prevailed—he was her private physician! Vachell smiled grimly. After all being dead wasn't so bad. You found out things.

And then he was sharply conscious that the five people in front of him were enacting a tragedy and not a comedy. Pieced together fragments of sentences gave a startling suggestion. Vachell had the sensation of sweat on his forehead, cold clamminess about his heart. And then forgetting that he was dead, forgetting anything and everything but the horrible, startling fact that stood out from the conversation, he stepped forward suddenly.

"It isn't true," he said hoarsely.

But they didn't see him. They didn't even hear him. Unconscious that the master of the house was facing him the doctor whipped out a note-book and began making entries. The maids went on wringing their hands, alternately sobbing and shrieking. And then Vachell knew. Dead, he was invisible to mortal eyes. Dead, his voice was inaudible to mortal ears. There was no use to hide. He could go about willy-nilly, invisible, inaudible.

But—Rose!

Now the delight in his discovery was drowned by the appalling fact that faced him from the conversation. He dodged abruptly through the library floor. It couldn't be true. It wasn't true. Rose was not dead!

But she was!

With the horrible fear still clutching his heart Vachell moved softly toward the feminine

figure that lay so still on the couch. His Rose! The woman he had loved, hated, yearned over, despaired of, mocked! The woman who meant everything to him, and yet—nothing! The woman for whom he lay up-stairs, inert, sot-like!

Dead!

With a horrible scream Vachell fell on his knees beside the couch. With trembling hands he pushed back the beautiful hair, caressed the face, the hands, the whole body. He was breathing hoarsely, gutturally, as though any moment he might be strangled.

He remained thus for fully five minutes. When he rose to his feet he ran a finger around the edge of his collar as though that things which his fingers could not feel were choking him. And then he smiled, bitterly, ironically. What did it matter? Dead, were could be no recriminations. At least he was not leaving her to the arms of Peter Kane!

And then he sprang sharply to the center of the room. Rage tore him. Futile in life, he was futile in death. Now he would never know if the thing which had poisoned his life and caused his death, were true! Now he would never know if the woman he had married had loved another man! He would never know, never, never!

Furiously his mind went back to the early days of their courtship, to the time when he and big Peter Kane were hot rivals. He had been the stranger—Peter Kane had known her always.

To him—Vachell—she had been superb, indefinable, an unassailable thing of mystery and charm. He had approached her devoutly, breathlessly, much in the manner that one would approach a shrine. It had not seemed possible that she could care for him, that she could even look at him!

But she had. The first day when her large, dark eyes had rested caressingly on his had been a red letter day in his life. Swiftly, more swiftly than he had dared hope, other red letter days followed, until that most incredible thing of all

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happened, she promised to marry him!

And then—on their wedding night—he had discovered her—in the arms of Peter Kane!

“Just saying good-bye to an old, old friend, dear,” she had said frankly, as she had come toward him without the least embarrassment. “You understand, don’t you?”

He had bowed, he remembered that now, extraordinarily low, to hide the gulp that almost strangled him.

That had been the beginning. Savagely, misunderstanding, the canker had eaten into his soul, his life. As was natural her friends were constantly at the house. Peter Kane with the rest.

It had been his weakness! Grimly smiling, Vachell knew that in his death as he had known it in his life. But he had nevertheless persisted. Grimly, carefully, he had appraised Peter Kane, his bigness, his fineness, his virile strength. What had he to offer beside that? He was not big, neither was he strong, neither was he fine! He had nothing but money—money and a tortured soul that refused to claim that which it had taken!

Ah, if he could only know! If he could only know! Standing in the center of the room his tortured soul cried out in agony. If he could only know!

He moved slowly toward the ceiling. There was a horrid smile on his face. Of what use had been his wandering. It had gained him nothing.

And then he stopped abruptly.

Something was coming toward him swiftly, gladly.

III.

AT first he could not make out what it was. And then his heart almost stopped beating. The outlines of it grow more distinct, it assumed form, color, he could see that its lips were parted, showing dazzling teeth, and that its eyes, large, dark, gazed at him with

a kind of pathetic melancholy. It was his wife! It was Rose, the woman he had deliberately willed to see, and yet the woman whom he had not seen because of her unfortunate death!

And yet she did not seem really dead. He marked that now as she stopped a few feet from him, her form fully dressed, richly colored as it might have been in life. He started forward suddenly. The dead, did they have visitations as well as the living?

And then he laughed harshly. The sight of her brought back old heartaches, old jealousies. Things had been too bitter with him to drop them suddenly.

And then he was conscious of the sound of her exquisitely cadenced voice, and that she was holding out her arms to him, appealingly, sadly.

“Wilbur,” she said gently.

But he had not moved a jot from his position. Although emotion tore at him it was bitter, galling. Now that she was conscious of his presence she would use the same tactics she had used in life. She would lie to him with every ounce of her soul, every beat of her heart, lie to him for his money. Oh, why, why hadn’t he been able to see her alive!

And then he was conscious that she was speaking again.

“I love you, Wilbur,” she said softly, “only you. You are mistaken about Peter. I never loved him. But you are so unfeeling, so hard. I must have understanding. You drive me to him. You drive me to him.”

Her voice tapered off sadly

Vachell’s eyes narrowed. His hands clenched. Oh, why did she lie to him now that lying was of no use? His lips curled.

“I suppose I drove you to him the night of our wedding,” he said deliberately.

She drew herself up haughtily. How well he remembered the gesture! And then she smiled the same pitying, condescending smile that, in life, drove him almost to a frenzy.

“I am sorry for the soul of you,” she said

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softly, "the soul of you that is so basely suspicious. It must be a lonely soul, very very lonely." And then her lips curled! "Why don't you go and see Peter," she said then, "and judge for yourself?"

He laughed again, the same harsh, grating laugh.

"I might," he said slowly, "if I could be sure of finding him alive, and if he would not lie to me as you are doing. I might," he said again slowly, "if I could be sure he would not *know* that I was there!"

For a moment he held her eyes. The expression of his never changed. Malignant lights shone from them: matched the set expression of his features, the malicious mutability of his viciously changing mouth.

He was never that way in life! He knew that, as, with a shuddering cry, the woman turned. As he did, at will, she seemed to walk on air, going slowly toward the window.

Maybe it had been the sharp agony of her cry. Maybe it was the pitiful hopelessness of her bent shoulders. Anyway something reached down into the soul of Wilbur Vachell and slightly stirred the depths. Purpose, which had received its death blow at the news of the death of his wife, blazed forth. He forgot that he was dead. He forgot that she was dead. He became again a seething caldron of hope, of desire, that he should accomplish his mission, that he should find out whether or not his wife loved Peter Kane!

His voice rang out peremptory.

"Rose," he said, "wait for me here. I'll be back."

The woman turned. For a second he had a glint of wondrously luminous eyes, of vivid, desirable, palpitating personality.

"Rose," he said hoarsely, and he sprang quickly forward. But as was his body so was hers—thin air.

She had completely vanished.

But—Peter Kane!

Journeying toward the man's home Vachell knew that his mind was still taut, tense, and that there was something highly explosive about this grim single-mindedness of purpose that took stock of nothing but the business in hand. Supposing that he should find that he had not been mistaken! Supposing he should find that they intended to fly together, that his supreme sacrifice in his room had not been in vain! Supposing, most odious of all, he should find Peter Kane dead!

He could not stand another lie! Flying faster and faster through the tinglingly cold air, Vachell was only half conscious that it was cold. He could not stand another lie! And yet what could he do? Breathing heavily he knew that spirit vengeance is ineffective against mortals, and that they would only be conscious of it as they might be physically conscious of a vicious stab of strong wind. The reaction would only tell against himself. It would as utterly destroy his spirit life as doubt of his wife's love had destroyed his physical life.

But he was already in Peter Kane's apartment. There was a sense of finality in his movements as though the end of them were a glorious life instead of almost certain annihilation.

Iteration of the wall entrance of Peter Kane's home had led Vachell to enter by the hall. Rapidly he proceeded to the living-room where he found a roaring wood fire—with two figures beside it.

For a second he held his breath. It couldn't be—they weren't—but closer inspection proved it—they *were*—Peter Kane and his mother!

Then he was not dead! Vachell knew that the knowledge came to him as in a burst of gladness, as a first prognosis that things might not be as he feared. And then he was conscious that there was agony on Mrs. Kane's face, and that she was looking up at her son quite as any mother might look who was seeing him for the last time in quite a while.

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"But it can't be, Peter." her voice low, agonised came to Vachell strangely. "It can't be. I could never endure it."

Straight, tall, the young man stood. Even in his tense anxiety Vachell noted it; quite as though he were meeting a blow as a man should. And then the hardness of his face relaxed, he looked down at his mother, and his big arm went protectingly around her.

"But it must be," he said gently. "My mother would not have me a coward!"

Now as the man's had, the woman's body straightened. Her eyes flashed, and she turned to her son sharply.

"But you're not," she said decidedly.

"But I am," he said softly. "It is cowardly to sneak around another man's wife, when that man thinks she is in love with you. And Vachell thinks so. No one can see it better than I; and it is eating out his heart. And there is no use of it, no use of it," he said brokenly, "for she loves Vachell."

Scarcely breathing, Vachell saw the mother smile. It was a smile of wisdom triumphant, of mother faith supreme. It said more plainly than words that she knew better, that somewhere there was a horrible mistake.

Peter Kane turned sharply.

"Don't smile like that," he said harshly. "What you think is not true. That is what is causing all the trouble, this constant suggestion that Rose has married the wrong man. And she hasn't. I'll tell you something." Now the big man took his mother's hand in his. "Before Vachell came, before there was any intimacy between them, Rose refused me, told me that she had never loved me, that she had only thought of me as a good friend, the best she had ever had."

The pain on the man's face was echoed in the mother's cry. And then, as she had in his youth, she pulled the big man's head to her breast.

"My poor boy," she said softly. "My poor

boy. It is best after all. You are interfering. I didn't understand. You must—go away."

There was a second of silence. Then Peter Kane pulled himself away gently.

"I must," he said firmly. His lips parted. "But I wish I could see Vachell first," he added and he smiled a quixotic sort of smile that had no place on this earth.

"You needn't!"

Was it Vachell's scream?

He didn't know, neither did Kane, who walked slowly toward the window.

But Vachell was conscious of a blinding, glaring flash of light. Everything tumbled about his ears as if the darkness which had enfolded him were being ruthlessly destroyed. And then—

A tearing, rending sensation of pain; wrenching, contortionlike agony; and a pair of mortal eyes opened. In variegated bathrobe—the mortal, Wilbur Vachell—was gazing straight into the eyes of his doctor!

"Close call," said the latter grimly as he got stiffly to his feet. His face was white and worn as if the vigil had been a long one.

But Vachell pushed the bedclothes away wildly. Things were seething in his brain. Stingingly cold, frost-bitten air, log fires, low voices were strangely intermingled with an effulgent transcendent sense of happiness that made quiescence impossible.

"Where—where am I?" he asked incoherently.

"Safe." The doctor's voice was gruff, sharp. He pushed his patient back gently. "But stay where you are."

"But I can't."

Vachell's voice rose excitedly. Now other visions were replacing the first ones, and he was seeing his own hall, a group of excited servants, a man in dazzling white behind a huge fern dish.

"I can't. You—you don't understand. Rose is dead!"

The doctor's brows knit heavily.

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“Dead!”

“Yes, I saw her myself?”

Now Vachell’s eyes glittered strangely, and he ran his hand through his thick, upstanding hair.

And then his whole frame shook as if he had been struck by the ague. A fearful knowledge was his, a knowledge that was born spontaneously with the running of his hand through his hair. For—miracle of miracles—he not only had the sensation of feeling the hair—he really *felt* it! That meant only one thing, one stupefying unbelievable thing, that his spirit, disembodied, free, had again entered its fleshy tabernacle, that he was no longer dead, that—in short—he was alive! It meant only one thing, that he, the poltroon, who had sought to escape his problems by death was again facing them, was again the agonized husband who was playing a second to Peter Kane!

And yet, was he?

As he sank wearily back upon his pillow he glanced sharply around. Everything was in its place, everything he remembered in life; his Morris chair, his bookcase, his lamp. And then as he met the eyes of the doctor holding to his lips a glass of golden brown liquid, his eyes narrowed. They should not know!

And then he *heard* his own voice, weak, soft.

“I—must have been out of my head,” he said slowly. “What did I do?”

“Took an overdose of chloral.” The doctor’s voice was sharp, cutting. “You’ve lain in a state of coma for two days. We thought you were gone.”

If the soul of Vachell was ironically smiling there was no indication of it in the half-parted lips. There was more to come.

“And my wife?” he said sharply.

“Mrs. Vachell has been almost prostrated.” Now Vachell caught a flicker of the doctor’s eye and he knew the severity was assumed to hide his intense emotion. And he knew

something else, too. And that was that Lawrence Thompson, his old time friend and medical adviser, had read the story of the empty chloral bottle as he had, months before, read the story of Vachell’s domestic tragedy.

And then Vachell knew that his friend was coming swiftly toward him, and that there was a strange meaning in his eyes.

“You’re wrong, Wilbur.” he said gently. “Very wrong. I’ll call her.”

Grimly waiting. Vachell knew that he scarcely breathed. The effulgent, transcendent sense of happiness with which he had returned to life had not abated one jot. It was only tempered by uncertainty, grim uncertainty of his fantastic spirit life. Had the whole thing been a dream, or was it the real experience of the soul held palpitatingly between life and death? Anyway, at the familiar quick step in the hall Vachell knew that something pitifully eager flared forth, something that was curiously intertwined with Peter Kane’s priceless message. Ah—if only the mortal life could compliment the spirit one!

And then he knew that something queer was happening, the very queerest thing in his whole experience.

He was gazing directly at his wife. But he was not seeing her as he had ever seen her before, her cool eyes stripping his soul naked, and laughing insolently at its cowardice. No, he was seeing her in quite a different fashion, quite an imperious fashion, quite in a fashion that would accord with the terrible meaning of his would-be suicide. For the first time in his life he was seeing her imperiously, masterfully, demanding as his right the full truth of their relations! He—Vachell—was seeing her as Peter Kane might have seen her, coolly, resourcefully, bringing her to him with the full strength of his demand!

It was the direct result of his late experience. Waiting fearfully, Vachell knew that, that—dream or reality—something had burned itself

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brandingly into his soul, and that he could no longer go along carelessly watching and waiting, as he had the whole year and a half of his hideous marriage. Something stronger than his fear, stronger than his weakness, stronger than his pride—his agonized soul—was standing forth strongly, sternly demanding without fear the knowledge that belonged to it.

And then he was conscious that something glorious was happening, something strange was happening, that his wife, his glorious, imperious, haughty wife was holding out her arms to him, and that there was something beseeching in her eyes, something pitiful in her eyes, something that had absolutely never been there before. She was his dream woman!

Savagely he threw the bedclothes aside and he came swiftly toward her, his dream woman in the flesh and blood. And then he knew that his arms were around her and that he was tilting back her head, that their eyes were meeting, that the ineffable was happening, the ecstasy that he had so craved, but that he had not dared hope for!

And then he knew that his voice, hoarse, glorified, was trembling on the air.

“My love,” he said, and he pushed back the strands of her glorious hair. “My love.”

His wife’s voice trembling, cadenced, reached him fearfully.

“My husband,” she said slowly, “Wilbur—my husband. You—you believe. You—you *believe!*”

Did he nod?

Wilbur Vachell never knew, as a few moments later he found himself being put gently back to bed. Weakness was claiming him. But he knew effulgently, transcendently, as he closed his eyes that it was not the weakness of the spirit, but only of the flesh, the flesh that had been torn and bruised with its Styxlike struggle. But what did it matter! He knew! She knew he knew!

Two days later, Lawrence Thompson, stopping on his way to the office told him a strange thing. Peter Kane had left town, was establishing himself permanently in another city.