

From Over the Border

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“HELP! Help!”
Roused suddenly from a sound half-awake, awaiting with tense nerves that repetition of the cry which would prove it a reality, not an intensely vivid dream voice.

Ah, there it was again! An unutterable awe thrilled him, so terrible was the note of horror and agony in the voice.

“Help! Ah-h-h—God!” Jerked out in a kind of smothered gasp, the words died away, leaving an indescribably dreadful silence that was heavy with intangible premonitions of evil.

Broad awake by this time, the startled old bachelor sprang out of bed, flooded the room with light, and reached for his dressing gown. In a moment he had slipped it on and thrust his feet into a pair of slippers.

Unless he was vastly mistaken, that agonized midnight cry for assistance came from the apartment of the Orville Rodmans, across the corridor from his rooms. And it was borne in upon him that it was Mrs. Rodman’s voice he had heard, for although he was not personally acquainted with the lady he had often heard her voice, which was an exceptionally sweet and well-modulated one.

Thirty seconds could not have elapsed before he was knocking at the door of the Rodmans’ apartment, his heart almost stopping under the weight of the ominous silence that reigned. He had almost persuaded himself that she had called out in the throes of a nightmare, when he heard a suffocated moan that fell weak and stifled upon his

straining ears. *What was happening behind those closed doors?*

His alarm and apprehension grew until he could bear the suspense no longer; from loud raps he began to pound with bare fists upon the door. Then he grasped the knob, twisting and pulling at it as he strove to open the door, which appeared to be securely locked. No response came from within; that ghastly silence still bore down upon him, heavy with midnight terror. He was on the point of seeking other help when something happened.

The key grated in the lock—the door swung open slowly, as if under the impetus of a gust of icy air that swept out upon him with almost physical force and tangibility, pushing him to one side as though he had been a featherweight. As it enveloped him with its frosty chill, he found himself shivering with what was more than physical cold; he experienced for a moment the uncanny sensation as of a malevolent presence that laughed at him evilly as he shrank before its unseen power. Terrible as was his momentary sensation, the stress of emotion in that cry he had heard a few seconds previous drew him across the threshold.

He touched the switch, which he knew was located beside the door in a position analogous to the switch in his own apartment, flooding the room and the adjoining corridor with a blaze of light. An icy chill, entirely out of place on such a mild autumn night, lingered in the still midnight air. Benham looked up and down the corridor; there was no one in sight, and as no one had passed him, he entered the room, confident of meeting one of

the Rodmans or their maid, for one of the three must have opened the door to him. To his bewilderment, the room was entirely empty. Upon the strangeness of this he did not ponder much at the moment, although he was to remember it afterward; the cry he had heard was sufficient warranty for him to make all possible haste.

The door of the bedroom, which adjoined the room he had entered, was closed. The kindly intruder hesitated but a moment, tapped lightly, then entered, touching the electric switch as he crossed the threshold. For a moment he was completely staggered; he had expected to meet someone in this room, but there appeared to be no one in the apartment. To be sure, there were signs of recent, very recent, occupancy; the trailing silk and filmy laces of a delicate negligee half covered a chaise longue, and upon the chiffonier Benham's quick scrutiny observed a discarded collar and tie, presumably removed by young Rodman, whose other garments were neatly disposed on a chair beside a great wardrobe opposite the door Benham had just entered. The bachelor could have sworn there was no human being in the room, and against this he had to put the reality of the agonized cries he had heard in Clara Rodman's peculiarly sweet, penetrating tones.

He looked about, stupefied to see nothing but the dresser, a chiffonier, tables, chairs, the wardrobe. Positively there was something uncanny about it. As he advanced into the middle of the room the great mirror in the wardrobe reflected his disheveled figure from head to foot; he could not help seeing it, although he did not want to look at it. To observe one's self advancing to meet one at midnight just after receiving a severe shock to one's nerves is a far from reassuring sight, he discovered. But he felt his eyes drawn toward the mirror with a magnetic attraction that he afterward realized was strangely uncanny.

And then—unexpectedly—from within the depths of the glass started up a figure! Mr. Benham felt cold perspiration starting out over his entire body at the shock of it. The face that regarded him was a man's face with deep-set eyes, holding such a smile of triumphant malice that the bachelor gave audible expression to his own astonishment with a loud "Ugh!" as he whirled on his heel to encounter the individual who was glaring over his shoulder.

He turned. And then he stood rooted to the spot, his mouth wide-open, his eyes staring. *He was*

alone in the room, as before! No one stood behind him or to either side of him. He sprang to the door, but there was no one in the next room. Then he realized that the mirror was not in a position to reflect anyone who stood in the doorway. He turned again to the glass to meet only his own astounded, mystified, and apprehensive eyes.

It was too much for Mr. Benham. He started for the door, and would have left the uncanny mystery to solve itself, had not a muffled, smothered sound as of faint, futile struggling near at hand met his ear. Once more he looked about him, drawing a deep breath to steady his jumping nerves. The mirror reflected his figure innocently enough. He looked at it as if daring it to play him another such scurvy trick, when the truth penetrated his mind in a blinding flash of intuition. Horror grasped at him with numbing hands as he rushed to the rescue.

The wardrobe was a fraud; the mirror was the front panel of a handsome but treacherous folding bed—and the bed was closed—and within it—His thoughts failed to operate further. He began to pull and tug with frantic haste at the terrible piece of furniture, his momentary uncanny, weird impression thrust to one side by his realization of the terrible truth and the necessity to keep a clear head. The bed had been firmly closed. As he pulled he was rewarded by another faint sound that told him life yet lingered in one or both of the victims of the treacherous mechanism.

At last he had it open; with a creaking reluctance, as of some horrid monster unwillingly disgorging its prey, it had come slowly down to the floor. The covers and the mattress had sunk to the head of the bed when it rose, almost completely cutting off the air from the unfortunate sleepers. Whether or not Benham was in time to resuscitate them he dared not think, but he did not venture to leave them, knowing that every moment was precious. He drew the bedding anxiously from the huddled bodies lying so inert and motionless, and placed an eager ear at the breast of Clara Rodman and then at her husband's. The woman's heart fluttered faintly, but Benham's soul was sick at the confirmation of his misgivings with respect to young Rodman; the poor young fellow was beyond mortal assistance.

Memories of a treatise on artificial breathing came dimly to the rescuer's mind as he applied himself actively to restoring the beautiful young woman who lay there so pale and lovely in her

intimate disarray, and his exertions were amply rewarded by a sigh which breathed from her parted lips with weak plaintiveness; he redoubled his efforts. Presently the long, curving lashes lifted languidly and her great dark eyes looked into Benham's at first without recognition. As consciousness returned, a burning blush spread over her face at the realization that it was a man, and strange man at that, who was bending solicitously over her.

With a sudden access of nervous strength, she drew the disturbed coverings about her, the while her melancholy gaze questioned Benham's with a dread beyond description.

"Who are you?" she murmured weakly. "What are you doing here? What has happened?"

"I'm Jasper Benham, your neighbor. I heard your call for help; found you shut up in this folding bed. Don't look!" he cried out with futile warning as she stirred, pricked by sudden misgivings, to look for her husband.

She disregarded his command. Weakly she turned, to see the lifeless form of her husband. Her eyes wild with desperate fear, she reached out, caught that limp arm, pulled at it anxiously.

"Orville! Orville! Speak to me! Speak to your Clara! Oh, he does not reply; he is deaf to my voice! God have pity! Then he is dead!"

She fell back in merciful unconsciousness.

Benham picked up her slender body and carried it to the chaise longue throwing the negligee over it; he dared not leave her in that treacherous bed while he went to rouse the maid, who, he now recalled, slept in the servants' quarters. He phoned the house superintendent, informed him of the tragedy, and was finally able to leave the apartment, leaving the young widow in the capable hands of her devoted maid.

He returned to his own rooms, but found it impossible to go to bed. Every time he looked at his eminently well-behaved bedstead it was to imagine it rearing up in the night, tossing him out upon the floor, and trampling him as a trained elephant crushes a condemned criminal. The impression was so strong that he got out his pipe and determined to make himself comfortable in a morris chair for the rest of the night.

His thoughts reverted persistently to a particular incident of the night's tragic experience that, the more he pondered it, the more inexplicable it became. This was the fact of the locked door that

had been opened to him so mysteriously. Benham could have sworn that the door was locked when he tried the handle. That he had heard the sound of the key in the lock before the door opened, he now recollected with perfect distinctness. It followed logically that someone had unlocked and opened the door to him, as his own hands were not on the knob at the time.

He began to reflect the smallest incident, striving to overlook nothing, as even the smallest thing might serve to throw some light on what now appeared to be inexplicable. There had been no one but himself in the corridor, either before or after the opening of the door. He had glanced around the room as soon as he had crossed the threshold, pushing the door back against the wall instinctively as he observed no one in the room ahead of him. There was no possible chance that the owner of the hands which had unlocked the door could have slipped past him and into the corridor; nor could this person have had time to conceal himself in the Rodman apartment in the interim between the opening of the door and Benham's abrupt entrance.

Benham hated to draw the only inference possible under the circumstances, but could not avoid doing so; either the door had not been locked—and he would have staked anything that it must have opened before his blows and shakings had it not been locked—or the person who unlocked it was invisible to the human eye. This conclusion arrived at, the old bachelor sat up straight in his chair, drew a long breath, and unconsciously threw a searching look over his shoulder as though to satisfy himself that he was quite alone; it was not a pleasant thought to entertain—the thought that the invisible might have accompanied him back to his own apartment! The paradoxical side of his action did not strike Benham at the moment.

There were other phenomena to be considered that bore upon his conclusions, also strongly in favor of the supernatural. He remembered that upon the door's opening he had felt the chill breath of a deadly cold wind that had pushed upon him with almost tangible force. That there had been no good reason for a draft Benham was positive; he knew that the windows in the room he had entered were closed, and the bedroom door had been closed until his hand opened it, so that the wide-open windows there could not have been the originating cause of the current of air which had been so strong that it

had affected him powerfully at the time.

Benham was not overimaginative, nor was he superstitious. He would much have preferred to have reasoned out the entire occurrence, uncanny as it now began to appear, on strictly material grounds. But this satisfaction was denied him; by no possible twisting of the facts could he account for the unlocking and opening of the door. And then— He laid down his pipe, for a sudden tremor shook him uncontrollably; he had remembered yet another thing which in the moment's excitement he had thrust to one side mentally. *Who and what was the man he had seen in the mirror looking over his shoulder with such malevolent triumph?*

Arrived at this point, Benham could not have slept a wink for the remainder of the night had he been offered a million dollars for a short nap. *Who was that man?* He could not deny having seen the reflection, and where there is a reflection there must be a solid body to cast it. Had there, then, been a man in the Rodman apartment, an evilly disposed stranger? The expression of that face distorted with malevolence—horrors! The mere recollection of it was disturbing. Yet had there been a man behind him, a man so close as to have appeared actually looking over his shoulder, how was it that when Benham turned briskly on his heel there was nobody behind him? No human being could have left the room without making a sound or being seen as he fled in that instant of time between Benham's discovery of the reflection and his almost instantaneous glance behind him. Could it have been his own imagination? He denied this to himself, much as he disliked to give credence to what he had always looked upon as superstition and overcredulity.

Dawn found Benham still puffing at his pipe, still pondering the strange and uncanny occurrences of the night, no nearer to a solution than when he had begun to puzzle over them. With morning arrived the coroner, who, when he learned from Mrs. Rodman of the bachelor's share in her rescue, dropped in at Benham's apartment to hear his recital. He listened to the details abstractedly until Benham diffidently mentioned the strange event of the door that had apparently been unlocked and opened to him without human intervention.

"That's odd, the door opening that way," observed he, his forehead wrinkling. "Are you sure no one passed you into the hall? Are you positive the door was locked? Did you look behind it?"

Benham went over his calculations of the previous night, this time orally.

"The Rodman apartment is on the fifth floor," the coroner mused. "The fire escape does not give on any room that could have been reached in that brief moment by any human being. Moreover, every window was securely fastened on the inside, except those of the bedroom, which open on a deep, wide shaft. No human agency could have opened that door," he summed up reluctantly. "And as Mrs. Rodman also confirms your insistence about the door's having been locked—" He shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

"I wonder if her first husband could have had anything to do with the tragedy," he suddenly remarked, after a moment's silent thought. "William Tolliver was mighty shrewd when alive, I've heard. Looks to me as though he'd lost nothing of his smartness by dying! I don't know yet just what he may have had to do in this case, but I have a strong intuition that he's mixed up in it somehow."

"I didn't know that Mrs. Rodman had had a previous marital experience," ejaculated Benham.

"Tolliver divorced her for running off with young Rodman."

Benham's interest increased. He urged the coroner to share with him whatever knowledge he might have of Clara Rodman's life, in the hope that it might throw some light on the occurrences of the past night. Agreeable to this request, the old bachelor was soon in possession of the following facts:

At seventeen her dying father urged upon her what appeared to him a most advantageous marriage with Tolliver, who loved her madly. His life seemed bound up in her. He spent his spare moments constructing the most charming bits of furniture for her and surrounded her with comforts, even luxuries, such as she had never known before. But one day, while she complacently accepted the passionate adoration of her elderly husband, appeared Orville Rodman—rich, young, romantic, handsome, aristocratic—all, in a word, that the elderly husband was not.

Clara was flattered, then fluttered, by Rodman's attentions. And one day Tolliver, who had grown keenly suspicious, interrupted an interview that set his head whirling and almost stopped the beating of his heart. He left the room without a single word, a single glance backward that would have shown the

rash young people what his sentiments might be. Clara was terrified, knowing her husband to be a man of fierce, implacable nature; she yielded at once to pleadings which up to this time she had resisted, and fled with Rodman.

Tolliver discovered them after several months, and offered to divorce his erring wife upon one condition; she and young Rodman must swear on the Bible to accept and use the wedding gift he would make them. It was assuredly a strange and unheard-of proposition.

Clara, womanlike, was anxious to regain, as far as possible, the social position she had recklessly risked; in order, then, to be free to marry the man for whom she had thrown all aside, she urged upon Rodman to accept the proposition. He yielded; they took the oath, and Tolliver kept his promise. In due course of time Clara was freed.

Rodman married her at once; to do him justice, it had not been other than a serious matter with him from the beginning. He took her abroad for a couple of years. Upon their return to the apartment he had leased, they found a letter awaiting them at Rodman's solicitor's—the fatal folding bed, made by the hands of the injured husband, was at their disposal, subject to the terms of their oath. Imagine the subtle irony of the gift! The young man declared, oath or no oath, he would have none of it. The pair came perilously near their first disagreement, for Clara persisted—in spite of her shrinking—in sticking conscientiously to the agreement; something of her former husband's powerfully passionate nature seemed to influence her in holding to her decision. Tears on her part, a shrug of the shoulders from Rodman, and the unwelcome gift was installed in their chamber.

What a gift was that! What must have been the reflections of the pair who had gained their happiness over the broken heart and the violated hearthstone of another human being, as they shared that strange gift—thinking, as they surely could not resist, of the donor of the gift. William Tolliver must have been amply revenged upon the despoiler of his home and happiness night after night. The two young people became more and more reserved with each other as the days and nights, equally wretched, passed. Orville began haunting his clubs again, returning at night as though drawn by a subtly powerful magnet to toss and reflect, to grind his teeth, to toss again. Clara grew melancholy, and her maid often found her dissolved in tears and told

about it in the servants' quarters.

"After the inquest there will be more to discuss," the coroner hinted darkly. He was quite right; the inquest brought out the final act of the tragedy and painted, strangely enough, to the interposition of Tolliver, who had been dead several days before young Rodman's death.

The maid testified that Mrs. Rodman had received a letter which the girl had not scrupled to read when she had discovered it in her mistress' bureau drawer. It was from William Tolliver, and was in a lofty but terrible strain. It warned her to prepare her soul for sudden death; it bade her tell her husband that he had but a short time left to enjoy that which he had deliberately stolen from another man; it told her to watch for the announcement of his death, as it would be an omen to her that her own would follow shortly.

Within a week a newspaper announced the ex-husband's tragic death at his own hands.

The maid declared that after the receipt of this news the pair acted like people from whose shoulders a great weight had been lifted. They toasted each other at dinner, laughing. She heard them discussing the discarding of the dead man's unwelcome gift. Orville then asked his wife if she did not consider herself absolved of her promise, now that "he" was dead. She replied that she feared him more dead than alive. Then she had burst out sobbing, crying: "Orville, Orville, swear that you do not regret your love for me! Tell me that it has compensated for everything!"

Mr. Rodman, said the girl, had soothed his wife with caresses. It was nearly eleven that night before she—the maid—had been dismissed, and she slept soundly until wakened by Mr. Benham after the tragedy.

It was impossible to question Mrs. Rodman; the unhappy young widow was in such a hysterical condition that her personal physician refused point-blank to answer for the consequences if she were questioned by the coroner at that time.

Benham discussed the subject thoughtfully with the coroner that afternoon in his own apartment. The man declared that in his opinion all the suspicion pointed at the first husband, although of course the verdict must be "Death by accident."

"I wonder if we cannot take a look at that bed?" inquired the bachelor musingly. "Mrs. Rodman is in a private hospital, and the maid is in charge of the apartment. I have a theory that I'd like to

subject to proof.”

The two men acted on Benham’s proposition, and ten minutes later had entered the dread chamber of the tragedy, shutting out the maid with her curious eyes. Benham felt strangely averse to any more witnesses than were strictly necessary. Together he and the coroner went over the bed inch by inch, letting it down cautiously. It was a curious and beautiful piece of work, ingeniously conceived, and handsomely executed. It appeared, when closed, to be a wardrobe, in the door of which was set a large full-length mirror. Perhaps it was, as a whole, a bit too heavy for a lady’s boudoir, and to Benham—after the horrible accident—there seemed something almost sinister in the thing.

He exchanged a mutually distrustful look with the coroner, and the two men pulled the bedding aside, exposing the springs, as with a single impulse. The hinges on which the bed turned were concealed in cunningly contrived metal boxes; Benham discovered that there were two at the foot of the bed from which ran long rods that connected with those at the top.

“What on earth are these for?” he said aloud. “The hinges of the bed must be at the top, where it folds up. I believe there is something diabolical about this bed!” He called to the maid for a hammer. Then he beat and battered at the round, well-oiled mechanisms until the head of the boxes screwed off, disclosing springs—some kind of clockwork arrangement inside.

Suddenly he began to see light. He backed off as though his hands had inadvertently come in contact with something horrible. He looked at the coroner, who stared back in dawning comprehension of something unutterably unbelievable. Mutually impelled by the same thought, they destroyed the mechanism and replaced the metal cap, laid the bedding in place, and pushed the terrible instrument of a dead man’s vengeance up into place again.

And then the bachelor gave a sharp exclamation. “Come here! Stand where I am standing,” he directed.

The coroner took his place before the mirror, started back with an echo of Benham’s cry. At the angle from which he looked, with the light striking the mirror from the side, he saw the distinct life-sized features of a man peering at him from over his shoulder. Intuitively, although he had never seen a likeness of him, he knew that it was the face of William Tolliver, who, with compressed lips, looked at him malevolently from deep-set eyes under shaggy eyebrows, from out the depths of the mirror.

How it had been accomplished, by what trick of the glazier’s art or the artisan’s skill, the thing had been done; staring with implacable hate from the mirror was the face of the man who had been so deeply wronged, the man who had so horribly revenged himself. No wonder the bed remained always with the mirror concealed! No wonder that the Rodmans nightly tossed and muttered, turning almost with loathing from arms that had formerly been so eager to embrace! No wonder they had discharged one girl who had put the bed down in spite of prohibitive orders, in the mistaken attempt to improve the appearance of the room!

The dead man had avenged himself horribly; he had kept his memory fresh before the miserable pair day and night in the very privacy of their nuptial chamber, with a refinement of torture that only a bitter and passionate nature could have devised. To this day Benham cannot decide whether or not the angry spirit of the wronged and embittered husband had not gone that night to gloat over the doom of those whom he had warned, with sarcastic prophecy, of their near-impending death? Had it been he who, unseen, had left the scene of his final triumph so hastily, leaving open to Benham as he went the door of that desolated home? The bachelor shudders at his own uncertainty.

But he was not surprised at hearing that Mrs. Rodman had entered a nursing sisterhood, which she had endowed with the vast properties left her by her husband’s death.