

A Thief in the Night

By Marion Hepworth Dixon

SHE had watched the huge rectangular shadow of the water-jug on the ceiling for over an hour and three-quarters, and still the nightlight on the washstand burnt uneasily on to the accompaniment of her husband's heavy breathing. The room had loomed black and foreboding on blowing out the candle an hour or two ago, but now the four white walls, hung here and there with faded family photographs, grew strangely luminous as her eyes grew accustomed to the semi-darkness. Yet shifting from left to right, and again from right to left on the tepid pillows, the outlines of the unfamiliar room gained no sort of familiarity as the hours wore on, but remained as blank and unmeaning as the house of death itself.

The silence alone was terrible, speaking as it did of the austere silence of the death-chamber below—a chamber where a white figure, once her husband's brother, lay stretched in awful rigidity on the bed.

The October night was dank, the atmosphere numb and heavy. As the roar of London died in the larger and enwrapping silences, the crack of a piece of furniture or the tapping of a withered leaf on the window-pane grew to be signs portentous and uncanny.

Yet, turning and twisting on the rumpled sheet, every moment
sleep

sleep seemed more impossible. In the stagnant air her head felt hot, her limbs feverish. She longed to jump out of bed and throw open the window, and made as if to do so, but hesitated, fearing the sound might waken the sleeping man beside her. But the thought of movement made her restless, and, slipping cautiously out on to her feet, she took her watch from the little table beside her and peered at it until she made out that the hands indicated five-and-twenty minutes to three.

Nearing the light, she revealed herself a lean, spare woman, with the leathery skin of the lean, and with hair now touched with grey, which grew sparsely and with no attempt at flourish or ornament, on the nape of an anxious neck. For the rest, a woman agitated and agitating, a woman worn with the fret of a single idea.

Five-and-twenty minutes to three! A clock downstairs somewhere in the great silent house struck the half-hour, and Mrs. Rathbourne, with one of those parentheses of the mind which occur in nervous crises, found herself wondering if her watch had gained since she set it right by the station clock at Sheffield. The journey South since they had received that startling telegram summoning them to town had seemed, indeed, a vague blur, varied only by the remembrance of fields splashed with yellow advertisements of divers infallible cures, of a quarrel between her husband and a porter about a bag, and later by the din and roar of the crowded streets and the flare of dingy lights which danced by in procession as the hansom dashed through London from King's Cross.

They had been too late. Too late! After four and a half hours' incessant prayer to Providence—a Providence of whom she had asked and expected so few boons of late—that she should be permitted to be in time. They were too late! Had not the thud, thud, thud of the train said the ugly words in that dreary journey past flying factory-chimneys, scudding hedges, and vanishing jerry-built suburbs?

suburbs? Too late! The blank face of the London house, the scrupulously-drawn blinds, advertised the fact even before she jumped from the cab, smudging her dress on the muddy wheel in her anxiety to gain the door. They were too late, irretrievably too late, she knew, a few minutes later, when the young wife, rising from an armchair in the dimly-lighted dining-room, greeted them in her usual smooth, suave, unemotional tones. She remembered the commonplaces that followed like things heard in a dream. Her husband's dreary inquiries, the young widow's explanations of how Colonel Rathbourne had rallied, and had actually died sitting in his chair in a dressing-gown, and how thoughtful he had been in alluding, some quarter of an hour before his death, to an alteration he had made in his will. The words reached her, but conveyed little meaning to her dazed perceptions. The very sound of the two voices seemed to come as from a distance, as the sound of other voices had once done, when she lay ill as a little child. A bewildered sense of the unreality of things substantial rocked in her brain. A great gap, a vague but impassable gulf lay surely between her and these living, breathing people, so concerned with the material trivialities of life. It was this something dual in her consciousness which made her wonder, half-an-hour later, if in very truth it were she, or some other woman, who mechanically followed her sister-in-law upstairs to the dead man's bedside. If it were she who recoiled so suddenly and with so agonised a cry at the sight of that shrouded form? She felt certain of nothing, except that she hated this wife of six months' standing, with her assured voice, her handsome shoulders, and her manœuvred waist. For six whole months she had been his wife.

Mrs. Rathbourne shivered, the square wrists shook with such violence that the watch she held nearly slipped from her fingers.

To avoid the possibility of noise she placed it on the washstand, and, as she approached the light, her eye was caught by the faded photograph which hung directly above on the wall.

It was of Colonel Rathbourne, the dead man below-stairs. Outwardly the portrait was a thing of little beauty. A mere drabbish presentment of a young man, dressed in the fashion of the sixties, with somewhat sloping shoulders, and whiskers of extravagant shape. Not that Mrs. Rathbourne saw either the whiskers or the shoulders. Long familiarity with such accessories made them part of the inevitable, part of all fixed and determined concrete things, part, indeed, of the felicitous "had been" of her youth. Had she thought of them at all, she would have thought of them as beautiful, as everything connected with the dead man had always seemed, then, thirty years ago, in the rare intervals he had been at home on leave, and now on the night of his sudden death.

To look at this portrait meant to ignore all intervening time, to forget that dread thing, that shrouded and awful something stretched on the bed in the room below. To look at it meant to be transported to a garden in Hampshire, to a lawn giving on Southampton Water, a lawn vivid and green in the shadow of the frothing hawthorns, grey in the softer stretches dotted with munching cattle which swept out to the far-off, tremulous line intersected with distant masts. She had dreaded to look or to think of that line. It meant the sea—that ugly void of wind and wave that was to carry him away from her. How determinedly she had put the thought aside, rejoicing in the moment, the soft atmosphere, the persistent hum of bees, the enervating cooing of the wood-pigeons.

Yet the eve of the day had come when the regiment was to sail, and when, across the intimacies of the cottage dining-table they

they looked at each other and avoided each other's eyes. Her husband had been in London on business for three or four days (it was some years before they finally settled in the North), and was to return by the last train. He had returned, punctually, as he did everything, and she recalled, as if it had been yesterday, the sound of his monotonous breathing through that last night. She had been unable to sleep, waiting for the morning, the morning when the dead man, then a slim young lieutenant, was to creep down to meet her in the little wood they reached by the orchard gate. Yes, in looking back she remembered everything. Her foolish fear of being too soon at the trysting-place, her dread of being too late. She recalled how she had strained her ears to listen for awakening sounds, how she had at last caught the click of an opening door, followed by cautious footsteps in the hall. To creep down was the work of a moment. Once below, and outside the cottage walls, the scent of the new-mown hay was in her nostrils, and in her limbs the intoxicating freshness of morning. She could see his figure in front of her on the narrow winding path, and heard her own welcoming cry, as she caught up her gown in the dewy grass, and darted towards him in the strange, westward-trending shadows.

And now he was dead. The white mockery of a man below-stairs, that shrouded thing, so numbing in its statue-like immobility, was all that remained. What had she left? What tangible remembrance of that lost possession, that she might finger and gloat over in secret? To unhook the photograph with its tarnished wire and dusty frame was her first impulse, but even when she clasped it in her hands the portrait seemed, in a fashion, to evade her. The modelling of the features had evaporated, the face was almost blank. She craved for something more tangible, more human, something more intimately his.

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The nightlight, which she had raised to look at the photograph, guttered and diminished to little more than a spark. Throwing on a wrap, she pinched the wick with a hair-pin to kindle the flame, and then, with a swift glance at the sleeping man, turned with a stealthy movement to the door. What if her husband should wake? A crack, at the moment, from the great oak cupboard at the other side of the room made her start with trembling apprehension. It sounded loud enough to waken fifty sleepers, but the noise died away in the corner from which it came, and the steady breathing of the man continued as if nothing had disturbed the strained and looming silence. Catching her breath she again moved forward, though assailed by the dread of the door-handle rattling, and the fear that there might be a loose board on the stairs. Screening the light from the sleeping man's eyes, Mrs. Rathbourne made her way round the bed, and, pulling the door noiselessly to behind her, steadied herself to listen.

In the gloom of the empty passages a sinister faintness seemed to hover; the mist had eked in at the long landing window, and added a mystery all its own to the unfamiliar lines of the house. There was silence everywhere—in the room she had left and in the one her sister-in-law now occupied facing the stairs. Only from the lower hall came the harsh, mechanical tick, tick, tick (with a slight hesitation or hitch in every third tick) of the eight-day clock which confronted the hall-door.

Down towards it she crept, shading the dim light to see in front of her, while the great shadow of her own figure rose, as she turned the corner of the staircase, and filled the obscure corners of the lower passage walls.

Beneath it was the dead man's room. She saw, with a catch at the heart, that the latch had slipped, and knew by the long inch-strip of ominous darkness, that the door stood ajar. With averted eyes

eyes—for she dreaded with an unaccountable dread that shrouded something on the bed—she leant her elbow on one of the upper panels, and with the stealthy movement of a cat slipped inside. An insatiable desire mastered her. The nervous hands twitched, her eyes travelled hungrily from one object to another, round the room. It was *his* room. The room in which he had slept, and lived, and died in it there must be something which he had used, that he had touched, and handled, that she could seize and call her own?

But the mortuary chamber wore that rigid, unfathomable look peculiar to rooms where the dead lie. Everything had been tidied, straightened; the dressing-table was bare, the books, papers, even the medicine-bottles had been cleared away. His favourite armchair—the chair, she remembered with a shiver, in which he had died—had been ranged stiffly, itself a dead thing, against the wall. There was no trace of life, or suggestion of it, in an emptiness which ached. Mrs. Rathbourne gazed at the mechanically arranged furniture in a baffled way, dimly realising that the soul of the room had fled from it, as it had from the body of the man she loved. Nothing remained but the shell. The kindly, loyal, and withal quaintly sarcastic man, who had struggled with disease within those four walls, had been posed, too, in the foolishly conventional attitude of the dead, the white sheet transforming the body into the mere shapeless outline of a man. He was hidden, covered up, put away, as he would soon be beneath the earth, to be forgotten.

Mrs. Rathbourne drew near the bed, holding the feeble light aloft with a trembling hand. With dilated eyes she stooped over the shrouded thing, and then, when about to raise the coverlid, fell back, as earlier in the evening, with a renewed sense of horror. Her pulse leapt, and then seemed to cease altogether. The strange-

ness

ness of death paralysed the very muscles of her arm. She wanted . . . she wanted the living, not the dead. It was the living man who, though so rarely seen, had filled the dreary emptiness of her life. She wanted the man, not the clay. Dazed, unstrung, and with the odd sensation of a hand clutching at her heart, she dropped into one of the cretonne-covered chairs beside the bed, and, as she did so, became conscious that her arm touched something warm.

It was a well-worn dressing-gown which had been thrown over the chair-back, the sleeve still bulging and round with the form of the man who had worn it that very day. In one of the wide-open pockets there was a crumpled handkerchief, while about it there hovered the vague odour of cigars. The button at the breast, she noticed, was loose and hung by a thread as if he had been in the habit of playing with it, even the bit of frayed braid on the cuff spoke in some unaccountable way of palpitating, everyday, intimate life.

A gush of tears—the first she had shed—rose to the wretched woman's eyes. She pressed her pinched lips to the warm, woolly sleeve, and then, with a convulsive movement, seized the dressing-gown and pressed it passionately against her flat chest. With the bundle in her arms, hugged close in guilty exultation, Mrs. Rathbourne stole to the door, and so noiselessly out and up the stair.

As before, the dank night swooned in the dour passages. With a hurrying beat, a beat which seemed to speak of the inexorable passage of time, the hall clock ticked, while behind, in the silent room, the motionless figure with the upturned feet loomed grim and aloof in the faint gleam of the vanishing light.