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A Drive in the Dark With the Devil

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WHEN I was a child, I was a sceptic sufficiently hardened to deny the Devil his existence, even to be proud of my audacity in doing so. It is commonly said that children, by reason of their ignorance of material things, are nearer to the spirit world than grown up folk but that, as they grow older, acquisition of worldly knowledge clouds their natural perception of the Unseen. With me it was the other way about: I must have been choked up with worldly knowledge, when I was six. I was not even afraid much—of the dark. When I was told by my nurse that the Devil went about like a ramping and a roaring lion, seeking whom he might devour, I laughed, my hardened laugh, and said: "How could he? And where is he, then?" But now I know quite well, he can; and that line vagueness in the description of his haunts, which was the basis of my secure sense, is changed to geographical exactitude. I can locate him now. He goes about the neighbourhood of Kingsbridge Station, Dublin, and drives a jaunting car.

I had been invited by a friend to stay with her at a certain spot distant from Dublin by seven or eight miles. She added: "It is rather an impossible place to get at, as there is no railway station nearer than Kingsbridge. Therefore, you must come by an early train, to escape the fatigue of a long drive in the dark."

Being yet clouded by my material perceptions, and proudly disdainful of incalculable powers outside of my own will, her statement of difficulties heightened the sense of my own omnipotence to override all obstacles. I was in holiday humour, and I divined adventure. Therefore, I deliberately arranged to arrive at Kingsbridge by eight o'clock p.m., and still further to impress my hostess with a sense of my undauntedness, engaged to have supper in Dublin with some friends, so as to relegate the drive, as far as possible to the hours when such darksome deeds occur to other fortunate people, as have hitherto avoided me.

At a decent period from supper, I asked the servant of my entertainers to call a car for me. What, exclaimed my hospitable friends, was I not going to stay the night with them?

It is a fact well known to observant globe-trotters, that, where a refined woman will shrink from accompanying her husband into the perils of untried lodgings and inferior hotels, and can announce, when tired, with unpleasant nullity, that "not a step further will she go"—there are no terrors of unclear sheets, of dishonest servants, of measureless fatigue, which the most delicate woman will not embrace magnificently, to obviate a separation from her box.

I belong to this heroic class; therefore I replied with firmness, that I had sent my boxes on. This must clinch matters, I was sure. In the eyes of the women folk, there was no flaw in my defence. But, with the disagreeable logic that certain people invariably turn on to just that weak spot in one's argument which one is protecting with transparent obstinacy, one of the men declared that my objection was no hindrance in the world. What more simple than to lend me apparel for the night?

This trapped me into the rudeness which is no reflection on one's own good breeding, but results, at pressure, from the lack of it in others. It now remained merely to me to look firm and foolish, and to persist. I accomplished these things. I was told I was all three of them. Nevertheless, the car was sent for. It might take some time to find one. I was told, as it was after hours, and when one was procured for me, if such a thing were possible, I had better adhere firmly to my man, whatever fare he might demand of me.

Meanwhile my feeling of omnipotence had been riddled slightly, both by the shells of opposition and an impression

that I was regarded as unreasonably importunate. I sat, wrapped in fathomless dignity, parrying direct hits as to why I was so hurried, and so odourate to friends, with my ears twitching for the sounds of the now vehemently desired car. "Where then," I was asked, "was this outlandish place, which I gave take so long to drive to?" I gave my friend's address. "Oh, there!" they said: "they knew it very well. It's a long dark road." "I expect so," I replied, counting the minutes now separately multiplied to ten times their duration, till my saviour, the jarvey should deliver me. And did I know the way at all? No, not at all. I had never been before? Never before, I echoed with Raven-like fatefulness in each reply. To keep up my spirits, which began obviously, I am afraid, to slacken, my friends beguiled me with details of my route.

"Well, you'll be all right the first part of your way."

"The first part of the way? Why not the last?"

"Oh, you'll see," with a wink from one.

"'Tis to be hoped she won't see," from another, with a laugh from all.

At this point I was conscious of large breaches in my fortress of endurance. My boxes! Heaven only knew where they might be! My car!—and would it never come! My dignity—how long would it hold out!

"And you know nothing of that road?"

"I said that I knew nothing." I would dissemble no longer. By drawing aside the window curtain, and gazing out I gave it to be understood I desired this riddlyriddle concluded.

"Ah, but no fear your driver'll know?"

"It is to be hoped." I now answered abandoning the cloaking sweetness of the baffled desperado. "It is to be hoped he will drive straighter to the point than you. What are you driving at?"

"'Tis only fair to tell her," one of them remarked.

"Ah, don't be frightening her," said another.

At this moment my car drove up outside the door. Upon which my sense of exquisite relief poured itself forth in pleasantries on everyone. Without waiting for my answer, I ran to the door, and opened it effusively to my deliverer. I received a slight shock at looking into the night for him, at a distance of two or three feet higher up than myself, and on finding him situated two or three feet lower down. But I recovered myself sufficiently to indicate my handbag in the hall, and to ask him to convey it to the car. As he brushed past me in the passage, which was narrow I fancied I smelt cloves; and accounted satisfactorily for it at once; we had been having stewed apples for supper! The maid servant, who had procured my salvation, remarked to me, it seemed at the time, with rather inordinate accentuation—"that 'twas the only one she could find, search where she might, an' she hoped I'd get there!" But the fleetness which he commanded with his horse and rubber tyred vehicle, blinded me to any slight flaws in the extreme desirability of my driver. "He's small enough anyway!" she remarked, sarcastically, to which I replied with fervour, "Mary, the best goods are always done up in the smallest parcels!"

I climbed upon the car, rejoicing, and asked for a wrap for my feet. As he replied to me, I noticed that my deliverer had a slight impediment in his speech, which sounded like a loose pebble rolling in his mouth, and reminded me of the utterance of a parrot. It was difficult at first to follow him, and as he approached the step of the car, thereby revealing to me that it and he were about on the same level, I looked earnestly into his face for the better apprehension of him. By the timely aid of a street lamp I then noticed how difficult it was to meet his eyes. I have often found it hard even with ordinary people to live up to

the standard of "looking them straight between the eyes." One cannot look at two eyes at a time. It feels uneasy if you confine your attention to one. The exact interpretation of between the eyes, is the bridge of the nose; but this is rarely satisfactory. To look at my jarvey it was necessary to cross one's eyes rapidly, like the greeting exchanged between two fencing foils. This was his own method of procedure. Even then it was not quite possible to calculate where they would come out, and when they met, one was inclined to remark with Laertes: "A hit—a very palpable hit." His tongue seemed curled up in his mouth for the purpose of keeping it ajar—he grinned with unabating intimacy and again I had the sense of pungent incenses in close proximity to me.

As he wrapped the rug about my feet, I was angry with myself for the malicious comparison which rose in me, between the appearance of my redeemer, the jarvey, and that of a full-grown inmate of the idiot ward in a workhouse, whom I had once seen weeping bitterly, because someone else had got an orange, and he had not. He supported himself by my legs—for which I could not quite see the immediate necessity—while he inquired where I was going, and when I had repeated the address, by his request, three times, I noticed how hoarse the poor man's voice was; whereupon I determined to give him sixpence extra for coming out with his bad chest so late at night. My driver had some difficulty in climbing to his box, owing, partly, I imagined, to his size, partly to some innate objection to his reaching it, which his horse seemed to have, and, while he was thus engaged, my friends came round to the side of the car to wish me God-speed.

"By the way," I remarked, in a gay voice, desirous to reappear conclusively in the role of an imperturbable woman of the world. "I interrupted you rudely just as you were saying that there was something about the road which it was only fair to tell me of."

The horse danced a little, making it expedient for my friend to hasten her speech: "Oh, it was nothing," she replied. "Only as you enter Ballysimon village, which is a mile or two from your friend's house, you are apt to meet the Headless Woman, and at the other end of the village one meets the Phantom Coach."

Here the horse, with the instinct of the born dramatist, dashed forward, on an effective curtain, scattering my friends to left and right of him. The fact that we immediately turned down a dark side street, a move which seemed to be as little expected by my driver as his horse, provided me, to my annoyance, with a suggestive background for the meditations with which my friend's parting words had inspired me. There was silence between the three of us, broken merely by a curious rasp in my friend the jarvey's breathing, during which I had time to observe that the animal which he drove seemed burdened with an over-developed imagination; for his head veered incessantly, and his ears had a look of perpetual anticipation. His feet, too, conveyed an impression of such gingerly uncertainty that it reacted on the nervous system of both myself, and, apparently, my jarvey; for he burst out into a violent guttural abuse of it. I broke the silence finally by saying to my driver in a subjunctive voice: "I consider myself lucky to have got hold of you at this hour of the day."

He leant back until the brim of his bowler hat touched mine. "I would consider ye lucky to have got hold o' me at any hour o' the day!" he breathed aromatically into my face, and at this

moment the rays from a street lamp fell up his eyes. They were executing the crossed-blades trick, and seemed to strike sparks out of each other in so doing. He leant back still further till his coat touched my cheek: "An' do ye know where we're goin'?" he said softly, with his parrot utterance.

"Certainly," I replied; "haven't I just told you?"

"Excuse me, missy darlin'," he answered, "and do me the great favour o' repayt-in' it."

"Rochestown House, Ballysimon," I repeated, and added: "Isn't your horse going a bit tender?"

"Sure, an' don't we all go tender wid' the gerrils!" was his reply, accompanied with his rattling laugh. I took no notice of this sentimental turning of the conversation, and remembered a previous saying of mine—that if it were incumbent on me to select a husband from a modest walk of life my choice would fall upon an Irish jarvey; but if this were to be a specimen of our love-making (whereupon a vista of seven more miles of is stretched itself out before me) I was not certain that I had not already changed my mind. We turned down darker and yet more deserted side streets, the horse betraying fresh surprise at every turn we took, when my jarvey pulled the animal up so short that it started, reared and plunged up on the pavement. "What is it?" I inquired, at pains to maintain my seat; "we can't possibly be there already." My redeemer, who was clambering slowly off the box, made no reply, but having reached the ground, wrapped his coat around him and started off in the dark at a swinging run. "Here, stop!" I called. "What are you doing?" But he was out of sight.

Minutes passed. I looked up to the sky for aid. But not a friendly eye of a star looked down. I admit it—horrible thoughts passed through me, and the same seemed to have occurred to the horse, for he was shivering. What if the jarvey were in league with a band of hooligans, and had gone to give the alarm of an easy victim at hand!

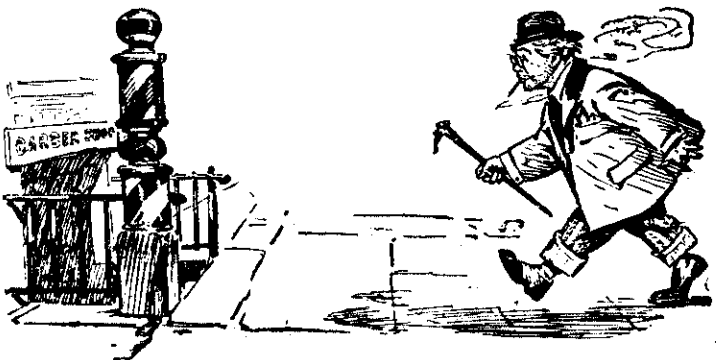
Presently, however, I heard the sound of running feet and breath that sawed the darkness. It was my jarvey—and, thank heaven, he was alone. He came up to the level of the high step of the car, and laid his hand fondly upon me, with a reinvigorated air.

"Why did you get off and leave me?" I demanded sharply. "What did you mean by it?"

"'Twas nothin', Missy darlin'," he replied. "On'y I was in dread the thraces o' the car were goin' to snap on me, an' I went to look for assistance. An' now can ye tell me, missy darlin', where we're goin'?"

I looked down into his face; he was squinting with plainness even in the dark. I decided swiftly that he was an idiot; and there was now no further doubt about the perfume he preferred. "Rochestown House, Ballysimon," I repeated, eye to eye with him, and with the grinding distinctness of fear. "And you'll drive me there without further delay—that is, if you know the way."

"Is it know the way?" he exclaimed in odorous tones of reproach. "Now, why would ye spake that rough to me!" He climbed upon the seat by dint of grasping at the person of the horse, and on we went again. On and on, it seemed for 20 miles, and the lamps dwindled, and the houses became scattered, gradually the sounds of feet upon the pavements died away entirely; ghostly-looking leafless trees sprang up, on either side of the road, waving arms that seemed to threaten me: "Go back, go back!" And now



THE DASH FOR THE POLE.