

The Drinkwater Romance

By Arthur Morrison. Illustrated by R. G. Vosburgh

MR. Reginald Drinkwater had rooms in the Temple. That was all of importance that could be said about Mr. Reginald Drinkwater, whose life had been wholly uneventful for the twenty-four years of it that had passed before he encountered this, his first adventure of a romantic complexion.

Mr. Drinkwater had not been called to the bar—he had not even begun to read with that purpose; but he was here at the Temple, quite convenient, if ever he should definitely decide to take that step. In fact, he had literary yearnings, and had long reasoned with himself that if he should actually embrace the profession of letters, any time spent in preparing for the bar would be wasted, and waste of time was a vice against which a literary man should guard himself with especial care.

He had not actually produced any literary work, for that, as everybody knows, is not to be rushed at. But he had taken the chambers, once occupied by a novelist of great reputation, and had laid in a large stock of manuscript paper of the sort said to be used by Mr. Thomas Hardy, and a fountain pen having a testimonial from Mr. Hall Caine; so that there remained no obstacle to success in case his final decision should set in the direction of his inclination. Meanwhile he received from his mother in Bedfordshire, a regular allowance, which was quite sufficient for his modest requirements, and he wisely reflected that so long as one refrained from committing oneself irrevocably to one or other profession, one avoided the possibility of an error which might cause serious regret throughout the rest of one's career.

Mr. Drinkwater's rooms had the advantage of a situation from which one looked into the windows, a few yards away, of the chambers of the great Buss, K.C. The two sets of rooms, in fact, adjoined at the back of next-door houses set at an angle, so that Reginald Drinkwater were it not for the general decorum of his behaviour, and his particular reverence for his distinguished neighbour, might have peeped through Buss, K.C., at short range, when the windows were a little open. Also, if Buss, K.C., had not been a very fat, stumpy little man with very short arms, and if he and Reginald Drinkwater had been acquainted, they might have shaken hands across the sills of the two windows closest to the angle over the little yard below. This, indeed, was a neighbourly courtesy of which Reginald had dreamed as a possibility in his future times of eminence. Meanwhile, what with the proximity of Buss, K.C., and the literary associations of his own rooms, he already felt himself rather eminent than otherwise.

"Ah, yes," he would say on the infrequent occasion of a friend's visit, "they are old Buss' rooms. The fine collection of old silver he's got there, too." Which looked almost as though Reginald were a familiar visitor of Buss, K.C., though, in fact, he only knew of the fine old silver, as others did, by report and from newspaper accounts of auction sales at which the great Buss was a buyer.

When Mr. Reginald Drinkwater's inactivity had so endured for a good while, he conceived a grievance against his very comfortable circumstances in that his life had been wholly empty of adventure. This, he told himself, was the reason that he had not as yet launched on a brilliant literary career, for he had heard on light authority that one could only write in the light of one's own actual experience. So he took to seeking adventure in the streets of London, where, he believed, from the teaching of many magazine stories, it was very readily encountered. But his luck was out, for, after many attempts, he was rewarded with nothing better than the purchase of a dummy pawn-ticket from a plausible young man in Fetter Lane. It is possible that a naturally retiring disposition hindered Reginald's ambitions, for, after all, London is a strange and adventurous place enough,

as he was at length convinced. For, indeed, his romance came at last.

He had left his rooms one February afternoon with the simple design of buying tobacco at a shop in Fleet street; and since it was to be so short an expedition he had merely locked his inner door and had left his "oak" swung open. The "oak" and the inner door, it may be explained parenthetically, stood, as is usual, scarcely two feet apart, and the former, a ponderous iron-strapped fabric, was only locked when the inmate was away from home, or, being in, desired no visitors.

Reginald Drinkwater bought the tobacco he required, and strolled easily back up Fleet street with his purchase in his pocket and his ignoble condition in his mind. Here he walked, in the midst of six million romances—for he had read, and therefore believed, that every life held its own—and not only had he found no romance himself, but he could guess at none of those about him. So Reginald walked, puzzled and ill-content, unaware that his romance waited for him a hundred strides away, and was nearer with every step.

He turned in at the Temple gate, and twisted left and right through the pas-

and prone to nervousness in female society.

"I am much afraid," she said; "I am pursued. You are, not angry that I should hide in your doorway?"

He protested, still with some confusion, that nothing was so far from his thoughts; and was adding that, on the contrary, he was ready and anxious to do anything on earth to save her, when she checked him with a raised forefinger and a head turned to listen.

"Was that not a step?" she said, "in there nobody else on the stairs?"

They listened together, but there was no sound.

"They are waiting, then," she said, "and watching for me—watching for me at the outside. Can I not go by another door?"

There was no other door, he explained, and, indeed, there was no need for such an exit. If she would place herself under his protection he would be happy to see her safely—

"No! No!" she interrupted; "you do not understand how bad it is. I should be followed—they would kill me somewhere else—and my brother, my dear brother! I must wait a little while. I think they do not know it is in this house I have come. You will be kind, sir, will you not? I have not one friend; and if you will let me stay in your room a little while, till it comes dark, I can escape, I think. You are very kind—Will you let me stay a little while?"

It might seem an odd request in ordinary, but the circumstances were far from ordinary now. To Reginald, who had met his adventure at last, they were stunning, bewildering. Could he possibly drive away a friendless girl—and such a girl—to meet the strange perils she feared alone? Was he not rather conscious of a secret joy that the danger,

distress, was tortured with helplessness. If only he could do something—if only the unknown enemy stood tangibly before him!

Presently she looked up and spoke again. "Pardon me," she said, "I am very weak, when I should be very strong. You are a kind friend, but I should not trouble you with these things. Perhaps I can go away. Can they see these windows from the street?"

Reginald hastened to reassure her. The windows overlooked nothing but a private yard, to which there was no access from any public place.

"You are really quite safe," he protested. "And if there is anything I can do—anything in the world—if I am not intruding on private affairs, and you will tell me—"

But her attention was fixed on the windows.

"Perhaps," she said, "I could go that way, if the other houses have doors, in other streets. There is no other door here, you say, but the windows would not be so difficult—to go out by that house."

She nodded toward Mr. Buss's rooms. But, as Reginald explained, Mr. Buss was away, taking a fortnight on the Riviera, and the doors of his chambers would be locked. At the same time, it gave him a further sense of the desperate situation of this delicate girl, that she should for a moment contemplate an escape by the expedient of scrambling from one window to another across an angle of wall thirty feet above the yard. He strove again to reassure her.

"That way is not possible," he said; "but you are really safe. Perhaps you have come from a country where the police are not—"

She looked up quickly.

"From another country?" she said. "You know I am not English? And they say my English is so good! How quick and clever you are!"

Never had flattery sounded so sweet in Reginald's ears. Indeed, flattery was a thing to them singularly unfamiliar, so small was his acquaintance with the world.

"Your English," he replied, "is splendid—beautiful! But I thought—I supposed—something suggested that you were a foreigner, and I wished to tell you that our London police—"

"Yes, I know—they are excellent," she interrupted. "Better, I hope, at least, than those of my poor country, where they have allowed a terrible crime—a horrible crime—that has made the whole world shudder!"

Reginald thought instantly of Portugal, and the murder of the king and his son; for the newspapers had been clamorous with the crime for a week past.

"Do you speak of Portugal?" he asked tentatively.

"Ah, indeed," she replied with a melancholy smile. "My poor country! It is wonderful that you should judge so well. It is good for me that you are my friend and not my enemy! Do you guess also what is my trouble? Shall I tell you?"

There was nothing in the world that could interest Reginald Drinkwater half so much, and he said so, in something very near these terms. "Unless," he said, "you would rather—rather not tell me."

"If it does not trouble you—bore you, is it not?—I would much like to tell you," she said. "It is so good to trust to a good friend, and when you have been so kind as to shelter me from my enemies it is only right that I should tell you why I have asked your help. There has been great trouble in my country, and my dear brother Luiz and I have escaped to England. You have heard of the trouble?"

"Oh, yes; of course. The late dictator also has left Portugal, I believe. You are not related to him?"

"To him! To the oppressor! To the man who caused everything! Never—that is not one of our misfortunes, I thank Heaven. My dear brother was of the opposite party—the republicans."

"I see; and was implicated, I suppose, in the—the—"

"Do you mean in the horrible crime—the assassination of the poor King and the prince? Ah, never! You could never suppose it if you knew my dear brother Luiz—never! We are of good family, and my brother could have no part in such doings. That is why we are here, and in such trouble. There were bad men in the republican party as well as good; indeed, the bad men gained a great ascendancy, and it is by them that the King was assassinated. My brother opposed them in the party, and they became his enemies. Because



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sages leading to his quarters, musing gloomily; and so he ascended the stairs, and reached his landing to perceive that his "oak" was standing much closer than he had left it. He swung it back, and stood amazed. For here was his romance.

Crouching between the "oak" and the inner door, shrinking into the angle farthest from him, her lips parted and her eyes full of fear, was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen or ever wished to see.

Her heavy veil was swung back from her now pale face, her eyes were black and large, and appealing, and her skin, brilliantly clear, had the tone of ivory. "You will not hurt me?" she pleaded. "You are not my enemy!"

Reginald, confounded by the vision before him, and too anxious to remove such an impression to be wholly coherent, stammered fervent denials. Except for the lady's own obvious terror he would have been a little frightened himself, for he was young and susceptible,

whatever it was, had driven her to his protecting arm? He turned the key in the inner door, and thrust it open.

"Oh, you are very kind, sir—so very kind," the stranger repeated, as she entered; and it was only now that Reginald noticed that she said "very," and that her whole accent and manner were a little foreign. "You have saved me," she continued, still much agitated; "and my brother—especially you have saved my dear brother!"

"Your brother?" repeated Reginald, with a doubtful look about the staircase as he closed the door. "Your brother?"

"Yes—my dear brother. He is not here—he is hiding. That is why I am so afraid to be followed, for then they will find him. Oh, the wicked men! They are so very cruel!"

The beautiful girl sank into a chair and buried her face in her hands. Reginald, his whole soul filled with indignation that the world could hold creatures so base as to put her to such