

Modern Melodrama

By Hubert Crackanthorpe

THE pink shade of a single lamp supplied an air of subdued mystery ; the fire burned red and still ; in place of door and windows hung curtains, obscure, formless ; the furniture, dainty, but sparse, stood detached and incoördinate like the furniture of a stage-scene ; the atmosphere was heavy with heat, and a scent of stale tobacco ; some cut flowers, half withered, tissue-paper still wrapping their stalks, lay on a gilt, cane-bottomed chair.

“ Will you give me a sheet of paper, please ? ”

He had crossed the room, to seat himself before the principal table. He wore a fur-lined overcoat, and he was tall, and broad, and bald ; a sleek face, made grave by gold-rimmed spectacles.

The other man was in evening dress ; his back leaning against the mantelpiece, his hands in his pockets : he was moodily scraping the hearthrug with his toe. Clean-shaved ; stolid and coarsely regular features ; black, shiny hair, flattened on to his head ; under-sized eyes, moist and glistening ; the tint of his face uniform, the tint of discoloured ivory ; he looked a man who ate well and lived hard.

“ Certainly, sir, certainly,” and he started to hurry about the room.

“ Daisy,”

"Daisy," he exclaimed roughly, a moment later, "where the deuce do you keep the note-paper?"

"I don't know if there is any, but the girl always has some." She spoke in a slow tone—insolent and fatigued.

A couple of bed-pillows were supporting her head, and a scarlet plush cloak, trimmed with white down, was covering her feet, as she lay curled on the sofa. The fire-light glistened on the metallic gold of her hair, which clashed with the black of her eyebrows; and the full, blue eyes, wide-set, contradicted the hard line of her vivid-red lips. She drummed her fingers on the sofa-edge, nervously.

"Never mind," said the bald man shortly, producing a note-book from his breast-pocket, and tearing a leaf from it.

He wrote, and the other two stayed silent; the man returned to the hearthrug, lifting his coat-tails under his arms; the girl went on drumming the sofa-edge.

"There," sliding back his chair, and looking from the one to the other, evidently uncertain which of the two he should address. "Here is the prescription. Get it made up to-night, a table-spoonful at a time, in a wine-glassful of water at lunch-time, at dinner-time and before going to bed. Go on with the port wine twice a day, and (to the girl, deliberately and distinctly) you *must* keep quite quiet; avoid all sort of excitement—that is extremely important. Of course you must on no account go out at night. Go to bed early, take regular meals, and keep always warm."

"I say," broke in the girl, "tell us, it isn't bad—dangerous, I mean?"

"Dangerous!—no, not if you do what I tell you."

He glanced at his watch, and rose, buttoning his coat.

"Good-evening," he said gravely.

At first she paid no heed; she was vacantly staring before her :
then,

then, suddenly conscious that he was waiting, she looked up at him.

“Good-night, doctor.”

She held out her hand, and he took it.

“I’ll get all right, won’t I?” she asked, still looking up at him.

“All right—of course you will—of course. But remember you must do what I tell you.”

The other man handed him his hat and umbrella, opened the door for him, and it closed behind them.

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The girl remained quiet, sharply blinking her eyes, her whole expression eager, intense.

A murmur of voices, a muffled tread of footsteps descending the stairs—the gentle shutting of a door—stillness.

She raised herself on her elbow, listening; the cloak slipped noiselessly to the floor. Quickly her arm shot out to the bell-rope: she pulled it violently; waited, expectant; and pulled again.

A slatternly figure appeared—a woman of middle-age—her arms, bared to the elbows, smeared with dirt; a grimy apron over her knees.

“What’s up?—I was smashin’ coal,” she explained.

“Come here,” hoarsely whispered the girl—“here—no—nearest—quite close. Where’s he gone?”

“Gone? ’oo?”

“That man that was here.”

“I s’ppose ’ee’s in the downstairs room. I ain’t ’eard the front door slam.”

“And Dick, where’s he?”

“They’re both in there together, I s’ppose.”

“I want you to go down—quietly—without making a noise—listen at the door—come up, and tell me what they’re saying.”

“What

"What? down there?" jerking her thumb over her shoulder.

"Yes, of course—at once," answered the girl, impatiently.

"And if they catches me—a nice fool I looks. No, I'm jest blowed if I do!" she concluded. "Whatever's up?"

"You must," the girl broke out excitedly. "I tell you, you must."

"Must—must—an' if I do, what am I goin' to git out of it?" She paused, reflecting; then added: "Look 'ere—I tell yer what—I'll do it for half a quid, there?"

"Yes—yes—all right—only make haste."

"An' 'ow d' I know as I'll git it?" she objected doggedly. "It's a jolly risk, yer know."

The girl sprang up, flushed and feverish.

"Quick—or he'll be gone. I don't know where it is—but you shall have it—I promise—quick—please go—quick."

The other hesitated, her lips pressed together; turned, and went out.

And the girl, catching at her breath, clutched a chair.

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A flame flickered up in the fire, buzzing spasmodically. A creak outside. She had come up. But the curtains did not move. Why didn't she come in? She was going past. The girl hastened across the room, the intensity of the impulse lending her strength.

"Come—come in," she gasped. "Quick—I'm slipping."

She struck at the wall; but with the flat of her hand, for there was no grip. The woman bursting in, caught her, and led her back to the sofa.

"There, there, dearie," tucking the cloak round her feet. "Lift up the pillar, my 'ands are that mucky. Will yer 'ave anythin'?"

She

She shook her head. "It's gone," she muttered. "Now—tell me."

"Tell yer?—tell yer what! Why—why—there ain't jest nothin' to tell yer."

"What were they saying? Quick."

"I didn't 'ear nothin'. They was talking about some ballet-woman."

The girl began to cry, feebly, helplessly, like a child in pain.

"You might tell me, Liz. You might tell me. I've been a good sort to you."

"That yer 'ave. I knows yer 'ave, dearie. There, there, don't yer take on like that. Yer'll only make yerself bad again."

"Tell me—tell me," she wailed. "I've been a good sort to you, Liz."

"Well, they wasn't talkin' of no ballet-woman—that's straight," the woman blurted out savagely.

"What did he say?—tell me." Her voice was weaker now.

"I can't tell yer—don't yer ask me—for God's sake, don't yer ask me."

With a low crooning the girl cried again.

"Oh! for God's sake, don't yer take on like that—it's awful—I can't stand it. There, dearie, stop that cryin' an' I'll tell yer—I will indeed. It was jest this way—I slips my shoes off, an' I goes down as careful—jest as careful as a cat—an' when I gets to the door I crouches myself down, listenin' as 'ard as ever I could. The first things as I 'ears was Mr. Dick speakin' thick-like—like as if 'ee'd bin drinkin'—an' t'other chap 'ee says somethin' about lungs, using some long word—I missed that—there was a van or somethin' rackettin' on the road. Then 'ee says 'gallopin', gallopin', jest like as 'ee was talkin' of a 'orse. An' Mr. Dick, 'ee says, 'ain't there no chance—no'ow?' and 'ee give a sort

sort of a grunt. I was awful sorry for 'im, that I was, 'ee must 'ave been crool bad, 'ee's mostly so quiet-like, ain't 'ee? An', in a minute, 'ee sort o' groans out somethin', an' t'other chap 'es answer 'im quite cool-like, that 'ee don't properly know; but, anyways, it 'ud be over afore the end of February. There I've done it. Oh! dearie, it's awful, awful, that's jest what it is. An' I 'ad no intention to tell yer—not a blessed word—that I didn't—may God strike me blind if I did! Some'ow it all come out, seein' yer chokin' that 'ard an' feelin' at the wall there. Yer 'ad no right to ask me to do it—'ow was I to know 'ee was a doctor?"

She put the two corners of her apron to her eyes, gurgling loudly.

"Look 'ere, don't yer b'lieve a word of it—I don't—I tell yer they're a 'umbuggin' lot, them doctors, all together. I know it. Yer take my word for that—yer'll git all right again. Yer'll be as well as I am, afore yer've done—Oh, Lord!—it's jest awful—I feel that upset—I'd like to cut my tongue out, for 'avin' told yer—but I jest couldn't 'elp myself." She was retreating towards the door, wiping her eyes, and snorting out loud sobs—"An', don't you offer me that half quid—I couldn't take it of yer—that I couldn't."

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She shivered, sat up, and dragged the cloak tight round her shoulders. In her desire to get warm she forgot what had happened. She extended the palms of her hands towards the grate: the grate was delicious. A smoking lump of coal clattered onto the fender: she lifted the tongs, but the sickening remembrance arrested her. The things in the room were receding, dancing round: the fire was growing taller and taller. The woollen scarf chafed her skin: she wrenched it off. Then hope, keen and bitter,

bitter, shot up, hurting her. "How could he know? Of course he couldn't know. She'd been a lot better this last fortnight—the other doctor said so—she didn't believe it—she didn't care— Anyway, it would be over before the end of February!"

Suddenly the crooning wail started again: next, spasms of weeping, harsh and gasping.

By-and-by she understood that she was crying noisily, and that she was alone in the room: like a light in a wind, the sobbing fit ceased.

"Let me live—let me live—I'll be straight—I'll go to church—I'll do anything! Take it away—it hurts—I can't bear it!"

Once more the sound of her own voice in the empty room calmed her. But the tension of emotion slackened, only to tighten again: immediately she was jeering at herself. What was she wasting her breath for? What had Jesus ever done for her? She'd had her fling, and it was no thanks to Him.

"Dy-sy—Dy-sy——"

From the street below, boisterous and loud, the refrain came up. And, as the footsteps tramped away, the words reached her once more, indistinct in the distance:

"I'm jest cryzy, all for the love o' you."

She felt frightened. It was like a thing in a play. It was as if some one was there, in the room—hiding—watching her.

Then a coughing fit started, racking her. In the middle, she struggled to cry for help; she thought she was going to suffocate.

Afterwards she sank back, limp, tired, and sleepy.

The end of February—she was going to die—it was important, exciting—what would it be like? Everybody else died. Midge had died in the summer—but that was worry and going the pace. And they said that Annie Evans was going off too. Damn it! she wasn't going to be chicken-hearted. She'd face it. She'd

had

had a jolly time. She'd be game till the end. Hell-fire—that was all stuff and nonsense—she knew that. It would be just nothing—like a sleep. Not even painful: she'd be just shut down in a coffin, and she wouldn't know that they were doing it. Ah! but they might do it before she was quite dead! It had happened sometimes. And she wouldn't be able to get out. The lid would be nailed, and there would be earth on the top. And if she called, no one would hear.

Ugh! what a fit of the blues she was getting! It was beastly, being alone. Why the devil didn't Dick come back?

That noise, what was that?

Bah! only some one in the street. What a fool she was!

She winced again as the fierce feeling of revolt swept through her, the wild longing to fight. It was damned rough—four months! A year, six months even, was a long time. The pain grew acute, different from anything she had felt before.

“Good Lord! what am I maundering on about? Four months—I'll go out with a fizzle like a firework. Why the devil doesn't Dick come?—or Liz—or somebody? What do they leave me alone like this for?”

She dragged at the bell-rope.

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He came in, white and blear-eyed.

“Whatever have you been doing all this time?” she began angrily.

“I've been chatting with the doctor.” He was pretending to read a newspaper: there was something funny about his voice.

“It's ripping. He says you'll soon be fit again, as long as you don't get colds, or that sort of thing. Yes, he says you'll soon be fit again”—a quick, crackling noise—he had gripped the newspaper in his fist.

She

She looked at him, surprised, in spite of herself. She would never have thought he'd have done it like that. He was a good sort, after all. But—she didn't know why—she broke out furiously :

“ You infernal liar !—I know. I shall be done for by the end of February—ha ! ha ! ”

Seizing a vase of flowers, she flung it into the grate. The crash and the shrivelling of the leaves in the flames brought her an instant's relief. Then she said quietly :

“ There—I've made an idiot of myself ; but ” (weakly) “ I didn't know—I didn't know—I thought it was different.”

He hesitated, embarrassed by his own emotion. Presently he went up to her and put his hands round her cheeks.

“ No,” she said, “ that's no good, I don't want that. Get me something to drink. I feel bad.”

He hurried to the cupboard and fumbled with the cork of a champagne bottle. It flew out with a bang. She started violently.

“ You clumsy fool ! ” she exclaimed.

She drank off the wine at a gulp.

“ Daisy,” he began.

She was staring stonily at the empty glass.

“ Daisy,” he repeated.

She tapped her toe against the fender-rail.

At this sign, he went on :

“ How did you know ? ”

“ I sent Liz to listen,” she answered mechanically.

He looked about him, helpless.

“ I think I'll smoke,” he said feebly.

She made no answer.

“ Here, put the glass down,” she said.

He obeyed.

He lit a cigarette over the lamp, sat down opposite her, puffing dense clouds of smoke.

And, for a long while, neither spoke.

"Is that doctor a good man?"

"I don't know. People say so," he answered.