

The Squire's Madness

By Stephen Crane

Linton was in his study remote from the interference of domestic sounds. He was writing verses. He was not a poet in the strict sense of the word, because he had eight hundred a year and a manor house in Sussex. But he was devoted, at any rate, and no happiness was for him equal to the happiness of an imprisonment in this lonely study. His place had been a semi-fortified house in the good days when every gentleman was either abroad with a bared sword hunting his neighbors or behind oak-and-iron doors and three-foot walls while his neighbors hunted him. But in the life of Linton it may be said that the only part of the house which remained true to the idea of fortification was the study, which was free only to Linton's wife and certain terriers. The necessary appearance from time to time of a servant always grated upon Linton as much as if from time to time somebody had in the most well-bred way flung a brick through the little panes of his window.

This window looked forth upon a wide valley of hop fields and sheep pastures, dipping and rising this way and that way, but always a valley until it reached a high faraway ridge upon which stood the upright figure of a windmill, usually making rapid gestures as if it were an excited sentry warning the old gray house of coming danger. A little to the right, on a knoll, red chimneys and parts of red-tiled roofs appeared among trees, and the venerable square tower of the village church rose above them.

For ten years Linton had left vacant Oldrestham Hall, and when at last it became known that he and his wife were to return from an incomprehensible wandering, the village, which for four centuries had turned a feudal eye toward the Hall, was wrung with a prospect of change, a proper change. The great family pew in Oldrestham church would be occupied each Sunday morning by a fat, happy-faced, utterly squire-looking man, who would be dutifully at his post when the parish was stirred by a subscription list. Then, for the first time in many years, the hunters would ride in the early morning merrily out through the park, and there would be also shooting parties, and in the summer groups of charming ladies would be seen walking the terrace, laughing on the lawns and in the rose gardens. The village expected to have the perfectly legal and fascinating privilege of discussing the performances of its own gentry.

The first intimation of calamity was in the news that Linton had rented all the shooting. This prepared the people for the blow, and it fell when they sighted the master of Oldrestham Hall. The older villagers remembered then that there had been nothing in the youthful Linton to promise a fat, happy-faced, dignified, hunting, shooting overlord, but still they could not but resent the appearance of the new squire. There was no conceivable reason for his looking like a gaunt ascetic who would surprise nobody if he borrowed a sixpence from the first yokel he met in the lanes.

Linton was in truth three inches more than six feet in height, but he had bowed himself to five feet eleven inches. His hair shocked out in front like hay, and under it were two spectacled eyes which never seemed to regard anything with particular attention. His face was pale and full of hollows, and the mouth apparently had no expression save a chronic pout of the underlip. His hands were large and rawboned but uncannily white. His whole bent body was thin as that of a man from a long sickbed, and all was finished by two feet which for size could not be matched in the county.

He was very awkward, but apparently it was not so much a physical characteristic as it was a mental inability to consider where he was going or what he was doing. For instance, when passing through a gate it was not uncommon for him to knock his side viciously against one of the posts. This was because he dreamed almost always, and if there had been forty gates in a row he would not then have noted them more than he did the one. As far as the villagers and farmers were concerned he never came out of this manner save in wide-apart cases, when he had forced upon him either some great exhibition of stupidity or some faint indication of double-dealing, and then this smoldering man flared out, encrimsoning his immediate surrounding with a brief fire of ancestral anger. But the lapse back to indifference was more surprising. It was far quicker than the flare in the beginning. His feeling was suddenly ashes at the moment when one was certain it would lick the sky.

Some of the villagers asserted that he was mad. They argued it long in the manner of their kind, repeating, repeating, and repeating, and when an opinion confusingly rational appeared they merely shook their heads in pig-like obstinacy. Anyhow, it was historically clear that no such squire had before been in the line of Lintons of Gldrestham Hall, and the present incumbent was a shock.

The servants at the Hall—notably those who lived in the countryside— came in for a lot of questioning, and none were found too backward in explaining many things which they themselves did not understand. The household was most irregular. They all confessed that it was really so uncustomary that they did not know but what they would have to give notice. The master was probably the most extraordinary man in the whole world. The butler said that Linton would drink beer with his meals day in and day out like any carrier resting at a pothouse. It didn't matter even if the meal were dinner. Then suddenly he would change his tastes to the most valuable wines, and in ten days would make the wine cellar look as if it had been wrecked at sea. What was to be done with a gentleman of that kind? The butler said for his part he wanted a master with habits, and he protested that Linton did not have a habit to his name; at least, none that could properly be called a habit.

Barring the cook, the entire establishment agreed categorically with the butler. The cook didn't agree because she was a very good cook indeed, which she thought entitled her to be extremely aloof from the other servants'-hall opinions.

As for the squire's lady, they described her as being not much different from the master. At least she gave support to his most unusual manner of life, and evidently believed that whatever he chose to do was quite correct.

II

Linton had written:

The garlands of her hair are snakes;
Black and hitter are her hating eyes.
A cry the windy death-hall makes—
O, love, deliver us.
The flung cup rolls to her sandal's tip; His arm—

Whereupon his thought fumed over the next two lines, coursing like greyhounds, after a fugitive vision of a writhing lover, with the foam of poison on his lips, dying at the feet of the

woman. Linton arose, lit a cigarette, placed it on the window ledge, took another cigarette, looked blindly for the matches, thrust a spiral of paper into the flame of the log fire, lit the second cigarette, placed it toppling on a book, and began a search among his pipes for one that would draw well. He gazed at his pictures, at the books on the shelves, out at the green spread of countryside, all without taking mental note. At the window ledge he came upon the first cigarette, and in a matter-of-fact way he returned it to his lips, having forgotten that he had forgotten it.

There was a sound of steps on the stone floor of the quaint little passage that led down to his study, and turning from the window he saw that his wife had entered the room and was looking at him strangely.

“Jack,” she said in a low voice, “What is the matter?”

His eyes were burning out from under his shock of hair with a fierceness that belied his feeling of simple surprise. “Nothing is the matter,” he answered. “Why do you ask?”

She seemed immensely concerned, but she was visibly endeavoring to hide her concern as well as to abate it. “I—I thought you acted queerly.”

He answered: “Why no. I’m not acting queerly. On the contrary,” he added smiling, “I’m in one of my most rational moods.”

Her look of alarm did not subside. She continued to regard him with the same stare. She was silent for a time and did not move. His own thoughts had quite returned to a contemplation of a poisoned lover, and he did not note the manner of his wife. Suddenly she came to him and, laying a hand on his arm, said, “Jack, you are ill?”

“Why no, dear,” he said with a first impatience, “I’m not ill at all. I never felt better in my life.” And his mind, beleaguered by this pointless talk, strove to break through to its old contemplation of the poisoned lover. “Hear what I have written.” Then he read:

“The garlands of her hair are snakes;
Black and bitter are her hating eyes.
A cry the windy death-hall makes—
O, love, deliver us.
The flung cup rolls to her sandal’s tip;
His arm—”

Linton said: “I can’t seem to get the lines to describe the man who is dying of the poison on the floor before her. Really I’m having a time with it. What a bore. Sometimes I can write like mad, and other times I don’t seem to have an intelligent idea in my head.”

He felt his wife’s hand tighten on his arm, and he looked into her face. It was so alight with horror that it brought him sharply out of his dreams. “Jack,” she repeated tremulously, “you are ill.”

He opened his eyes in wonder. “Ill! ill? No; not in the least!”

“Yes, you are ill. I can see it in your eyes. You—act so strangely.”

“Act strangely? Why, my dear, what have I done? I feel quite well. Indeed, I was never more fit in my life.”

As he spoke he threw himself into a large wing chair and looked up at his wife, who stood gazing at him from the other side of the black oak table upon which Linton wrote his verses.

“Jack, dear,” she almost whispered, “I have noticed for days,” and she leaned across the table to look more intently into his face. “Yes, your eyes grow more fixed every day—you—you—your head, does it ache, dear?”

Linton arose from his chair and came around the big table toward his wife. As he approached her, an expression akin to terror crossed her face, and she drew back as in fear, holding out both hands to ward him off.

He had been smiling in the manner of a man reassuring a frightened child, but at her shrinking from his outstretched hand he stopped in amazement. “Why, Grace, what is it? tell me.”

She was glaring at him, her eyes wide with misery. Linton moved his left hand across his face, unconsciously trying to brush from it that which alarmed her.

“Oh, Jack, you must see some one; I am wretched about you. You are ill!”

“Why, my dear wife,” he said, “I am quite, quite well; I am anxious to finish these verses, but words won’t come somehow; the man dying—”

“Yes, that is it—you cannot remember—you see that you cannot remember. You must see a doctor. We will go up to town at once,” she answered quickly.

“’Tis true,” he thought, “that my memory is not as good as it used to be. I cannot remember dates, and words won’t fit in somehow. Perhaps I don’t take enough exercise, dear; is that what worries you?” he asked.

“Yes, yes, dear, you do not go out enough,” said his wife. “You cling to this room as the ivy clings to the walls—but we must go to London, you *must* see some one; promise me that you will go, that you will go immediately.”

Again Linton saw his wife look at him as one looks at a creature of pity. The faint lines from her nose to the corners of her mouth deepened as if she were in physical pain; her eyes, open to their fullest extent, had in them the expression of a mother watching her dying babe. What was this strange wall that had suddenly raised itself between them? Was he ill? No; he never had been in better health in his life. He found himself vainly searching for aches in his bones. Again he brushed away this thing which seemed to be upon his face. There must be something on my face, he thought; else why does she look at me with such hopeless despair in her eyes? these kindly eyes that had hitherto been so responsive to each glance of his own. *Why* did she think that he was ill, she who knew well his every mood? *Was he mad?* Did this thing of the poisoned cup that rolled to her sandal’s tip—and her eyes, her hating eyes—mean that his— No, it could not be. He fumbled among the papers on the table for a cigarette. He could not find one. He walked to the huge fireplace and peered nearsightedly at the ashes on the hearth.

“What, what do you want, Jack? Be careful! The fire!” cried his wife.

“Why, I want a cigarette,” he said.

She started, as if he had spoken roughly to her. “I will get you some; wait, sit quietly—I will bring you some,” she replied as she hastened through the small passageway up the stone steps that led from his study.

Linton stood with his back still bent, in the posture of a man picking something from the ground. He did not turn from the fireplace until the echo of his wife’s footfall on the stone floors had died away. Then he straightened himself and said, “Well, I’m damned!” And Linton was not a man who swore.

III

A month later the squire and his wife were on their way to London to consult the great brain specialist, Doctor Redmond. Linton now believed that "something" was wrong with him. His wife's anxiety, which she could no longer conceal, forced him to this conclusion; "something" was wrong. Until these few last weeks Linton's wife had managed her household with the care and wisdom of a chatelaine of medieval times. Each day was planned for certain duties in house or village. She had theories as to the management and education of the village children, and this work occupied much of her time. She was the antithesis of her husband. He, a weaver of dream-stories, she of that type of woman who has ideas of the emancipation of women and who believe the problem could be solved by training the minds of the next generation of mothers. Linton was not interested in these questions, but he would smile indulgently at his wife as she talked of the equality of mind of the sexes and the public part in the world's history which would be played by the women of the future.

There was no talk of this kind now. The household management fell into the hands of servants. Night and day his wife watched Linton. He would awaken in the night to find her face close to his own, her eyes burning with feverish anxiety.

"What is it, Grace?" he would cry. "Have I said anything? What is the reason you watch me in this fashion, dear?"

And she would sob, "Jack, you are ill, dear, you are ill. We must go to town; we must, indeed."

Then he would soothe her with fond words and promise that he would go to London.

This present journey was the outcome of those weeks of watching and fear in Linton's wife's mind.

Linton's wife was trembling violently as he helped her down from the cab in front of Doctor Redmond's door. They had made an appointment, so that they were sure of little delay before the portentous interview.

A small page in blue livery opened the door and ushered them into a waiting room. Mrs. Linton dropped heavily into a chair, looking with a frightened air from side to side and biting her underlip nervously. She was moaning half under her breath, "Oh, Jack, you are ill, you are ill."

A short stout man with clean-shaven face and scanty black hair entered the room. His nose was huge and misshapen and his mouth was a straight firm line. Overhanging black brows tried in vain to shadow the piercing dark eyes that darted questioning looks at every one, seeming to search for hidden thoughts as a flashlight from the conning tower of a ship searches for the enemy in time of war.

He advanced toward Mrs. Linton with outstretched hand. "Mrs. Linton?" he said. "Ah!"

She almost jumped from her chair as he came near her, crying, "Oh, doctor, my husband is ill, very ill, very ill!"

Again Doctor Redmond, with his eyes fixed upon her face, ejaculated "Ah!" Turning to Linton he said, "Please wait here, Squire; I will first talk to your wife.—Will you step into my study, madam?" he said to Mrs. Linton, bowing courteously.

Linton's wife ran into the room which the doctor pointed toward as his study.

Linton waited. He moved softly about the room looking at the photographs of Greek ruins which adorned the walls. He stopped finally before a large picture of the Gate of Hadrian. He traveled once more into his dream country. His fancy painted in the figures of men and women

who had passed through that gate. He had forgotten his fear of the blotting out of his mind that could conjure these glowing colors. He had forgotten himself.

From this dream he was recalled to the present by a hand being placed gently upon his arm. He half turned and saw the doctor regarding him with sympathetic eyes.

“Come, my dear sir, come into my study,” said the doctor. “I have asked your wife to await us here.” Linton then turned fully toward the center of the room and found that his wife was seated quietly by a table. Doctor Redmond bowed low to Mrs. Linton as he passed her, and Linton waved his hand, smiled, and said, “Only a moment, dear.” She did not reply. The door closed behind them.

“Be seated, my dear sir,” said the doctor, drawing forward a chair; “be seated. I want to say something to you, but you must drink this first.” He handed Linton a small glass of brandy.

Linton sat down, took the glass mechanically, and gulped the brandy in one great swallow. The doctor stood by the mantel and said slowly, “I rejoice to say to you, sir, that I have never met a man more sound mentally than yourself—”

Linton half started from his chair.

“Stop!” said the doctor; “I have not yet finished.—But it is my painful duty to tell you the truth. *it is your Wife who is Mad! Mad as a Hatter!*”