

A Deed of Vengeance?

By Bram Stoker

Lord Francis Onslow lifted his cap. The action was an instinctive one, for he was face to face with a lady; but he was half dazed with the unexpected meeting, and could not collect his thoughts. He only remembered that when he had last seen his wife she was opening the door of her chamber to De Mürger. For weeks he had been schooling himself for such a meeting, for he knew that on his return such might at any time occur; but now, when the moment had come, and unexpectedly, the old pain of his shame overwhelmed him anew. His face grew white—white till it seemed to Fenella that it was of the pallor of death. She knew that she had been so far guilty of what had happened that the murder had been the outcome of her previous acts. She knew also that her husband was ignorant of his part in the deed—and her horror of the man, blood-guilty in such a way, was fined down by the sense of her own partial guilt. The trial, with all its consequent pain to a proud and sensitive woman, had softened her, and she grasped at any hope. The sight of Frank, his gaunt cheeks, which told their tale of suffering, and now the deadly pallor, awoke all the protective feeling which is a part of a woman's love. It was with her whole soul in her voice that she said again: 'Frank!'

His voice was stern as well as sad as he answered her: 'What is it?' Her heart went cold, but she persevered. 'Frank, I must have a word with you—I must. For God's sake, for Ronny's sake, do not deny me.'

She did not know that as yet Frank Onslow was in ignorance of De Mürger's death; and when his answer came it seemed more hard than even he intended: 'Do you wish to speak of that night?'

In a faint voice she answered: 'I do.' Then looking in his eyes and seeing the hard look becoming harder still—for a man is seldom generous with a woman where his honour is concerned, she added: 'O Heaven! Frank! You do not think me guilty! No, no, not you! not you! That would be too cruel!'

Frank Onslow paused and said: 'Fenella, God help me! but I do,' and he turned away his head. His wife, of course, thought that he alluded to the murder, and not to her sin against him as he saw it, and with a low moan she turned away and hid her face in her hands. Then with an effort she drew herself up, and without a word or a single movement to show that she even recognized his presence, she passed on up the street.

Frank Onslow stood for a few moments watching her retreating figure, and then went across the street and turned the next corner on his way to the post office, for which he had been enquiring when he met his wife. At the door he was stopped by a cheery voice and an outstretched hand: 'Onslow!'

'Castleton!' The two men shook hands warmly.

'I see you did not get my telegram,' said Lord Castleton. 'It is waiting for you at the post office.'

'What telegram?'

'To tell you that I was on my way here from London. I went in your interest, old fellow. I thought you would like full particulars—the newspapers are so vague.'

'What papers? My interest? Tell me all. I am ignorant of all that has passed for the last six weeks.' A vague, shadowy fear began to creep over his spirits.

Castleton's voice was full of sympathy as he answered: 'Then you have not heard of—but stay. It is a long story. Come back to the yacht. I was just going to join you there. We shall be all alone, and I can tell you all. I have the newspapers here for you.' He motioned to a roll under his arm.

The two went down to the harbour, and finding the sailor waiting with the boat at the steps, were rowed to the yacht and got on board. Here the two men were all alone. Then, with a preliminary clearing of his voice, Castleton began his story: 'Frank Onslow—better get the worst over at once—just after you went away from Harrogate your wife was tried for murder and acquitted.'

'My God! Fenella tried for murder? Whose murder?'

'That scoundrel De Mürger. It seems he went into her room in the night and attempted violence, so she stabbed him—'

Castleton stopped in amazement, for a look of radiance came over Frank Onslow's face, as he murmured 'Thank God!' Recalled to himself by Castleton's silence, for he was too amazed to go on, Frank said. 'I have a reason, old fellow; I shall tell it to you later, but go on. Tell me all the facts, or let me read the papers. Remember I am as yet quite ignorant of it all and I am full of anxiety!'

Without a word Castleton handed him the papers, and, lighting a fresh cigar, sat down with his back to him, and presently yielded to the sun and fresh air and fell into a doze.

Frank Onslow took the papers, and read carefully from end to end the account of the trial of his wife for the murder of De Mürger. When he had finished he sat with the folded paper in his hand, and his eyes had the same far-away look in them which they had had on that fatal night. The hypnotic trance was on him again.

Presently he rose, and with stealthy steps approached his sleeping friend. Murmuring 'Why did I not kill him?' he struck with the folded paper, as though with a dagger, the form before him. Castleton, who had sunk into a pleasant sleep and whose fat face was wreathed with a smile, was annoyed at the rude awakening. 'What the devil!' he began angrily, and then stopped as his eyes met the face of his friend and he realized that he was in some sort of trance. He grew very pale as he saw Frank Onslow stab, and stab, and stab again. There was a certain grotesqueness in the affair—the man in such terrible earnest, in his mind committing murder, while his real weapon was but a folded paper. As he stabbed he hissed, 'Why did I not kill him? Why did I not kill him?' Then he went through a series of movements as though he were softly pulling an imaginary door shut behind him, and so back to his own chair, where he sat down hiding his face in his hands.

Castleton sat looking at him in amazement, and then murmured to himself: 'They thought it was someone stronger than Fenella whose grasp made those marks on the dead man's throat.' He suddenly looked round to see that no one but himself had observed what had happened, and then, being satisfied on this point, murmured again: 'A noble woman, by Jove! A noble woman!' He called out: 'Frank—Frank Onslow! Wake up, man.'

Onslow raised his head as a man does when suddenly awakened, and smiled as he said: 'What is it, old man? Have I been asleep?' It was quite evident that he had no recollection of what had just passed.

Castleton came and sat down beside him, and his kindly face was grave as he asked: 'You have read the papers?'

'I have.'

‘Now tell me—you offered to do so—why you said “Thank God!” when I told you that your wife had killed De Mürger?’

Frank Onslow paused. Although the memory of what he had thought to be his shame had been with him daily and nightly until he had become familiarized with it, it was another thing to speak of it, even to such a friend as Castleton. Even now, when it was apparent from the issue of the trial that his wife had avenged so dreadfully the attempt upon her honour, he felt it hard to speak on the subject. Castleton saw the doubt and struggle in his mind which was reflected in his face, and said earnestly, as he laid his hand upon his shoulder: ‘Do not hesitate to tell me, Frank. I do not ask out of mere curiosity. I am perhaps a better friend than you think in helping to clear up a certain doubt which I see before me. I think you know I am a friend.’

‘One of the best a man ever had!’ said Frank impulsively, as he took the other’s hand. Then turning away his head, he said slowly: ‘You were surprised because I was glad Fenella killed that scoundrel. I can tell you, Castleton, but I would not tell anyone else. It was because I saw him enter her room, and, God forgive me! I thought at the time that it was by her wish. That is why I came away from Harrogate that night. That is what kept me away. How could I go back and face my friends with such a shame fresh upon me? It was your lending me your yacht, old man, that made life possible. When I was by myself through the wildness of the Bay of Biscay and among the great billows of the Atlantic I began to be able to bear. I had steeled myself, I thought, and when I heard that so far from my wife being guilty of such a shame, she actually killed the man that attempted her honour, is it any wonder that I felt joyful?’

After a pause Castleton asked: ‘How did you come to see—to see it. Why did you take no step to prevent it? Forgive me, old fellow, but I want to understand.’

Frank Onslow went to the rail, and leaned over. When he came back Castleton saw that his eyes were wet. With what cheerfulness he could assume, he answered: ‘On that very night I had made up my mind to try to win back my wife’s love. I wrote a letter to her, a letter in which I poured out my whole soul, and I left my room to put it under her door, so that she would get it in the morning. But’—here he paused, and then said, slowly, ‘but when in the corridor, I saw her door open, and at the same moment De Mürger appeared.’

‘Did she seem surprised?’

‘Not at first. But a moment after a look of amazement crossed her face, and she stepped back into the room, he following her.’ As he said this he put his head between his hands and groaned.

‘And then?’ added his friend.

‘And then I hardly know what happened. My mind seems full of a dim memory of a blank existence, and then a series of wild whirling thoughts, something like that last moment after death in Wiertz’s picture. I think I must have slept, for it was two o’clock when I saw Fenella, and the clock was striking five when I crossed the bridge after I had left the hotel.’

‘And the letter? What became of it?’

Frank started. ‘The letter? I never thought of it. Stay! I must have left it on the table in my room. I remember seeing it there a little while before I came away.’

‘How was it addressed? Do not think me inquisitive, but I cannot help thinking that that letter may yet be of some great importance.’

Frank smiled, a sad smile enough, as he answered: ‘By the pet name I had for Fenella—Mrs Right. I used to chaff her because she always defended her position when we argued, and so, when I wanted to tease her, I called her Mrs Right.’

‘Was it written on hotel paper?’

‘No. I was going to write on some, but I thought it would be better to use the sort we had when—when we were first married. There were a few sheets in my writing case, so I took one.’

‘That was headed somewhere in Surrey, was it not?’

‘Yes; Chiddingfold, near Haslemere. It was a pretty place, too, called The Grange. Fenella fell in love with it, and made me buy it right away.’

‘Is anyone living there now?’

‘It is let to someone. I don’t think that I heard the name. The agent knows. When the trouble came I told him to do what he could with it, and not to bother me with it any more. After a while he wrote and asked if I would mind it being let to a foreigner? I told him he might let it to a devil so long as he did not worry me.’

Lord Castleton paused awhile, and asked the next question in a hesitating way. He felt embarrassed, and showed it: ‘Tell me one thing more, old fellow—if—if you don’t mind.’

‘My dear Castleton, I’ll tell you anything you like.’

‘How did you sign the letter?’

Onslow’s face looked sad as he answered. ‘I signed it by another old pet name we both understood. We had pet names—people always have when they are first married,’ he added with embarrassment.

‘Of course,’ murmured the sympathetic Castleton.

‘One such name lasted a long time. An old friend of my father’s came to see us, and in a playful moment he said I was a “sad dog”. Fenella took it up and used to call me “Doggie”, and I often signed myself “Frank Doggie”—as men usually do.’

‘Of course,’ again murmured Castleton, as if such a signature was a customary thing. Then he added, ‘And on this occasion?’

‘On this occasion I used the name that seemed full of happiest memories. “Frank Doggie” may seem idiotic to an outsider, but to Fenella and myself it might mean much.’

The two men sat silent awhile, and then Castleton asked softly: ‘I suppose it may be taken for granted that Lady Francis never got the letter?’

‘I take it, it is so; but it is no matter now, I refused to speak with her just before I met you. I did not know then what I know now—and she will never speak to me again.’ He sighed as he spoke, and turned away. Then he went to the rail of the yacht and leaned over with his head down, looking into the still blue water beneath him.

‘Poor old Frank!’ said Castleton to himself. ‘I can’t but think that this matter may come right yet. I must find out what became of that letter, in case Lady Francis never got it. It would prove to her that Frank—’

His train of thought suddenly stopped. A new idea seemed to strike him so forcibly that it quite upset him. Onslow, who had come over from the rail, noticed it. ‘I say, Castleton, what is wrong with you? You have got quite white about the gills.’

‘Nothing—nothing,’ he answered hastily. ‘I am subject to it. They call it heart. Pardon me for a bit, I’ll go to my bunk and lie down,’ and he went below.

In truth, he was overwhelmed by the thought which had just struck him. If his surmise were true, that Onslow, in a hypnotic trance, as he had almost proved by its recurrence, had killed De Murger, where, then, was Fenella’s heroism after all? True that she had taken the blame on herself; but might it not have been that she was morally guilty all the same? Why, then, had she taken the blame? Was it not because she feared that her husband might have refused to screen her shame; or because she feared that if any less heroic aspect of the tragedy was presented to the public, her own fair fame might suffer in greater degree? Could it indeed be that Fenella Onslow

was not a heroine, but only a calculating woman of exceeding smartness? Then, again, if Frank Onslow believed that his wife had avenged her honour, was it wise to disturb such belief? He might think, if once the suggestion were made to him, that his honour was preserved only by his own unconscious act.

Was it then wise to disturb existing relations between the husband and wife, sad though they were? Did they come together again, they might in mutual confidence arrive at a real knowledge of the facts, and then—and then, what would be the result? And besides, might there not be some danger in any suggestion made as to his suspicion of who struck the blow? It was true that Lady Francis had been acquitted of the crime, although she confessed to the killing; but her husband might still be tried—and if tried? What then would be the result of the discovery of the missing letter on which he had been building such hopes?

The problem was too much for Lord Castleton. His life had been too sunny and easy-going to allow of familiarity with great emotions, and such a problem as this was to him overwhelming. The issue was too big for him; and revolving in his own mind all that belonged to it, he glided into sleep.