

Resurgam

By Rina Ramsay

I

The London parson had taken a night off to run down and preach for Stackhouse.

He liked the change. It was like dipping into another world to slip out of his own restless parish into the utterly different atmosphere of this quiet country town. It had struck him most in the pulpit, when the lights went up on the sleepy congregation and he gave out a concluding hymn. How alike they were; all one pattern, all known to each other, all leading the same staid, ordinary lives. What a blessed tonic, his brief sojourn in this placid community.

He puffed out his chest, drinking in the soft night air that was so good to swallow. He was a big man and burly, and the narrow pavement would hardly hold the three of them abreast, so he was walking between the other two down the middle of the darkened street. They passed various worshippers in the glimmer—families, friends, and sweethearts—all of them pausing to say good-night. Such a peaceable little town and so friendly! It struck him again as comical that it should have been Stackhouse and not himself who had had a nervous breakdown last summer.

He burst out chuckling, and then, on the point of sharing his amusement at such an anomaly, was discreet. Those highly strung individuals were so touchy. And Stackhouse did not seem in the humour for chaffing. His mouth was set in an odd line of strained endurance and he hardly spoke. His long, lean, ascetic figure had something monkish about it as he stalked along in his cassock. His eyes were staring into the gloom ahead.

Mrs Stackhouse, on the other side, was making up for her husband's silence. Robinson had had no idea she was such a chattering woman. It began to annoy him. It seemed to him that there was a suggestion of hysteria in her incessant prattle.

Near the vicarage gate they overtook a woman of the charwoman class, and the vicar's wife hailed her with the usual salutation and asked why Bessy had missed Sunday-school. The woman unlatched the gate for them. She had a small child with her, and spoke for its benefit in a mincing tone.

'Bessy's bin a very bad girl, ma'am. She's been telling lies.'

'Oh, dear!' said Mrs Stackhouse, properly scandalized.

'Yes, ma'am; the young monkey! She will have it her lady, as used to, sat with her on Sunday night.'

'Oh!' said Mrs Stackhouse again, but swiftly. 'Nonsense, nonsense!'

She whisked through the gate, which clanged after them, leaving the woman outside with the infant, unadmonished, hanging to her skirt with a finger in its mouth. In the light of the hall lamp she glanced furtively at her husband.

'My dear boy!' she said, hurriedly, almost wildly; 'a child of four!'

Stackhouse dropped his eyes from hers, and lifted his hand with a curious gesture as if he were wiping the sweat from his brow.

Inside the house Mrs Stackhouse fled to the kitchen to hurry that uncomfortable meal called supper, and the two men waited a minute or two by the study fire.

'Awfully good of you to come down, Robinson,' said the vicar. He spoke in a strained voice; there was something in it that sounded like expectation, like some faint hope; but the Londoner, for all his alertness, had not the clue. He noticed, however, that his host's knuckles gleamed

white as he gripped hard on the edge of the chimney-piece. These long, weedy men had no stamina, physical or nervous. It must have been his temperament, certainly not his surroundings, that had made Stackhouse go to pieces.

‘Good of you to ask me,’ he said, politely. ‘I love this quiet place. Such a contrast to my parish! You should see us up there, how crowded, quarrelling and fighting. I’m afraid that sea voyage didn’t set you up altogether?’

‘I thought it had, though,’ said Stackhouse, abruptly. ‘When I came back

He shut his mouth suddenly in the middle of the sentence, but looked hard at his fellow-priest. In his look was wistfulness, and an imminent despair.

‘I’d like to ask you something,’ he said, ‘but—I dare not.’ He let go the chimney-piece and led the way into the dining-room, where Mrs Stackhouse was calling them. She was too anxiously hospitable for comfort, bouncing up and down behind her coffee-pot, fussing about the food, and rattling on feverishly; but keeping, the visitor could see, a distracted eye on her husband. There was not much coherence in her prattle, and sometimes she lost the thread of it and looked for a minute helpless. Only at such disconcerting moments could the Londoner, coming to the rescue, get a word in.

Why would the woman insist on talking, and what was she afraid of? Some outbreak of nerves on the part of the silent man? Was it pure hysteria on her part, or was she trying to cover some private fear?

He seized the first opportunity to take his share in the conversation, mildly humorous, but conscious all the while of the peculiar strain in the atmosphere. And then, incidentally, he remembered something.

‘By the way,’ he said, ‘you lucky people, you know all your congregation. Who is the lady who sat in the side aisle alone in the seat next the pillar? A singularly interesting face—’

Mrs Stackhouse started violently.

‘Wh—what was she like?’ she asked.

‘Rather eager and sad,’ said Robinson, reflecting, ‘but quite a girl. She had a pointed chin, and dark hair, I think, and large, dark eyes—penetrating eyes; and she wore some kind of glittering jewel hung round her neck. It was her troubled expression that struck me first—’

He broke off astonished. For Stackhouse had stood up and was staring at him, gripping the table, leaning over. His look was half incredulous, half unspeakable relief.

‘Then,’ he said, in a choked voice, ‘you, too, saw her. Thank Heaven! I am not mad.’

Mrs Stackhouse hid her face suddenly in her hands and burst into an uncontrollable fit of crying.

The visitor looked from one to the other in real alarm. He could see nothing in his harmless remark to affect them so deeply, or to relax, as it seemed, an intolerable strain.

‘I’m afraid—’ he began.

Mrs Stackhouse sat up and smiled.

‘But we are so thankful to you,’ she said, still sobbing. ‘Oh, you can’t imagine what a relief it is! You’re an independent witness—unprejudiced—and you saw her. Oh, you don’t know what it means to us. We were both so terrified that his mind was going—’

‘Still,’ said the Londoner, puzzled, ‘I can’t see how my mentioning that young lady

She interrupted him. Something like awe hushed her excited voice.

‘The girl you saw in church,’ she said, ‘died last year.

‘Impossible!’ said Robinson.

Stackhouse—who was with difficulty controlling a nervous tremor that shook him from head to foot, but whose voice was steady—moved to the door.

‘Let us go back to the study,’ he said, ‘and talk it over.’

His whole manner was changed as he stood on the hearthrug looking down on his guest and his wife. He had lost the pathetic hesitation that Robinson had noticed in him that night, and recovered something of his old bearing of priestly pomp. ‘Most of us believe in the unseen,’ he pronounced; ‘but to find what belongs to the other world made visible—brought so close—is a dreadful shock. My wife thought it must be an hallucination; she thought I was going mad—and I, too, grew horribly afraid. You see, I had had that nervous breakdown before, and the doctors sent me away for six months. It looked as if the prescription had failed. We thought that my breakdown must have been the warning of a mental collapse. We—I can’t tell you, Robinson, what we suffered. And yet I saw that poor girl, night after night, so plainly—’

‘She was such a nice girl!’ broke in Mrs Stackhouse, in her gasping treble; ‘and such a help in the parish. We liked her so much. And, of course, we were getting no letters—the doctors had forbidden it; we had heard nothing whatever till we came home and they told us she had committed suicide soon after we went away. I thought the shock of it had been too much for George. No wonder—such a *good* girl, Mr Robinson. She—she used to sit in that seat with the schoolchildren to keep them quiet. No one could have dreamt she could do anything so wicked

‘Do you mean,’ said Robinson, bluntly, ‘that I saw a ghost?’

Stackhouse bent his head. His wife shivered suddenly as if she had not till then fully realized what it meant. Her mind had been so possessed by fear for the sanity of her husband; her relief had been too intense.

‘I—suppose so,’ she said, in an awe-stricken whisper.

There followed a short pause; no sound but the fire crackling and the night wind sighing a little outside the room. Mrs Stackhouse drew in nearer the fender as if she were very cold, and made a little gasp in her throat. The Londoner, looking from one to the other with his kindly, humorous glance, began to talk common sense.

‘Of course it’s a mistake,’ he said. ‘The girl I saw in church tonight was real. It can only be some chance likeness—perhaps a relation—’

Stackhouse shook his head.

‘No,’ he said. ‘There’s no one like her. Poor girl, poor girl; her spirit cannot rest. God forgive me, there must have been something deadly wrong in my teaching, since it could not keep her from such a dreadful act. Is it strange that she looks reproachful?’

‘But haven’t you made enquiries?’

‘We have not dared to speak of it to a soul!’ cried Mrs Stackhouse. ‘They would all have believed—as I did—that George was going mad. Oh, can’t you see the horrible difficulty? And then—’

‘I am not going to have my church made a public show for the rabble,’ said Stackhouse, violently. ‘I won’t have that desecration! Can’t you see them crowding here in their thousands, staring, scoffing, profaning a holy place? The newspapers would seize on the tale in a moment! For Heaven’s sake, man, hold your tongue.’

He stopped, and again that nervous tremor took him.

‘Do you mind telling me the circumstances? Who was this girl?’ said the Londoner curious, but stoutly incredulous. ‘It certainly wasn’t the face of a suicide that I saw—’

‘No. It’s incomprehensible,’ said Stackhouse, trying to recover a sort of calm. ‘She was the last person in the world, you would have said. How little we creatures know! She lived with her

uncle, a solicitor here, and kept house for him. The uncle is my churchwarden. She was going out shortly to India to be married. There was nothing to worry her.'

'Poor little Kitty!' said Mrs Stackhouse, in a sobbing breath. 'If only we had been there—'

'Yes, she might have confided in us,' said Stackhouse. 'But the priest I left in charge here was a young man, lately ordained; shy, and not observant. And nobody had noticed anything strange about her. Only her uncle said at the inquest that he was afraid she had been a little scared at the idea of her approaching marriage. She had lived in this place all her life, and it was a wrench to leave it; and she had not seen the man for five years. He was afraid she must have been brooding in secret and dreading the journey; and he blamed himself for thinking it only natural a girl should be fluttered at the prospect of such a tremendous step. Poor man, he must have been terribly distressed. One of the jury told me that if they could have found any possible excuse they would have brought it in misadventure, if only to spare his feelings—'

'But she went down to the chemist herself and bought the stuff,' broke in Mrs Stackhouse. 'She told him she wanted it for an old dog that had been run over; she signed the poison book and asked him particularly if it would be painless. Of course, knowing her as he did, he never dreamt—'

'And the dog?' said Robinson.

'There was no dog,' said Stackhouse. 'No one in the house had heard of it. She locked her door as usual at night—she had done it ever since an alarm of burglars in the house years ago; and when they got frightened in the morning and burst it in she was found dead in bed. She had drunk the poison in the lemonade she took up with her every night.'

'And they buried her with a mutilated service!' said Mrs Stackhouse, shuddering.

'Poor girl!' said Stackhouse, and turned away his head.

The London parson broke the distressing silence.

'A very sad case,' he said; 'but aren't you letting it overcome your judgement? Why in this case beyond all others should her unhappy spirit be allowed to haunt the church? I dare say it is just what a miserable soul would wish, sorrowful, self-tormenting—if uncontrolled. But I see no reason why it should be permitted. And assuming it could be, I'm curious to know why she should appear to you and not to her own relation. He would have spoken of it, wouldn't he, if she had?'

'Poor man!' said Mrs Stackhouse, with an hysterical laugh that she was unable to check; 'he would have raised the whole neighbourhood.'

'Probably,' said Stackhouse, the grave line of his mouth relaxing, 'but he shut up his house and went away; the loneliness was too much for him. And I hear that on his travels he seems to have come across a sensible woman who took him and married him. Some middle-aged person like himself, who had no ties and was feeling lonely. It's the best that could happen.'

'The blinds were up as I passed the house yesterday,' said Mrs Stackhouse.

'Heavens, Robinson, what's to be done?' burst out Stackhouse. 'Look at us, talking coolly in the face of this horror! I can't stand the thing much longer. Think of it, man! Week after week, there she sits, with her eyes fixed on me—'

'Oh, George, George!' said his wife, shuddering.

Robinson was sorry for them both. Evidently both of them were neurotic, and the tragic circumstance they related had affected them; their highly strung temperaments, acting on each other, had worked them up to a really dangerous pitch. And Stackhouse hadn't enough to do. Perhaps it was worse for him to rust in this quiet parish than to wear himself out with work. The

doctors had sent him on a sea voyage, had they? Months of idleness and too much introspection. Fools!

‘Look here,’ he said, ‘you go up and take over my job for a bit, and I’ll stop down here and discover something. You’ll be giddy at first, but the organization’s good, and I’ve got a regular martinet of a curate. He’ll manage you and see you don’t kill yourself. And I think Mrs Stackhouse will find my house quite comfortable for a bachelor’s. I want a holiday badly—and you’ll soon shake off this obsession of yours in a London slum.’

Mrs Stackhouse looked up eagerly at her husband. Relief at the great suggestion shone in her eyes.

‘It would be cowardly to do that,’ said Stackhouse, irresolutely. ‘I should feel as if I had deserted a poor soul that needs my help.’

‘You’re not fit to help anyone in the present state of your nerves,’ said his fellow-parson, and clinched the argument like a Jesuit.

‘How do you know she wants your help more than mine? Didn’t I see her too?’

II

The October sun shone aslant the quiet Street as the Revd Mr Robinson marched along it to call on his—or, rather, on Stackhouse’s truant churchwarden, Mr Parker. He had a straw hat on and swung his stick.

Personally, he was hugely enjoying his interval of peace, and he had in his pocket a letter from his head curate extolling Stackhouse, who was working like a demon, and looked less ill. It only remained for Robinson to clear up the ghost worry in unmistakable fashion, which ought not to be too hard. He smiled. Odd tricks one’s imagination played sometimes! Recollecting Stackhouse’s unbalanced asseveration, he had himself experienced a slight thrill as he peered down the glimmering aisle on the following Sunday evening, and saw the same face that had impressed him before, the same dark eyes riveted on him. His robust intellect, that admitted all things to be possible, but few of them expedient, had been a little staggered by the sad intensity—imagination again—of her look. But a very commonplace incident had rescued him from any foolishness; just a little nodding child that had snuggled up against her as she gathered it in her arm.

He told himself that what he had to do was simply to make a few discreet enquiries and get acquainted with the disturbing young woman. He had spoken to the clerk after service, but that ancient worthy had not noticed who was sitting by the pillar; his sight, he explained, was not so good as it might be, with that chancy gas. Happen it was some stranger; folk was a bit shy of sitting that side because of the children fidgeting, and them boys—you couldn’t keep them boys quiet! Happen it was a teacher?

Clearly there was no disquieting rumour current, no local gossip; there seemed to be no foundation for any supernatural hypothesis but the overwrought condition of the parson’s nerves.

Robinson reached his destination, and pushed open the iron gate. Mr Parker was out, but Mrs Parker was at home, and the caller was marched into the drawing-room.

This was a mixture of ancient middle-class superstition and modern ease. It amused Robinson to compare the two, and even to track the ancestral album to its lurking-place behind a potted palm. While he waited he undid the stiff clasp and turned over the pages. Pity that people had given up that instructive custom of pillorying different generations for the good of posterity! It was an interesting study to look back and mark how family traits persisted, how they cropped up

on occasion as ineradicable as weeds. He went through the book with the keen eye of an anthropologist. There was something elusive, something distantly familiar running through the whole collection. He must have met a member of that family at one time without knowing it. On the very last page he saw her; a photograph of a girl.

Breaking in on his moment of stupefaction Mrs Parker sailed into the room, having furbished herself for the occasion with fresh and violent scent on her handkerchief. A dashing female, with quantities of blazing yellow hair and round eyes that stared and challenged; a splendid presence, indeed, in this sober house. But not at all the expected type of a middle-aged comforter. Much more like a firework.

She excused her husband in a high London voice. He was obliged to be at his office. Everything was in a muddle owing to things being left so long to the clerks. It really was time they came back, though how she was to endure this place! Still, of course, with a motor! Dull, did he say? It was simply dreadful. She had always warned Jimmy that it would be too much for her, but he had persuaded her at last.

‘How lucky for him!’ said Robinson, politely. The lady agreed at once.

‘Rather!’ she said. ‘Poor Jimmy! He must have proposed to me twenty times in the last two years!’

The accelerated clatter of a tea-tray approached. The bride was not going to allow her one visitor to escape her. She began moving things on the table.

‘I have just been looking through that album,’ said Robinson, turning it over as carelessly as he could. ‘That is a striking photograph on the last page. I fancy I have seen the original.’

She uttered a little shriek and closed the book.

‘Oh!’ she said. ‘Don’t you know? It’s Mr Parker’s niece who committed suicide. A shocking thing, wasn’t it? Haven’t you heard about it? It was in all the papers!’

Eagerly she plunged into the story. His shocked countenance encouraged her to enlarge. He sat facing her across the gaudy little painted tea-cups (‘a wedding present from one of my pals,’ she remarked) that surrounded the heavy silver pot.

She poured out the whole history as Robinson had heard it from his fellow-parson, but with amplifications. He heard what a queer temper poor Kitty had, and what a drag on a girl it was to be tied by a long engagement. When a man she hadn’t seen for years wrote suddenly wanting her to come out at once and be married, no wonder the poor girl was terrified. Men alter so. He might have taken to drinking, he might even have grown a beard! And she didn’t dare to back out of it, because she was a religious girl, and she’d promised; and very likely he needed her bit of money. She wasn’t dependent on her uncle—oh, dear, no! Why, that heavy old tea-pot that made your arm ache belonged to her share! And she’d never stirred an inch from home. If Jimmy had had a grain of sense he would have put his foot down and said if the man really wanted her he must come and fetch her. But he didn’t think of it, and so— and so Well, it must have sent her crazy. Look at her artfulness, making up that story about the dog, when she went out to buy the poison! Wasn’t it awful how cunning a person could be, and yet not right in the head, of course!

Her ear-rings tinkled as she shook her head with an air of wisdom. Her cager relation was no more personal than that of anybody retailing the latest sensational case in the papers—except in so far as she possessed the distinction of inside knowledge. There was a certain pride in her glib recital. But she was utterly unaffected by any breath of superstition, any hint of the supernatural hovering.

‘Did you know her well?’ said Robinson, trying to shake off his strange feeling of mental numbness.

‘Oh, my goodness, no!’ she said. ‘I never saw her. I didn’t get engaged to Jimmy till it was all over, and he came up to town more dead than alive, poor fellow, and told me how his circumstances had changed; and I was so sorry for him I just got married to him at once and off we went to Monte Carlo.’

An incongruous picture presented itself to her listener’s mind, the spectacle of this splendid person leading a dazed mourner by the scruff of his neck towards consolation. But the flicker of humour passed.

‘I should like to meet your husband,’ he said. She took, or mistook, him to be severe.

‘I’m afraid we have both been naughty,’ she said. ‘I know we have never been to church, and Mr Parker a churchwarden, too! I used always to call him “the churchwarden” when I wanted to tease him—and he used to get red and say it was a very important office. I must really apologize. And the cook says nobody will call on me till we’ve appeared at church. I’ll promise to bring him next Sunday evening. The cook says it used to be his turn to take round the plate at night.’

Eagerly, but with condescension, she gave this undertaking to satisfy the conventions (the cook having omitted to point out the superior social stamp of Morning Service), and effusively she shook hands. Robinson got out of the house and into the empty street. His mind began to work slowly, in jerks, like a jarred machine.

It was the original of that dead girl’s photograph he had seen.

Something remarkably like panic shook him. He drew his hand across his forehead and found that it was wet.

By an odd trick of memory his own involuntary gesture reminded him of Stackhouse, who had wiped the sweat from his brow like that when the charwoman complained that her little girl had been telling lies. The insignificant incident, printed unconsciously on his brain, came back to him now with an unearthly meaning. He remembered that baby face, wide-eyed, insistent, too young to explain, too little to understand. And he remembered a sleepy head supported safely within a protecting arm.

‘Good Lord!’ he said, and his ruddy face was pale.

III

It was a hot, full church, the atmosphere thick with the breath of humanity and the purring gas. Evening service was popular with the multitude, and a wet night had driven all and sundry who would have been taking walks in the lanes to the only alternative. They pushed in, furling their dripping umbrellas and stacking them in the porch, till there was scarcely an inch of room in the middle aisle. And as the organ ceased rumbling and the packed congregation prepared to shout out the opening hymn a small, rabbit-faced man came stealing up the nave.

In his wake, plumed and hatted and scented, advanced Mrs Parker, making her triumphal entry. Indisputably there was nobody in the church dressed like her. The man ushered her into her place, and took up his own, with a countenance of uneasy rapture, beside this tremendous fine bird he had somehow caged.

Robinson, at the reading-desk, shot one furtive glance at the side aisle and withdrew his eyes. He was conscious of a mixed sensation of relief and of disappointment. His timorous look had travelled along rows of blank, unimportant faces, and seen nothing to send a shock to his sober sense. The appearance, whatever under God’s mysterious providence it might be, was not there.

He took heart to rate himself inwardly for a pusillanimous yielding to superstition. Obstinate-ly he refused to let his attention wander and pinned his eyes to his book.

The service wore on, chant and psalm, prayer and preaching. He found himself halting unaccountably in the pulpit; the terse, vigorous words he sought for became jumbled in his head. In his struggle to keep the thread of his discourse and be lucid he had to fight a growing horror of expectation, a kind of strange foreknowledge that pressed on him. His eyes searched the dim spaces while his tongue stumbled over platitudes. He tried vainly to pierce the veil of mystery that hung over the darkened church. It was not time yet.

And then the glimmering lights went up.

She was there, in her place by the pillar, with her tragic eyes raised to him and the jewel glittering on her breast. All the other faces around her seemed indistinct, as if she alone were real—and yet the seat had been packed with worshippers standing up finding the places for the concluding hymn. Straight and still she stood among them, and, filled with a sense of impending climax, Robinson found it impossible to turn from gazing and go down the pulpit stairs. He, too, waited, watching, holding his breath, while the organ struck up and the churchwardens began to take the collection under cover of a lusty, long-winded hymn.

All at once, without consciously looking in that direction, he became aware that Mr Parker's place was vacant. He saw the small, rabbit-faced man drawing himself up to be stiff and pompous, carrying out his duty. Row after row he collected gravely, passing down the nave and coming up the side aisle. With a shock that staggered him for a moment the watcher realized that it was Mr Parker's part to collect on that side of the church. Would nothing happen, or would he, too, be granted the power to see?

The people were swinging through the third verse to an undercurrent of tinkling pennies. Nearer and nearer the man approached. Mechanically the watcher in the pulpit counted. Three more rows—two more—he had nearly reached her, but had made no sign. One more row and then—*crash!* The plate of coins went spinning in all directions. The man lay still where he had dropped on his face.

He did not die immediately. The numbing paralysis took a little time to kill. But he lay like a trodden insect, muttering, muttering. Blank terror was fixed immutably on his face.

It was clear from his own words that he had murdered his niece, but even the doctors did not know how much was intelligent confession and how much the involuntary betrayal of a stricken brain automatically reeling off old thoughts and guarded secrets.

'She'll not have me, she'll not have me; she says I'm not rich enough—'

That was his continual refrain, the fixed idea that had obsessed him, and that found utterance now .at intervals, breaking even through the more coherent statements that had been taken down.

'It was all Bill's fault. Why didn't he leave his money to me instead of the girl? If I had it now; if I had it! That fool of a girl, she thinks of nothing but her lover—'

Only for a moment the muttering voice would pause. Robinson, watching beside him, would speak of the everlasting mercy.

'She'll not have me, she'll not have me; she says I'm not rich enough!' and then, in the monotonous babble that was like a recitation, 'I did it. Draw up the legal documents. Put it down. They called it suicide, that's why she can't forgive me. That's why she came. Look at her, reproaching me with her eyes! Oh, my God, Kitty, take your eyes off me—'

On it went, over and over.

‘I sent her to get the poison. I told her the dog had been run over in the street. I said I had shut it in the coach-house and the only merciful thing was to put it out of its pain. I told her to hurry and not to say anything to the servants—they would come bothering round, and they would not understand it was kindness. And I took it from her and put it into her lemonade on the sideboard. It was so easy. Look at her, look at her, come back to curse me!’

It was not hard to reconstruct the whole sordid story of a weak-minded man’s infatuation and greed. It was also wiser, remembering Stackhouse and his horror of letting his church be profaned by a sightseeing crowd, to acquiesce in the public view that it was remorse that had brought on the stroke that killed Kitty’s uncle. And so Robinson held his peace.