

The Demon

By Christopher Blayre

Dr-r-r-r-r! Dr-r-r-r-r! and so on.

“Bless the Telephone!” said the Regius Professor of Medicine.

I make use of a conventional euphuism—it was not a blessing that the Regius Professor invoked in favour of the National Telephone Company, the mention of which dates the events which I am about to relate—it was before a Paternal Government had assumed that Control, which enabled it to provide the last straw, which gave the hump to that patient animal, the British Public.

Dr-r-r-r-r! Dr-r-r-r-r!

“Yes—Yes—Hullo!—Hullo!” Sir George Amboyne was in the middle of writing an important paragraph in an important paper, and he felt as if someone had suddenly thrust a marling-spike between the spokes of the fly-wheel of his mind, and had brought the machinery of thought to a crashing and dislocating stop. It was a law, both written and unwritten, that he was not to be ‘rung up’ by his friends during the working hours of the morning. He was prepared to be nasty.

“Is that you, Reggie?”

A guttural laugh rattled the microphone.

“Who do you want?” asked the Professor, with that lapse from grammar which is universal in the circumstances.

A contralto voice replied “I want Sir George Amboyne, Bart., F.R.S., etcetera. Don’t you know me, Reggie? It’s me, Cynthia.” Again the grammar of telephonic speech.

A wave of disgust and disquiet surged over the Professor. ‘Reggie!’ There was only one person in the world—the most unexpected person in the world—who had, on the last occasion on which he had seen her, suggested that this would be a humorous and affectionate name for him, an echo—or contraction—of his title ‘Regius Professor of Medicine.’ It had made him shudder with disgust, the more so as the authoress of this solecism had been for long years his most dainty, refined and delicate friend—Cynthia Carlyon. He had hoped that the manner in which he had received the suggestion had made the occasion unique—a ‘joke’ never to be repeated.

“I am George Amboyne,” he replied, with as much severity as one can assume over the telephone wire.

“That’s all right, Reggie dear. I know you don’t like it but you’ve got to put up with it.”

“I *don’t* like it, Cynthia. What do you want? I am very much occupied.”

“I know you are—that’s why I thought it would be fun to ring you up.” Again the guttural laugh. It seemed a pity that the laugher could not see his face as he heard it.

“Will you *please* tell me what you want?”

“I’m feeling dissipated and devilish—I want you to come and play with me. You might take me out to lunch.”

“I am sorry, but it is quite impossible.”

“Oh! damn!”

“Please—*please*, Cynthia—*don’t*. It’s horrible. If you want to see me particularly I will come to you after four.”

“No good to-day, old chap, I’ve got a bran new Johnnie coming to tea, and I want him all to myself.”

He went back to his desk and sat down, but he could not go on with his work. He sat staring out of the window. It was horrible. That this vulgar, slangy creature could possibly be Cynthia, absolutely stunned his senses. The most dainty—the most delicate—the flowerlike—. He gave it up, and leaning his forehead upon his hands, he groaned aloud.

* * *

Some years—less than a decade before the date of this unpleasant incident—Cynthia Canyon occupied the position of Queen of a Cult. She stood out in the literary, the artistic, and the scientific society of Cosmopoli, as it were, an object of reverent and affectionate worship. She was beautiful in the manner of a Titian Madonna, a reddish-gold woman of infinite grace and perfect taste. A poetess, an essayist, a musician, a painter, she met the men of literature, science and art on their own ground. As a bachelor-girl (to use a phrase which was invented, I think, long afterwards) of independent means, she had a real “Salon,” where one met everybody worth meeting from an intellectual point of view. She was popularly supposed to have refused to marry every man who had ever come under the spell of her curious crooked smile—it was the probationary stage through which he who would join her charmed and charming circle had to pass. This formality satisfactorily accomplished, and the period of convalescence—or quarantine—safely negotiated, you settled down into your place in her studio. No one ever resumed the Quest of Cynthia—he merely adopted the Cult.

And then, to the horror of all of us, she came back from Florence one fatal spring day, married to Max Carlyon.

Carlyon was a blackguard; he was an adventurer of the subtle type, not the flamboyant—he had tried that and it had proved a miss. He also drank. And—as Herodotus would put it—this is all that we shall say about Max Carlyon; excepting that he curdled the coterie, and Cynthia’s salon was reduced to the faithful few who put up with him when he was present, rejoiced when he was absent, and melted away when he came home drunk.

Among these Sir George Amboyne (who was appointed to the Regius Professorship of Medicine in the University of Cosmopoli about two years later) was one of the most faithful. In the events which followed he was also the last. But this is to anticipate.

* * *

About two years after her disastrous marriage Cynthia faded; indeed she obviously became very ill. Her condition became so alarming that Amboyne insisted that he should merge the friend in the surgeon, and he, with a no less eminent colleague, after a careful and heart-breaking examination, pronounced upon Cynthia Carlyon sentence of death—humanly speaking. She underwent a terrible operation, and took up her abode in a charming nursing home, a little way outside the town. And so we waited for the end.

But whether by reason of some hidden force of vitality, or of her determination not to give up, the end did not come. A year passed, and “The Death-bed of Cynthia” became an institution—indeed it may be said to have become a social function. Her friends rallied round her, and each of them had his or her appointed hour, when they met round the bed, where she lay like a bright and cheerful Madonna, told her the news, brought her their books and pictures, played to her (she had a “baby grand” in her room), and by degrees, a new and highly selective Salon gathered again by her bed-side.

During the second year of this strange existence, the disease woke up again. Since that time the scourge of cancer has surrendered to the besieging forces of Science, and now we know what to do to eradicate it, but in those days, the cure, persistently sought, had eluded the vigilance of its untiring pursuers. I walked away from her bed-side one day with George Amboyne, through the as yet undesecrated lanes of Bromley, and I asked him:

“Is this the end?”

“Humanly speaking,” he replied, “yes. Unless a miracle were to happen. And miracles do not happen in the clinics of cancer.”

“How long will she live?”

“Perhaps a month—possibly longer— but I hope not.”

Two days after this I was astonished to receive a note from the Matron of the nursing home, couched in the following terms:

“Sir,—I am instructed by Mrs. Carlyon’s medical attendant to request you to discontinue your visits until further notice. He hopes that in a week or two you will be able to resume them.”

Mrs. Carlyon’s medical attendant—George Amboyne!—what the—!

I jumped into a hansom cab and was at Amboyne’s house in less than a quarter of an hour. I found him at breakfast. I had not breakfasted.

“What is the meaning of this?” I said, putting the Matron’s letter before him.

“What it says,” he replied.

“But you—?”

“I am no longer ‘Mrs. Carlyon’s medical attendant.’ ”

“For heaven’s sake, explain!” said I. “Canyon called upon me yesterday morning—.”

“Was he sober?”

“Partially. He asked me what hope I had of his wife’s life. I told him none. He said: ‘Then you will not be surprised if I call in another opinion.’ I said ‘Not at all—I shall be happy to meet any other medical man that you may call in.’ He smiled his beastly unctuous smile and said ‘I don’t think you will be troubled.’ And so he left me.”

“Well—what next?”

Amboyne handed me a letter which had been lying open by his plate. It read: ‘Dear Dr. Amboyne, Mr. Carlyon’s visit to you will have prepared you to hear that at his request I have taken over the treatment of his wife. I shall be happy to meet you on the case, if you can time your visit to coincide with mine. Yours faithfully, Erasmus Quayle.’

“? ? ?”

“Erasmus Quayle is a quack. He advertises in provincial and clerical papers ‘Cancer cured by an infallible treatment. Payment by results. No cure, no charge.’ ”

“Good God! and are you going to meet him?”

“On a first impulse, no—of course not. And yet, Cynthia! I don’t know what to do—I don’t know what to say.”

“He’ll kill her.”

“No—that is predestined—but this man—(he is an Honorary M.D. of some Middle West American Institution which sells Degrees)—keeps his patients alive for a bit by some preparation of his own—sometimes for months. He announces a cure, gets paid—enormously—and then clears out. The patient then dies.”

“What’s to be done?”

“I don’t know. Excuse me; there’s the telephone.”

In a few minutes he returned, very pale and obviously very much distressed.

“Well—that settles it,” he said quietly. “Carlyon on the telephone. He says that Dr. (Doctor!) Quayle thinks it unnecessary to trouble me, and that his wife would rather I did not call until I hear from her.”

“There’s only one gleam of light in the murk,” I said. “I hear that the Matron exercises her authority, and does not let Carlyon see his wife when he is too drunk.”

“Yes—that’s something,” replied Amboyne.

* * *

Two years passed by. Three weeks after the conversation I have recorded with George (now Sir George) Amboyne, I, in common with others of her ‘intimates,’ received a letter from Cynthia asking me to come and see her. I went, of course, at once. Frankly, I was amazed.

“Come in, dear man,” she called out, as I opened the door. “Come in! what do you think of me? I am cured!”

I cannot describe what I felt. The room seemed to spin round me. All I could say was “Thank God, dear Cynthia.”

“And Dr. Quayle,” replied she, rather wistfully, “I know I must not say too much about him to you people. Fortunately he refuses to meet any of my friends. But look at the result!”

I could only murmur commonplaces. The foundations of my belief in medical science were being shaken. But there it was. Cynthia seemed to be quite her old self. Amboyne came in whilst I was there. It was not a very comfortable meeting—indeed we were both relieved when Cynthia told us that for a few weeks she must cut her interviews shorter than she would like; and we left her.

We went into the Matron’s sanctum, and after the ordinary greetings, Amboyne said to her:

“This is very remarkable, Matron. What does it all mean?”

“I don’t know,” she replied, with an air of visible distress. “It passes everyone’s comprehension. This Mr. Quayle—.”

“Yes?” said Amboyne, encouragingly; “can you tell me?”

“No,” she replied, “it’s all mysterious. He cooks things in a little pot behind a screen—he brings the materials, and takes them away again.”

We merely give his medicines as he directs. It is most extraordinary—and unsatisfactory.”

And with that we left her. Amboyne was silent all the way back to town. Like the parrot of folk-lore.

And then the two years went by. Cynthia received her friends as before Carlyon kept in the background, but I gathered indirectly from the Matron that at intervals he made scenes about money. Cynthia spoke of moving to a less expensive room. I remembered grimly the legend in gold on some of the fancy mugs at Schwalbach ‘*Mann ärgere deine Frau nicht; das Kur kostet viel Geld.*’

At the end of the two years, I went one day to the home for my bi-weekly visit, and met Amboyne in the hall.

“You can’t go in,” he said. “Cynthia is dying.”

“Dying?”

“Yes—Quayle has given up the case—made all he can, I suppose. Says she grew over-confident and disobeyed orders. I was sent for this morning. She is quite unconscious—she will not regain consciousness. It is the end.”

We came away. Outside, Carlyon, speechlessly drunk, was being led firmly away by a policeman.

* * *

But Cynthia did not die. I called next morning and the Matron told me that after being dead as they all supposed for two hours, her eyelids suddenly flickered and she regained consciousness. In the morning she seemed much stronger and asked for food.

“You had better not see her,” said the good woman; “she is very fretful, and uneasy. So unlike herself—quite disagreeable. I am very worried over it all. I rang up Mr. Quayle and he refused to come—so this morning I sent for Sir George Amboyne. He seemed very shocked.”

For several weeks there was no fresh development in this astonishing case. I had a note from Cynthia merely saying ‘Don’t come till I let you know. I’m growing stronger every day.’

I saw Amboyne. He could give me no news, beyond that she seemed to gain strength every day, according to the report of the nurses—he had not seen her since the first day. He had received the same note as I had. He hesitated a moment and then said:

“I am afraid that you will experience—and so shall I—a shock, when we see her again. From what the Matron tells me she is woefully changed—for the worse. They say she is ‘a trying patient’ and they will be glad to get rid of her.”

“Get rid of her?”

“Yes—she talks of leaving the home in about a fortnight.”

“Leaving the home?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Yes—that’s it. All we can do is to wait.”

* * *

We waited three weeks, and then, on the morning of an unforgettable day, I received a letter from Cynthia, dated from a second-rate hotel in the S.W. district, asking me to call upon her! She told me not to call till the afternoon ‘as I am going on a jamboree to a music hall to-night, and don’t get up very early anyhow. I’ve been here ten days, but didn’t tell any of you good, serious old fogies. I wanted to have a fling around before I encounter your solemn mugs, and high-flown ideas, and have to become serious and respectable again, after all these wasted years.’

I took the note round to Harley Street, and thence to the University where Amboyne was lecturing, and I waited for him. I showed him the note, and for all reply he took another from his pocket and handed it to me. It said:

“Here I am, you see, in spite of your determination to kill me. What price Infallibility ‘for the Mortuary Stakes? But come along and see your little Cynthia and make up for a lot of lost time. You have become no end of a swell since I ‘took ill’ as the servants say. ‘Regius Professor’—I bow! But what a mouthful! I think I shall call you ‘Reggie’ in future.”

I handed it back and looked at him, speechless.

“Isn’t it horrible?” he said in a low tone. “What do you make of it?”

“Let us go and see,” I replied.

We went that afternoon, and were shown into a tawdry sitting room, which smelt of dust and patchouli. Cynthia was lolling on a green ‘rep’ sofa—smoking a cigarette. Carlyon was sitting by her side, and got up sheepishly as we entered.

“Well, so long, old girl,” he said huskily; “I’ll leave you with your intellectual friends.” He gave a short laugh as he turned to us and said, “You’ll find the old girl a bit different to what she was, and a jolly good thing too. She’s woken up—fine!”

We sat down and for a moment we simply could not utter a sound. *Was* this Cynthia. Yes—it was the same willowy figure, the brown eyes, the fine long hands and feet—but her hair! In place of her red-gold aureole was a short thick crop of black curly stubble. The expression in her eyes was that of an animal gathering itself together to spring. She was the first to break the silence.

“Good Lord, how glum you both look. You look as if you had never seen me before. Have a cigarette, or a drink—or both—and lets be jolly.”

“Are you sure,” said Amboyne, “that you are not overtaxing your strength? I should hardly—.”

“Oh! for heavens’ sake, don’t preach at me, Reggie—.”

“I beg your pardon!”

“Yes—Reggie—don’t you think it’s rather nice for a Regius Professor? Much nicer than George—a dull, solemn name. But don’t be dull and solemn with me, I’ve kicked free and I’m going to have a good time. Be jolly—or stop away. If you are going to look at me like that, I prefer Max—he’s a sportsman.”

The interview was a short one. To this day I don’t know how we got through it. She was dreadful—when we got up to go she did not try to detain us, nor did she ask when we would come again. We got into the street somehow.

I found that I could hardly speak above a whisper. But I said:

“What is it?”

“I don’t know—I don’t know—but I *think* it is a Demon.”

“Amboyne!—pull yourself together.”

“Do it yourself I—you are shaking all over—it’s difficult. But”—and he stopped dead and looked straight at me—“didn’t you see IT lurking behind the eyes that used to be Cynthia’s, watching us to see whether we recognised It?”

“Yes—I did.” (But I was glad that the Regius Professor of Medicine had mentioned it first.)

* * *

And this brings us to the morning with which I opened this record, when Cynthia Carlyon rang up the Regius Professor—for fun.

He got through the routine of the day—consultations, a lecture at the University, a committee at the Royal Society, and arrived home exhausted with work which had been made painful and difficult by a suppressed emotion of horror. He was just sitting down to the simulacruxn of dinner when the telephone rang again. A woman’s voice, in a flutter of excitement.

“Is that Dr. Reginald Burgoyne?”

“Amboyne is my name, Sir George Amboyne.”

“Beg pardon, I didn’t know whether to say George or Reginald. You are the doctor?”

“Yes.”

“Please come at once to the Hotel—A lady, Mrs. Carlyon is calling out for you something awful.”

“What has happened?”

“I don’t know, sir, I’m the manageress. The lady had a gent to tea, and when he had gone I heard a screech and went in to her. She was in a fit seemingly. Screaming something awful. I got

her to bed and called in the doctor. She keeps calling for you, he says. I thought he said name of Burgoyne. She called out 'Reggie' and 'George.' Will you come, sir? Please do, the doctor says so."

"At once," replied Amboyne.

In the tawdry sitting room he met a harassed looking young practitioner, obviously paralyzed at finding himself face to face with the world-renowned Regius Professor.

"Epilepsy, I suppose, sir—with submission—but I don't know. I never saw anything like it before. And her language, it is frightful. Like sometimes—in puerpural fever. Will you see her?"

They went in. Cynthia—the old placid Cynthia, save for the short black hair, was lying in bed, as the woman of the house had left her. The old tender half-humorous eyes were open, and as Amboyne leaned over her she said softly "It was good of you to come, George. Don't let them take me away again."

"Of course not, dear. I'll look after you."

"Can you, do you think? I have been in Hell."

But as she spoke the Demon flashed into her eyes, and she sprang to a sitting position with a wild cry—like an animal in pain.

The Regius Professor put his arm round her, and she clawed at his face. But only for a moment. Then she sank in his arm, and he laid her gently back upon the bed.

That was all.