

# The Reticule

By Elliott O'Donnell

Between Norwich and Swaffham, low down in a valley, there once stood a mill. It is now a ruin and all the people round studiously avoid it after nightfall. It must be admitted that they have some reason for doing so in view of the incidents I am about to relate.

Some years ago on an early autumn afternoon two ladies, Miss Smith and Miss Raven, fashion designers to the firm of Kirsome & Gooting, Sloane Street, London, set out from Norwich for a tramp into the country. Both girls—for they were only girls—were typically modern; that is to say, they were bonny and athletic, and, despite the sedentary nature of their vocation, extremely fond of outdoor life. Miss Raven, the elder of the two, was nice-looking without perhaps being actually pretty; but Miss Smith was undeniably a beauty. Had she been a lady of title or an actress, all the society papers would have been full of her. She did not, however, crave for notoriety; she was quite content with the homage of most of the young men whom she knew, and the unspoken admiration of many men whom she did not know, but who looked at her out of doors or sat near to her in theatres and restaurants.

She was much attached to Miss Raven, and as the two strode along, swinging their arms, their tongues wagged merrily and without intermission. On and on, down one hill and up another, past wood and brook and hamlet they went, till a gradual fading of the light warned them it was about time to think of turning back.

“We must go as far as that old ruin,” Miss Raven said, pointing to a tumble-down white building that nestled close to a winding stream. “I’ve never seen anything quite so picturesque.”

“And I’ve never seen anything quite so weird,”

Miss Smith replied. “I’m not at all sure I like it. Besides, I’m desperately thirsty. I want my tea. We’d much better go home.”

They had an argument, and it was eventually agreed that they should go on—but not beyond a certain point. “Not an inch farther, mind,” Miss Smith said, “or I’ll turn back and leave you.”

The ruin lay in a hollow, and as the two girls descended the slope leading to it, a mist rose from the ground as if to greet them. They quickened their steps, and, approaching nearer, perceived a mill wheel—the barest skeleton, crowned with moss and ferns and dripping with slime. The pool into which it dripped was overgrown in places with reeds and chickweed, but was singularly bare and black in the centre, and suggestive of very great depth. Weeping willows bordered the stream, and their sloping, stunted forms were gradually growing more and more indistinct in the oncoming mist.

The space in front of the house, once, no doubt, prettily cultivated garden, was now full of rank grass and weeds, and dotted here and there with unsightly mounds consisting of fallen bricks and mortar. Some of these mounds, long, low, and narrow, were unpleasantly suggestive of graves, whilst the atmosphere of the place, the leaden-hued and mystic atmosphere, charged to the utmost with the smell of decayed trees and mouldy walls, might well have been that of an ancient church-

A sense of insufferable gloom, utterly different from any they had ever before experienced, took possession of the two girls.

"This place depresses me horribly. I don't know when I've felt so sad," Miss Smith observed. "It's very stupid of me, I know, but I can't help thinking some great tragedy must have taken place here."

"I feel rather like that too," Miss Raven responded. "I've never seen such dreariness. Do you see those shadows on the water? How strange they are! There's nothing that I can see to account for them. There's certainly nothing the least like them in the sedge. Besides, there oughtn't to be any shadows there. There are none anywhere else. Look! Oh, do look! They are changing. They are completely different now. See, I'll throw a stone at them." Her throw, missing its mark, was so characteristically girlish that Miss Smith, despite her leanings to suffragism, laughed. Miss Raven threw again, and this time a deep plumb announced her success. "There," she cried triumphantly. "Now do you see it?"

"I see something," Miss Smith answered. Then, with sudden eagerness: "Yes, you are right. The shadows are continually changing. They seem to separate themselves from the sedge, and fall like live things into the pool. By the way, the pool seems to be growing darker and bigger. I don't like the place at all. For Heaven's sake let's get away from it!"

Miss Raven, however, was too fascinated. Stepping carefully, so as to avoid the mud and long grass, she went right up to the pool and peered into it.

"How fearfully deep and still it is," she said. "What a beastly place to end one's days in." Then she gave a sudden cry. "Aileen! Here! Come here, quick!"

Miss Smith hastened up to her. "What is it?" she said. "How you frightened me!"

Miss Raven pointed excitedly at the water. It was no longer tranquil. The chickweed round the edges began to oscillate, white bubbles formed in the centre, and then, quite suddenly, the entire surface became a seething, hissing, rushing, roaring whirlpool, which commenced rising in the most hideous and menacing manner. Seizing Miss Raven by the arm, Miss Smith dragged her back, and the two fled in tenor. The fog, however, was so thick that they missed their way. They failed to strike the road, and, instead, found themselves plunging deeper and deeper into a fearful quagmire of mud and the rankest compound of rushes, weeds, and grass.

They were just despairing of ever extricating themselves when Miss Smith felt a light tap on her shoulder, and swinging round, was almost startled out of her senses at the sight of a very white face glaring at her. Miss Raven, noticing that her companion had stopped, also turned round; and she too received a shock. The face she saw was so very white; the eyes—intently fixed on Miss Smith—so strangely luminous; the head—covered with red, shaggy hair—so disproportionately large; and the figure—that of a hunchback youth—as a whole so extraordinarily grotesque.

He made no sound, but, signing to them to follow him, he began to move away with a queer, shambling gait. The girls, thankful, enough to have found a guide, however strange, kept close at his heels, and soon found themselves once again on the roadway. Here their conductor came to a halt, and producing from under his coat what looked like a lady's reticule, he was about to thrust it into Miss Smith's hand when their eyes met, and, to her intense astonishment, he uttered a bitter cry of disappointment and vanished. His action and disappearance were so inexplicable that the girls, completely demoralised,

took to their heels and ran without stopping till the ruins were far in their rear, and they were well on their way home.

They related their experience to the people with whom they were staying, and were then told for the first time that the ruin was well known to be haunted. "Nothing will persuade any of the villagers to visit the mill pond after dusk," their hostess remarked, "especially at this time of the year, when they declare the water suddenly rises and follows them. The place has a most sinister reputation, and certainly several people, to my knowledge, have committed suicide there. The last to do so was Davy Dyer, the hunchback, whose ghost you must have just seen. His was rather a sad case, as I have good reason to know. Would you like to hear it?"

The girls eagerly assented, and their hostess told them as follows

"Ten years ago there stood on the spot you visited this afternoon a very picturesque house called the 'Gyp Mill.' It was then extremely old, and as its foundations were faulty, it was thought a severe storm would, sooner or later, completely demolish it. Partly for this reason, and partly because the mill pool was said to be haunted, it stood for a long time untenanted. At last it was taken by a widow named Dyer. Mrs. Dyer was quite a superior kind of person. She had at one time, I believe, kept a fairly good class girls' school in Bury St. Edmunds, but losing her connection through illness, she had been obliged to think of some other means of gaining a livelihood. When she came to the Gyp Mill she cultivated the garden and sold its produce; provided teas for picnic parties in the summer; and let out rooms, chiefly to artists.

"She had one son, Davy, a very intelligent boy of about eighteen, but hopelessly deformed. He was not only hunchbacked but he had an abnormally large head; and what was quite unpardonable in the eyes of the village children, who tormented him shamefully, a mass of the brightest red hair.

"Well, one day, a girl whom I will call Beryl Denver, came to stay with me. Beryl was extremely pretty and horribly spoilt. She had gone on the stage against her parents' wishes and had been an immediate success. At the time I am speaking of she had just had an offer of marriage from a duke, and it was to hear what I had to say about it—for I am, I think, the only person from whom she ever asks advice—that she was paying me this visit. After being with me three days, however, and changing her mind with regard to the duke's offer at least a dozen times, she suddenly announced that she must seek some more countrified place to stay in. 'I want to go right away from everywhere,' she said, 'so that I can forget—forget that there is such a place as London. Don't you know of any pretty cottage or picturesque old farm, near here, that I could stay at?'

"I suggested the Gyp Mill, and she started off at once to look at it.

"She came back full of enthusiasm. 'It's a delightful spot,' she said. 'I'm glad I went to see it—the flowers are lovely, and the old woman's a dear—but I couldn't stay there. I couldn't stand that hunchback son of hers. His white face and big dark eyes alarmed me horribly. I don't think it's at all right he should be at large.'

"'Poor Davy,' I remarked. 'His appearance is certainly against him, but I can assure you he is absolutely harmless. I know him well.'

"Beryl shook her head. 'You know my views, Aunty,' she said (she always calls me Aunty although I am not related to her in any way). 'All ugly people have a kink of badness in them somewhere. They must be either cruel, or spiteful, or treacherous, or, in

some way or other, evilly disposed. I am quite certain that looks reflect the mind. No, I couldn't endure that boy. I can't stay there.'

"In the morning, however, as I had fully anticipated, she changed her mind. A fly was sent for, and she drove off to the Gyp Mill, taking all her luggage with her. How Mrs. Dyer ever got it up her narrow staircase I can't think, but she must have managed it somehow, for Beryl stayed and, contrary to my expectations, for more than one night.

"Davy, she afterwards informed me, soon got on her nerves. Always when she went out she caught him covertly peeping at her from behind the window curtain of the little front parlour; and if ever she stood for a moment to chat with his mother, she could see him slyly watching her through a chink in the doorway. She had seldom, so far, met him out of doors; but as she was returning from a walk one afternoon, she came across a group of village children shouting at and jostling someone very roughly in their midst, and approaching nearer saw that the object of their abuse was Davy, and that, in addition to pushing and pummelling him, they were tormenting him with stinging nettles—a very favourite device of the children in this district. Filled with disgust, rather than pity (Beryl, like most modern girls, is wanting in real sentiment, and in this instance simply hated to think that anyone could derive amusement from so ungainly a creature), she interfered.

" 'You abominable little wretches!' she cried. 'Leave him alone at once. Do you hear?'

"Had a bomb fallen, the children could not have been more surprised. One or two of the boys were inclined to be rude, but on the rest the effect of Beryl's looks and clothes (the latter in particular) was magical. Gazing at her open-mouthed, they drew back and allowed Davy to continue his way.

"After this, Davy peeped more than ever, and Beryl, losing patience, determined to put a stop to it. Catching him in the act of following her through the fields one morning, she turned on him in a fury.

" 'How dare you?' she demanded. 'How dare you annoy me like this? Go home at once.'

" 'This is my home, lady,' Davy replied, his eyes on the ground and his cheeks crimson.

" 'Then you must choose some other route,' Beryl retorted; 'and for goodness' sake don't be everlastingly looking at me. I can't stand it. No wonder those children rounded on you, you— She was going to call him some very strong name—for Beryl when roused didn't stick at trifles—but suddenly checked herself. She began to realise that this queer, distorted little object was in love with her. Now no girl in London, probably, had more admirers than Beryl. Peers, politicians, authors, men of all vocations and classes had succumbed to her beauty, and she had deemed herself pretty well blasé. But here was a novelty. A poor, ostracised rustic hunchback—the incarnation of ugliness and simplicity. 'You know how the horrible often fascinates one,' she said to me later, 'for instance, a nasty tooth, or some other equally horrible defect in a person's face, which one keeps on looking at however much one tries not to—well, it was a fascination of this kind that possessed me now. I felt I must see more of the hunchback and egg him on to the utmost.'

"Apparently it was owing to this fascination that Beryl, changing her tactics, encouraged Davy to talk to her, and assuming an interest in the garden, which she knew was his one hobby, gradually drew him out. Very shy and embarrassed at first, he could only very briefly answer her questions; but soon deceived by her manner—for Beryl

could act just as cleverly off the stage as on it—he grew bolder, and talked well on his favourite subject, natural history. He really knew a great deal, and Beryl, despite the fact that she could hardly tell the difference between a hollyhock and marigold, couldn't help being impressed.

“She walked home with him that day; and for days afterwards she was often to be seen in his company.

“ ‘He'll miss you dreadfully when you go, ma'am,' Mrs. Dyer said to her. ‘He thinks the world of you. He told me last night that he only wished he could do something to show you how grateful he is for your kindness to him.’ Of course, Mrs. Dyer did not say that Davy was in love—but Beryl knew it. She knew that to him she was a deified being and that he absolutely adored her. Thus matters stood, when a letter from the duke made Beryl decide to leave Gyp Mill at once and return with all speed to London. She walked to the post office to dispatch a telegram, and Davy went with her. Beryl knew that this would be the last time, in all probability, that she would ever walk with him; and feeling that she must find out how far his love for her had progressed she agreed to his proposal that they should return home by a rather longer route. He wished, he said, to show her a garden which was by far the prettiest in all the country round, and it would not take them more than a quarter of a mile or so out of their way. Of course Beryl looked upon this suggestion as a mere pretext on Davy's part for prolonging the walk, and she wondered whether he would say anything, or whether his passion would be held in check by his natural respect for her superior social position. She was disappointed. Although she saw love for her shining more brightly than ever in his eyes, he did not speak of it; he talked only of flowers and of the great beauties of nature. Bored to distraction, she at last cut him short, and, declaring that she had no time to waste, hurried on. It was not until they had reached home that she discovered she had lost her reticule, containing not only a purse full of sovereigns but the letter she had just received from the duke. She distinctly remembered having it with her, she said, when Davy was prosing over the stupid flowers, and she supposed she must have left it somewhere in the garden, probably on the seat where they had sat for a few minutes. Davy, of course, went back at once to look for it, but when he returned an hour or so later and in crestfallen tones told her that he could not find it, her anger knew no bounds. She did not actually call him a fool, but she made him clearly understand she thought him one; and he set off again almost immediately to have another look for it. He did not come back this time till close on midnight, and he had not the courage to tell her of his failure. His mother did it for him. Beryl went away early the following morning, too indignant to shake hands with either Mrs. Dyer or her son. ‘If Davy didn't actually take the reticule,’ she wrote to me some days later, ‘it was all owing to him—to his bothering me to see that rotten garden—that I lost it; but I firmly believe he has it. Ugly faces, you know, are indicative of ugly minds—of a bad kink somewhere.’

“Of course the affair of the reticule soon became public property. It was advertised for in the local papers, and the woman in the post office told everybody that she remembered seeing it in Beryl's hand when she left the shop. ‘Davy,’ she said, ‘was with Miss Denver at the time, and I particularly noticed that he walked very close to her and watched her in a peculiarly furtive manner.’

“Now the villagers, with whom the Dyers had always been unpopular, were not slow in taking up the cue, and consequently Davy, now waylaid by armies of children calling him thief, and even beating him, never had a moment's peace.

“At last he was found one morning in the mill-pond drowned, and it was generally believed that remorse for his sins had made him commit suicide. His mother alone thought otherwise. I did not see Beryl nor hear anything of her for at least two years after Davy’s death, when to my surprise she drove up to the door one day with her usual pile of luggage.

“ ‘Who is it this time?’ I said, after we had exchanged greetings. ‘The duke again!’

“ ‘Oh dear no,’ Beryl replied. ‘ I broke it off definitely with him long ago. He was too boring for words, always dangling after me and never letting me go out with anyone else. If he had been tolerably good-looking I might have stood it, but he wasn’t. He was hopelessly plain. However, I made some use of him, and he certainly gave me good presents. I have been engaged several times since, and I’ve come now to ask your advice about the Earl of C—’s eldest son. Shall I marry him or not? Do you think he’s worth it?’

I did not answer her at once, but let her ramble on, till she suddenly turned to me and said, ‘Do you remember the last time I was here? Two years ago! You know I stayed at that delightful old mill house—the Gyp something, and lost my reticule. Well, I found it some time afterwards in my hat-box. I hadn’t taken it out with me that day after all. And I could have sworn I had. Wasn’t it funny?’

“ ‘Extraordinary, perhaps,’ I remarked, with rather more severity in my voice than I had ever used to her before, ‘but hardly funny.’ And I was about to relate to her all that had occurred in the interim, when something checked me. After all, I thought, it would be just as well for this spoilt, heartless little London actress to go to the Gyp Mill and find out for herself.

“ ‘Oh, I suppose I ought to have written to the people and let them know,’ she said carelessly, ‘but I was really too busy. I always have such lots to do. Such heaps of correspondence to attend to, and so many visits to make. If it’s a fine day tomorrow I’ll walk over and explain.’

“I did not, of course, expect Beryl would go, but greatly to my surprise, soon after luncheon, she came into my bedroom in her hat and coat. ‘I’m off,’ she said. ‘I think the walk will do me good. And, look here, don’t wait dinner for me, because in all probability I’ll stay the night. It all depends upon how I feel. If I’m not back by eight you need not expect me till to-morrow. Bye-bye.’

“She stole to my side and kissed me, and, armed with an umbrella and mackintosh, set off up the street. I watched her till she turned the corner. Then I lay down and wondered what sort of a reception she would meet with at the hands of Mrs. Dyer. As the afternoon waned the sky grew ominously dark, and the wind rose. Presently big drops of rain spluttered against the window, and there was every indication of a very severe storm. Had Beryl been on good terms with Mrs. Dyer my mind would have been at rest, as she would have been able to take refuge at the Mill, but, knowing Mrs. Dyer’s feelings towards her, I doubted very much if Mrs. Dyer would allow her to set foot within the house; and she would have some distance to walk before she could reach another shelter.

“Down came the rain in grim earnest, and that night witnessed the worst storm Norwich had known for many years. Beryl did not return. I sat up till twelve wondering what had become of her—for despite this wayward child’s many faults I t was much attached to her—and slept very little for the rest of the night. In the morning my maid came into my room in a breathless state of excitement.

“ ‘Oh, mum,’ she exclaimed, ‘the storm has destroyed half Norfolk.’ (This, of course, I knew to be an exaggeration.) ‘What do you think! Simkins’ Store is blown down, nearly all the chimneypots are off in Fore Street, and the milk- man has just told me the Gyp Mill is under water and Mrs. Dyer is drowned!’

“ ‘What!’ I shrieked. ‘The Gyp Mill under water! Are you sure? Miss Denver was staying there last night. Call a cab—I must go there at Once.’

“The maid flew; and I was feverishly scrambling into my clothes, when, to my utmost relief, in walked Beryl.

“ ‘So you’ve heard,’ she said, looking rather pale, but otherwise quite composed. ‘The Gyp Mill valley is under water, and old Mrs. Dyer is drowned. It was rather lucky for me that I didn’t go there after all, wasn’t it? Quite a narrow escape, in fact.’

“ ‘Thank God, you’re safe!’ I exclaimed, drawing her into my arms and kissing her frantically. ‘Tell me all about it.’

“ ‘Oh, there isn’t much to tell,’ she said. ‘ When I got a mile or two on the road I found I had quite forgotten the way, so I inquired of the first person I met, a labourer, and he said, “When you come to the duck pond bear sharply to your left.” Well, I trudged on and on, and I am sure I must have gone miles, but no duck pond; and I was beginning to despair of ever seeing it, when a sudden swerve in the road revealed it to me. The sky was very dark and threatening, and the wind—you know how I detest wind—sorely tried my temper. It was perfectly fiendish. Well, when I got to the pond I found there were two roads and I had quite forgotten which of them I had to take. I was standing there shivering, feeling horribly bored, when to my joy a figure suddenly hove in view. It had grown so dark that I could not make out whether the stranger was a man or a woman. Besides, I couldn’t see a face at all, only a short, squat body clad in some sort of ill-fitting fustian garment. I shouted out, “Can you tell me the way to the Gyp Mill?” but could get no reply. The strange creature simply put out one hand, and taking the road to the right, beckoned to me to follow. Then I suddenly remembered that the other person—the labouring man—had told me to take the road to the left, and I ran after the curious-looking individual shouting, “The Gyp Mill.—Do you hear?—I want to go to the Gyp Mill. Mrs. Dyer’s.” Again I got no response, but the hand waved me on more vigorously than before.

“ ‘It was now so dark that I could hardly see where I was treading, and the wind was so strong that I had the greatest difficulty in keeping my feet. I battled on, however, and after what seemed to me an eternity, we eventually stopped outside a building that showed a twinkling light in one of the windows. My conductor opened a wicket gate and, signing to me to follow, walked me up a narrow winding path to the front door. Here he halted and, turning suddenly round on me, showed his face. It was the Dyer boy—Davy, I think they called him. Davy the hunchback.’ Here Beryl paused.

“ ‘Are you quite sure?’ I asked.

“ ‘Absolutely,’ she replied. ‘ I couldn’t mistake him. There he was—with his hunchback, huge head, cheeks looking whiter than ever—and red hair. How I could see that it was red in the dark I can’t tell you, but all the same I could, and moreover, the colour was very clear and distinct. Well, he stood and looked at me for some seconds beseechingly, and then said something—but so quickly I couldn’t catch what it was. I told him so, and he repeated it, jabber, jabber, jabber. Then I grew angry. “Why have you brought me here? I shouted. “I wanted to go to the Gyp Mill.” He spoke again in the same

incomprehensible way, and holding out his hands as if to implore my forgiveness, suddenly disappeared. Where he went to is a mystery. The rain had now begun to fall in torrents, and to attempt to go on was madness. Consequently, I rapped at the door and asked the woman who opened it if she could put me up for the night. "Yes, miss," she said. "We have a spare room, if you don't mind it's being rather small. The gentleman that has been staying here left this morning. Did anyone recommend you?" "Mr. Dyer brought me here," I said, "and, I believe, he is somewhere outside." "Mr. Dyer!" the woman exclaimed, looking at me in the oddest manner. "I don't know a Mr. Dyer. Who do you mean?" "Why, Davy Dyer," I replied, "the son of the old woman who lives at the Mill. Davy Dyer, the hunchback."

"Then, to my amazement, the woman caught me by the arm. "Davy Dyer, the hunchback!" she cried. "Why, miss, you must either be dreaming or mad. Davy Dyer drowned himself in the Mill pool two years ago!" ' ' "