

A Sworn Statement

Emma Francis Dawson

Being the Deposition of Mr. Audenried's Valet.

This ae night, this ae night,
Every night and alle,
Fire and sleet and candle-light,
And Christ receive thy saule.
-- *Lykewake Dirge.*

I first met Mr. Audenried through his advertising for a valet. I liked his appearance, and engaged with him at a lower salary than one of my experience and ability will usually work for. He was then living in a furnished house on Rincon Hill, whence he could see the bay. He sat for hours looking at it and writing verses. He had money, but was neither young nor strong, and seldom went out. He had been very handsome, was still fine-looking, with eyes that glowed with a lurid, internal fire.

There was one other person in the house, a quiet lady, yet one to be noticed and remembered. I pride myself on my discretion. It was nothing to me how many "Coralies" or "Camilles" existed. It was long before I alluded to her, though I met her in the upper hall, on the stairs, and sometimes found her in the room with my master and myself, or just outside the door, standing near, as if waiting for me to go. After a while, I got the notion that she did not like me, and it made it unpleasant. After long thinking it over, for I did not want to leave, I gave a month's notice.

"Why is this, Wilkins?" says Mr. Audenried. "If it is a question of wages, stay on. I like your quiet ways," says he. That is just what he says.

"To tell the truth, sir," I says, "it's not my pay---it's the lady, sir."

"What!" says he.

So then I told of her air of watchful dislike, and how I was not used to being spied upon, and that it was needless my recommendations could all show. He turned quite pale, so white that I thought Heaven forgive me if I'd made trouble between them, for she looked sad enough anyway. He did not speak for a long while.

Then he muttered to himself: "*This* man, too!"

He made me tell him all over again. Then, after a pause, he says: "Find me another place, Wilkins, and help me move."

So I thought there was a quarrel; We did move from house to house, from street to street, from city to city, all through the State and to others near. Mr. Audenried never spoke of her, nor noticed her, but as soon as she came, as she always did come, he at once gave the order to start. He seemed to watch my face, and I fancied he knew in that way when she was about. I wondered what their story might be, and tried to make out from verses he wrote that time, but all I could get hold of were these :

PROPHETIC.

Unto the garden's bloom close set
Of lily, larkspur, violet,
Sweet jasmine, rose, and mignonette
More beauty lending,
Fair Marguerite stands in the sun,
Plucks leaves from daisy, one by one,
While Faust, impatient, sees it done
And waits the ending.

See! on the garden-wall behind,
Their happy shadows plain defined,
Bent heads and eager hand, outlined
Like soft engraving;

And there athwart their fingers' pose
A shape whose presence neither knows.

Mephisto! 'T is his head that shows
A cock's plume waving!

Sometimes we rested a few days or weeks, sometimes went on, day after day, without stopping, but she was my master's shadow; she followed us everywhere. I used to try and puzzle out what their secret was. If it had been love, it must now be hate, I told myself, seeing how they often met and passed without a word. He did not appear to even see her.

We had come back to San Francisco, and it was nearing Christmas-time when I was first seized with my queer spells. We had taken another furnished house, far out and high upon Washington street. I thought we had got rid of the woman; but coming home late one afternoon I found her in the window, while my master had been looking over his writing-desk. Before him lay withered flowers, a ribbon, a lady's glove, and a photograph with some look of this persistent woman, but younger and handsomer.

I felt uneasy. Mr. Audenried sat with head on his hand, lost in thought. When I spoke he did not hear nor notice me until I put the medicine he had sent for into the hand in his lap. Then he did not know it at first, though in giving the parcel I touched his hand. Something about him I could not describe kept me an instant motionless in that position.

A stupor came over me. The carved ivory hourglass we had filled with Arizona sand from before the Casa Grande, our bright, thick Moqui blanket on the lounge, our foreign fur rugs, our Japanese fans, bronzes, and china---the whole room came and went as to one who is sleepy yet tries to keep awake. Again and again it vanished, reappearing enlarged to twice, three times, its size. Then it was lost in a mist, from which rose a different scene.

The chandelier had changed to long lines of lights, the pictures to great mirrors, and arches with banners and streamers. Devices in evergreen showed that it was Christmas Eve. I was aware of a rush and whirl of dancers, waltz-music, flowers, gay colors, and the scent of a sandal-wood fan; but I saw plainly only one woman, young, gay, lovely, but with a faint likeness to some one I had seen who was older and wretched. I rubbed my eyes, and when I opened them at the sound

of my master's voice, it was the room I knew, with all its familiar objects, and he and I were there alone.

One day I met our quiet lady coming from Mr. Audenried's study, and found him there in a fainting-fit. As I was helping him across the hall to his bedroom I had the second of my odd attacks.

A dullness and vague fear troubled me. Our many-branched antlers, our lacquered-work and carved cabinets and great Chinese lantern, the stained-glass skylight, the big vase of pampas-grass, the open doors and windows, the sunny yard, with callas and geraniums in bloom, all wavered before me, went and came and vanished.

I saw a room with flowered chintz in curtains and furniture-covers, a glowing anthracite fire, and Christmas wreaths hanging in long windows looking on frost-bound garden and river. And the beautiful woman of the ball ! Still young, but now unhappy, looking at me in despair. Both arms outstretched in an agony of entreaty, and tears rolling down her cheeks. Terribly distressed by her woe, I gave a cry of pity just as Mr. Audenried, gasping and falling on the bed, brought me back to him, to myself, and to his room.

Putting away his things for the night I found these verses in a woman's writing:

IN ABSENCE.

In my black night no moonshine nor star-glimmer
On my long, weary path that leads Nowhere
 I get no shimmer
Of that great glory our day knew.
I cannot think the world holds you;
It is not ours, this Land of Vague Despair---
 I scarce can breathe its air.

I am as one whom some sweet tune, down dropping,
Has left half-stunned by silence like a blow;
 Like one who, stopping
In drifting desert sands, looks back
Where sky slants down above his track,

To mark the tufted palm whose outlines show
An oasis below;

Like one whom winter wind and rain are blinding,
And storm-tossed billows bear from land away,
Who, no hope finding,
Should yield himself to bitter fate.
Can I do this! Ah, God! too late---
Have I not felt thy dear, warm lips convey
Commands I must obey ?

"Forget-me-not!" a kiss for every letter.
"Forget-me-not!" a kiss for every word.
It could not better
Have stamped itself upon my soul
It passed beyond my own control.
All thought, all circumstance are by it stirred,
Invisible, unheard.

Though, like Francesca, ever falling, falling
Through dizzy space to endless depths afar,
Thy kiss recalling
Would charm me to forget my woe;
Of Heaven or Hell I should not know,
Nor as I passed see any blazing star,
Nor mark its rhythmic jar.

If such remembrance only---moon-reflection
On depths untried of my soul's unknown sea---
Mere recollection---
Could hold me spellbound by its sway,
What of your true kiss can I say?
Ah! that is wholly speechless ecstasy,---
No words for that could be!

I thought it might be I had myself grown nervous about the quiet lady, to have

these crazy fits after seeing her, and I dreaded to have her come again. But it was not my place to urge Mr. Audenried to move, and he seemed tired of changing.

One evening he had a severe attack of palpitation of the heart, and called me in great haste. I had been wondering what had put him in such a flutter, when that lady opened the door and glanced round the room as if she had forgotten something, but did not come in. Mr. Audenried was so ill that he had to sit up in bed and have me hold him firmly, my hands pressing his breast and his back.

Again that strange dread and drowsiness fell on me like a cloud. My master's pearl combs, brushes, crystal jewel-box, with its glittering contents, and a bunch of violets in a wine-glass on the bureau, his Japanese quilted silk dressing-gown thrown over a chair, embroidered slippers here, gay smoking-cap there, and a large lithograph of Modjeska, glimmered through a fog, came back, withdrew again.

The one high gas-burner became a full moon, the walls fell away; I stood out of doors in a summer night's dimness and stillness that make one feel lonely; grass, daisies, and buttercups underfoot, and overhead stars and endless space. The beautiful woman, worn and wild-looking, with flashing eyes, stood there in a threatening posture, calling down curses! I shrank in horror, though the vision lasted, as before, not more than a quarter of a second.

Mr. Audenried, wasted and wan, had grown so nervous that after this time he refused to be left alone, and above all, cautioned me to stay beside him on Christmas Eve.

"An unpleasant anniversary to me," he says.

The doctor advised him to change to a hotel, to have cheerful society. We moved to the Palace Hotel, and to divert his mind from its own horror Mr. Audenried gave a dinner-party in his rooms on Christmas Eve.

It was a wild night, just right for "Tam O'Shanter," which one of the gentlemen recited. The weather or my master's forced gayety made me gloomy. There was a raw Irish waiter to help, and once I went into the anteroom just in time to catch him about to season one of Mr. Audenried's private dishes from a bottle out of our Japanese cabinet. It was marked "Poison," but he could not read.

"What could possess you," I says, "to meddle with *that*?"

"Sure," he says, "the lady showed me which to take."

"The *lady!* What lady?" I says, trembling from head to foot.

"A dark lady," says he, "with a proud nose and mouth, and eyebrows in one long, heavy line."

I was horrified. I did not want to figure in a murder case. I liked Mr. Audenried too well to leave. I was too poor to lose a good place. I resolved to stay and protect him, but my heart beat faster. For my own safety I meant to say over the multiplication-table, and not get bewitched or entranced again. I told myself over and over, "She shall not outwit me."

The wind and rain beat against the windows, and I heard one of our guests singing "The Midnight Revellers:"

"The first was shot by Carlist thieves
Three years ago in Spain ;
The second was drowned in Alicante,
While I alone remain.
But friends I have, two glorious friends,
Two braver could not be;
And every night when midnight tolls
They meet to laugh with me!"

As I took in some wine, a gentleman was saying: "Too wild a story for such a commonplace background as San Francisco."

"One must be either commonplace or sated with horrors to say that," says Mr. Audenried. "What city has more or stranger disappearances and assassinations? There have been murders and suicides at all the hotels. Other cities surpass it in age, but none in crime and mystery."

It was a lively party. A love-song from one of the gentlemen turned the talk on love affairs, and I went in just as Mr. Audenried was saying: "Aaron Burr relied wholly on the fascination of his touch. I believe in the magnetism of touch; that it cannot only impart disease but sensations. Holding a sleeper's hand while I read, by no will-power of mine he dreamed of scenes I saw in my mind."

Trained servant as I am, I disgraced myself then. I dropped and broke some of our own bubble-like glasses I was carrying. I was so unnerved by this explanation of my queer turns. It flashed upon me how they had only come when I was touching him. I had heard a former master, a learned German, talk about his countryman Mesmer, and I understood that what had appeared to me in my spells was what Mr. Audenried was thinking of!

I could scarcely recover myself for the rest of the company's stay. I recollect no more about it, except that somebody played the flute till it seemed as if a twilight breeze sighed for being pent in our four walls and longed to join its ruder brother-winds outside ; and that Mr. Audenried read these verses of his :

RONDEL.

To-night, O friends! we meet " Kriss Kringle";
He comes, he comes when falls betwixt us
The chiming midnight-bells' soft klinge,
When, glad, we crowd round cheery ingle,
Or, lonely, grieve that joy has missed us;
Or, in cathedral gloom, pray Christus;
Or drain gay toasts where glasses jingle.
Though marshalled hosts of cares have tricked us,
In wine's Red Sea drown all and single---
"Christmas!"
Drown recollection that afflicts us---
Our bowls, like witches' caldrons, mingle
Too much of old Yule-tide that kissed us---
The bitter drink that Life has mixed us
Forget, and shout till rafters tingle---
"Christmas!"

The last guest had hardly gone when Mrs. Carnavon's card was brought up. This was an elderly lady we had met in our travels, who took an interest in Mr. Audenried's case, though a stranger. She came in, bright and chatty, and my master was so cheered up by it that he readily let me leave.

I did not want to go. I had not been drinking; I was well and in my right mind, but my whole skin seemed to draw up with a shiver and thrill as at some near terror. But he sent me to a druggist to have Mrs. Carnavon's vinaigrette refilled.

As I left the passage to our suite of rooms and turned into the long, lonesome hall, more dreary than ever in its vastness at this quiet, late hour, I saw a little way ahead our brunette stepping into the elevator. I fancied a mocking smile on her face as she looked back at me. I forgot the multiplication-table, whose fixed rules were to keep me in my senses. For the first time it struck me that she was the woman of my visions, grown older and sadder.

I hurried, but when I reached the door she had gone, and stout Mrs. Lisgar was coming up, like the change of figures in a pantomime. She was another mystery of mine; for her maid had told me Mrs. Lisgar and my master knew each other abroad, but were sworn foes now, neither of us knew why.

"I beg your pardon, Madam," I says; "did you see the lady who just went down? A handsome brunette, with eyebrows that join above a Roman nose, and a very short upper lip. Where did she go?"

Mrs. Lisgar swelled bigger and redder.

"Has Mr. Audenried sent you to annoy me?" she says.

"Certainly not, Madam," says I. "But I saw her!---heavy, meeting eyebrows, scornful mouth, and--- "

"Silence, sir!" she cried. "There was no one in the elevator. Don't you know you are speaking of my poor sister, dead for many years?"

In my confusion I gasped out at random: "Mrs. Carnavon is here. Do you know her?"

Mrs. Lisgar says: "She was my sister's most intimate friend. But you are either drunk or crazy. I was with her when she died in Arizona last week."

An awful suspicion seized me ; a cold sweat broke out on my brow. I had not lost sight of Mr. Audenried's door. I bowed to Mrs. Lisgar and tried to hurry back, but a numbness in every limb weighed me down till I seemed to move as slowly as the bells that were striking twelve.

As I drew near, I heard angry voices inside, then a fearful groan, which seemed to die off in the distance. But I found every room in our suite vacant, except for my figure, which I caught glimpses of at every turn, staring out of the great mirrors, ghastly, haggard, with bloodshot eyes, and a strained look about the mouth, madly straying among the lights and flowers, tables with remnants of the feast, and the disordered chairs, which after such a revel have a queer air of life of their own.

A long window in the parlor stood wide open. Chilled with fright, with I don't know what vague thought, I ran and looked out. Six stories from the street, nothing to be seen outside but the night and storm, neither on the lighted pavement far below, nor among drifting clouds overhead! Nothing but impenetrable darkness then and afterward over Mr. Audenried's fate.

This is all I can tell of the well-known strange disappearance of my unhappy master. It is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.