# **TOM GALLON** DEAD MAN'S LOVE



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EAN 8596547131120

DigiCat, 2022

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# **CHAPTER I.**

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### I COME TO THE SURFACE OF THINGS.

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I came out of Penthouse Prison on a certain Monday morning in May. Let there be no misunderstanding about it; I came out by way of the roof. And the time was four in the morning; I heard the big clock over the entrance gates chime in a dull, heavy, sleepy fashion as I lay crouched on the roof under shadow of the big tower at the north end, and looked about me.

Looking back at it now, it seems like a dream, and even then I could not realise exactly how it had happened. All I know is that there had been an alarm of fire earlier in the night, and a great running to and fro of warders, and a battering at doors by frantic locked-in men, with oaths, and threats, and shrieks. The smell of burning wood had reached my nostrils, and little whiffs and wreaths of smoke had drifted in through the ventilator in my door, before that door was opened, and I found myself huddled outside in the long corridor with other fellow-captives. And at that time I had not thought of escaping at all, probably from the fact that I was too frightened to do anything but obey orders.

But it came about that, even in that well-conducted prison, something had gone wrong with the fire-hose; and it became a matter of a great passing of buckets from hand to hand, and I, as a trusted prisoner, and a model one, too, was put at the end of the line that was the least guarded. Smoke was all about me, and I could only see the faces of convicts and warders looming at me through the haze, indistinctly. I handed the buckets mechanically, as I had done everything else in that place during the few months I had been there.

I heard an order shouted in the distance, and I lost the faces that had seemed to be so near to me; the fire had broken out in a fresh place, and there was a sudden call for help. I hesitated—the last of the line of men—for a moment; then I set down my bucket, and turned in the opposite direction and ran for it. I knew where there was a flight of stairs; I guessed that one particular door I had seen but once would be open; the rest I left to chance. With my heart thumping madly I fled up the stairs, and flung myself against the door; it yielded, and I stumbled through on to the roof of the prison.

I could hear down below me a great hubbub, but the roar of the flames had subsided somewhat, and I knew that the fire had been conquered. That meant for me a shorter time in which to make good my escape. I went slipping and sliding along the roof, half wishing myself back inside the prison, and wondering how I should get from that dizzy height to the ground. Fortunately I was young, and fit, and strong, and they had put me to the hardest work in the prison for those first months, thereby hardening my muscles to their own undoing; and I was active as a cat. After lying on the roof for what seemed a long time—until, in fact, the hubbub below had almost subsided entirely—I determined that I could afford to wait no longer. I raised my head where

I lay and peered over the edge, as I have said, just as the great clock struck four.

I looked straight into the open mouth of a rain-water pipe a few inches below me. It was almost full daylight by this time, but a hazy, misty morning. I worked my way to the very edge of the roof, and lay along it; then I got my arms over the edge and gripped the broad top of the pipe. There could be no half measures about such a matter; I threw myself over bodily, and dropped to the stretch of my arms, and hung there. Then I quickly lowered one hand and gripped the smooth, round pipe, and began to slide down. I remember wondering if by some fatality I should drop into the arms of an expectant warder.

But that didn't happen. I reached the ground in safety and crouched there, waiting; there was still the outer wall to scale. In that I was less fortunate, for although in the grey light I made the circuit of it inside twice over, I failed to discover anything by which I could mount. But at last I came upon a shed that was used for storing the oakum, picked and unpicked; it had a heavy padlock on the wooden door, and the roof of the shed inclined at an angle against the high wall. It was my only chance, and there was but one way to do it.

I stepped back a few paces, and took a running leap for the edge of the roof, jumping for the padlock. I tried three times, and the third time I got my foot upon the padlock, and caught the gutter with my hands. Exerting all my strength, I drew myself up until I lay flat upon the shelving roof of the shed, scrambled up that, and stood upright against the outer wall, with the topmost stones about a foot above the reach of my hands.

That was the most ticklish work of all, because the first time I tried to make a jump for the top of the wall I slipped, and nearly rolled off the sloping roof altogether. The second time I was more successful, and I got my fingers firmly hitched on to the top of the wall. I hung there for a moment, fully expecting that I should have to let go; but I heard a shout—or thought I heard one—from the direction of the prison, and that urged me on as nothing else could have done. I drew myself up until I lay flat on the top of the wall, and then I rolled over into freedom.

Incidentally in my hurry I rolled over on to a particularly hard road, without much care how I fell. I picked myself up and looked about me, and began for the first time to realise my desperate situation. What earthly chance was there for me, clad as I was in convict garb, in a wild country place, at something after four o'clock in the morning? I was branded before all men; I was a pariah, to be captured by hook or by crook; the hand of the meanest thing I might meet would legitimately be against me.

But then I was only five-and-twenty, and the coming day had in it a promise of sweetness and of beauty—and I was free! Even while I cast about in my mind to know what I should do, I know that I rejoiced in my strength and in my young manhood; I know that I could have grappled almost gleefully with any adverse fate that might have risen up against me. But I recognised that the first thing to do would be to make for cover of some kind, until I could make shift

to get a change of clothing, or to decide after my hurried flight what the next move was to be.

After going some little way I dropped down into a ditch, and looked back at the prison. It stood up grim and silent against the morning sky, and there was now no sign of any disturbance about it. Evidently for the present I had not been missed; only later would come a mustering of the prisoners, and my number would be called, and there would be no answer. That gave me time, but not time enough. I determined to make my way across country as quickly as I could before the world was astir, and so put as great a distance as possible between myself and the prison.

But by the time I had run a few miles, and could see in the near distance the roofs of cottages, I began to realise that in the country people have a bad habit of rising at a most unearthly hour. It was but little after five o'clock, and yet already smoke was coming from cottage chimneys; more than once I had a narrow squeak of it, in coming almost face to face with some labourer trudging early to his work in the fields. Daylight was not my time, it was evident; I must wait for the friendly darkness, even though I waited hungry.

The record of a great part of that day is easily set down. I lay perdu in a little wood, where, by raising my head, I could see out on to the broad highway that was presently in some indefinite fashion to set me on the greater road for freedom. All day long the sun blazed down on that road, and all day long from my hiding-place I watched vehicles and pedestrians passing to and fro; I had much time for thought. Once some little children toddled down hand-in-hand into

the wood, and began to pick flowers near where I lay hidden; that was the first sight of anything beautiful I had had for a good long time, as you shall presently understand. Despite the danger to myself, if they should have seen me and raised any alarm, I was sorry enough when they toddled away again.

There was so much to be thought about, as I lay there on my face, plucking at the cool green grasses, and drinking in the beauty of the wood. For I was but five-and-twenty, and yet had never known really what life was like. I had been shut away all my days in a prison, almost as grim and as bad as that from which I had this day escaped; and I had left it for that greater prison where they branded men and set them to toil like beasts.

My earliest recollections had been of my uncle—Zabdiel Blowfield. I seemed to have a vision of him when I was very, very small, and when I lay quaking in a big bed in a horrible great room, bending over me, and flaring a candle at me, as though with the amiable intention of starting my night's rest well with a personal nightmare. Uncle Zabdiel had brought me up. It seems that I was left on his hands when I was a mere child; I easily developed and degenerated into his slave. At the age of fourteen I knew no more of the world than a baby of fourteen months, and what smattering of education I had had was pressed then into my uncle's service; I became his clerk.

He lived in a great house near Barnet, and from there he conducted his business. It was a paying business, and although I touched at first only the fringe of it, I came to understand that Zabdiel Blowfield was something of a

human spider, gathering into his clutches any number of fools who had money to lose, together with others who wanted money, and were prepared to pay a price for it. He taught me his business, or just so much of it as should make me useful in the drudgery of it; and, as it happened, he taught me too much.

I had ten years of that slavery—ten years, during which I grew to manhood, and to strength and vigour. For while he thought he suppressed me, and while, as a matter of fact, he half-starved me, and dressed me in his own cast-off clothing, and kept my young nose to the grindstone of his business, I contrived, within the last year or so at least, to lead something of a double life. I was young, and that alone shall plead my excuse. If another excuse were wanted, it might be summed up in this: that the world called me—that world that was a glorious uncertainty, of which I knew nothing and longed to know a great deal.

Uncle Zabdiel regarded me as very much of a poor fool; it never entered into his head for a moment to suspect the machine he had taught to do certain mechanical things. But I, who never had a penny for my own, constantly had gold passing through my fingers, and gold spelt a way out into the great world. I was tempted, and I fell; it was quite easy to alter the books.

I had two years of it. They were two years during which I worked as hard as ever during the day, and escaped from that prison when darkness had fallen. I always contrived to get back before the dawn, or before my uncle had come into the place he called his office; and by that time I had changed back into the shabby, apparently broken, creature

he knew for his slave. For the rest I did nothing very vicious; but I saw something of the world outside, and I spent what I could get of my uncle's money.

The blow fell, as I might have expected—and that, too, by the merest chance. I had grown reckless; there seemed no possibility of my being found out. But my Uncle Zabdiel happened to light upon a something that made him suspicious, and from that he went to something else. Without saying a word to me, he must have unwound the tangle slowly bit by bit, until it stood out before him clearly; and then he took to watching.

I shall never forget the morning when he caught me. I got into my accustomed window, in those gayer clothes I affected in my brief holidays, and I came face to face with the old man in my room. He was sitting on the side of the bed, with his black skull-cap thrust on the back of his head, and with his chin resting on his stick; and for a long time after I knew the game was up he neither spoke nor moved. As for me, I had had my good time, and I simply wondered in a dull fashion what he was going to do.

"You needn't say anything, Norton Hyde," said Uncle Zabdiel at last. "I know quite as much as you can tell me, and perhaps a little more. You're an ungrateful dog, and like other ungrateful dogs you shall be punished."

"I wanted to live like other men," I said sullenly.

"Haven't I fed you, lodged you, looked after you?" he snapped out. "Where would you have been, but for me?"

"I might have been a better man," I answered him. "I've slaved for you for ten long years, and you've done your best to starve me, body and soul. I've taken your money, but it

isn't as much as you'd have had to pay me in those ten years, if I'd been some poor devil of a clerk independent of you!"

"We won't bandy words," said my uncle, getting up from my bed. "Go to bed; I'll decide what to do with you in the morning."

Now, wisely speaking, of course, I ought to have made good my escape that night. But there was a certain bravado in me—a certain feeling, however wrong, that I was justified to an extent in what I had done—for the labourer is worthy of his hire. So I went to bed, and awaited the morning with what confidence I could. Being young, I slept soundly.

I was the only living relative of Zabdiel Blowfield, and one would have thought—one, at least, who did not know him—that he would have shown some mercy. But mercy was not in his nature, and I had wounded the man in that tenderest part of him—the pocket. Incredible as it may seem, I was handed over to justice on a charge of forgery and falsification of books, and in due course I stood my trial, with my uncle as the chief witness against me.

Uncle Zabdiel made a very excellent witness, too, from the point of view of the prosecution. I—Norton Hyde—stood in the dock, I flatter myself, rather a fine figure of a young man, tall, and straight, and dark-haired; the prosecutor—and a reluctant one at that—stood bowed, and old, and trembling, and told the story of my ingratitude. He had brought me up, and he had educated me; he had fed, and clothed, and lodged me; but for him I must have died ignominiously long before. And I had robbed him, and had spent his money in riotous living. He wept while he told the

tale, for the loss of the money was a greater thing than most men would suppose.

The limb of the law he had retained for the prosecution had a separate cut at me on his account. According to that gentleman I was a monster; I would have robbed a church; there was scarcely any crime in the calendar of which I would not have been capable. It was plainly suggested that the best thing that could happen to society would be to get me out of the way for as many years as possible.

The judge took up the case on something of the same lines. He preached a neat little sermon on the sin of ingratitude, and incidentally wondered what the youth of the country were coming to in these degenerate days; he left me with confidence to a jury of respectable citizens, who were, I was convinced, every man Jack of them, fathers of families. I was doomed from the beginning, and I refused to say anything in my own defence.

So they packed me off quietly out of the way for ten years; and Uncle Zabdiel, I have no doubt, went back to his old house, and thereafter engaged a clerk at a starvation wage, and kept a pretty close eye upon him. I only know that, so far as I was concerned, he sidled up to me as I was leaving the dock, and whispered, with a leer—

"You'll come out a better man, Norton—a very much better man."

Perhaps I had not realised the tragedy of the business at that time, for it must be understood that I had not in any sense of the word lived. Such small excursions as I had made into life had been but mere dippings into the great sea of it; of life itself I knew nothing. And now they were to shut me away for ten years—or a little less, if I behaved myself with decorum—and after that I was to be given an opportunity to make a real start, if the gods were kind to me.

However, it is fair to say that up to the actual moment of my escape from Penthouse Prison I had accepted my fate with some measure of resignation. I had enough to eat, and work for my hands, and I slept well; in that sense I was a young and healthy animal, with a past that had not been interesting, and a future about which I did not care to think. But as I lay in the wood all that long day better thoughts came to me; I had hopes and desires such as I had not had before. I saw in a mental vision sweet country places, and fair homes, and decent men and women; I was to meet and touch them all some day, when I had worked myself out of this present tangle. Alas! I did not then know how much I was to go through first!

I had lain so long, with but the smallest idea of where I actually was, and with a ravening hunger upon me, that I had actually seen men returning from their work to their homes in the late afternoon before I bestirred myself to think of what I was to do. More than once, as I lay there, I had seen, speeding along the great road above me, motorcars that annihilated space, and were gone in a cloud of dust. I had a ridiculous feeling that if I were nimble enough I might manage to board one of those, and so get away beyond the reach of pursuit. For always the great prison menaced me, standing as it did within a mile or two of where I lay. I knew that the pursuit must already have started; I wondered that I had not yet seen a warder.

And then came deliverance. You may say it was miraculous, if you will; I can only set down here the fact as it happened. I saw in the distance, winding down a long hill, a grey monster scarcely darker than the road over which it swept, and I knew without the telling that the grey monster was a racing car. As it drew nearer I saw that it had a sharpened front like an inverted boat, and behind that sharpened front crouched a man, with his hands upon the wheel and his face masked by hideous goggles. He swept down towards the place where I lay at a terrific pace, and, half in wonder at the sight, and half fascinated by it, I drew myself forward through the bushes until I lay at the very side of the road, with my chin uplifted and my face literally peering through the hedge.

The grey monster came on and on, and the curious thing was that it slackened speed a little as it got near to me, so that I saw the dusty outlines of it, and the great bulk of it set low between its wheels, and caught the sound of its sobbing breath. And then it stopped at the side of the road, so near to me that I could almost have stretched out a hand and touched the nearest wheel.

The man got down stiffly out of his seat, and thrust the goggles up over his cap and began to pull off his driving-gloves. Something had gone wrong with the monster, and I heard the man heave a quick sigh as he bent down to examine the machinery. For a little time his head disappeared among the works, and then, with a grunt of relief, he straightened himself and began pulling on his gloves; and so, by a miracle, turning his head a little, looked down into my upturned face.

He was a youngish man with a thin, keen, shaven face, tight-lipped and clear-eyed. He had on a long grey coat, buttoned close about him, and his appearance, with the cap drawn down over his ears and the goggles set on the front of it, was not altogether prepossessing. But the man looked a sportsman, and somehow or other I was attracted to him. Scarcely knowing what I did, I glanced to right and left along the road, and then rose to my feet in the ditch.

He gave a low whistle, and nodded slowly, finished pulling on his gloves, and set his gloved hands against his sides. "Hullo, my friend," he said at last, "I heard about you on the hill up yonder. You're wanted badly."

"I know that," I said huskily, for my throat was dry, alike from thirst and from a new fear that had sprung up in me. "Perhaps you'd like to drive me back to meet them."

"If you're anxious," he retorted, with a laugh. "Only it happens that I'm not that sort. It would be playing it rather low down to do that, wouldn't it?"

"I should think so," I said, answering his laugh with another that had something of a sob in it.

"What's your particular crime?" he asked. "Murder?"

"Nothing half so bad as that," I answered him. "I stole some money, and had a good time; now I've been paying the penalty. I've done nearly one out of my ten years."

He turned away abruptly, and I heard him mutter something which sounded like "Poor devil!" but I would not be sure of that. Then, after bending for a moment again over his car, he said, without looking up at me, "I take it you'd like to get out of this part of the country, if possible?"

"Anywhere!" I exclaimed, in a shaking whisper. "I only want a chance."

He looked along the lines of the grey monster, and laid his hand upon the machine affectionately. "Then you can't do better than travel with me," he said. "I can swing you along at a pace that'll knock the breath out of you if you're not used to it, and I can drop you a hundred miles or so along the road. There's no one in sight; get in. Here's a spare pair of goggles."

I adjusted the goggles with a shaking hand, and tried to thank him. He had tossed a short grey coat to me, and that I put about my shoulders. Almost before I was in the seat beside him the grey car began to move, and then I saw the landscape slipping past us in two streaks. I tried once or twice to speak, but the words were driven back into my mouth, and I could not get anything articulate out.

My recollection of that journey is dim and obscure. I only know that now and then, as we flew along, the man jerked out questions at me, and so discovered that I had had nothing to eat all day, and was practically famished. He slowed down the car and showed me where, in a tin case under my feet, were some sandwiches and a flask; and I took in sandwiches and dust gratefully enough for the next few miles, and gulped down a little out of the flask. The houses were beginning to be more frequent, and we met more vehicles on the road, when presently he slowed down to light his lamps.

"At what particular spot would you like to be dropped?" he asked, as he came round my side of the car and bent down over the lamp there. "Choose for yourself."

I told him I hardly knew; I think then, for the first time, I realised that I was in as bad a case as ever, and that, save for my short coat and the goggles, I was clad exactly as when I had dropped over my prison wall. I think I told him that all places were alike to me, and that I would leave it to him.

So we went on again at a diminishing speed, with the motor horn sounding continuously; flashed through an outlying village or two, until I saw, something to my horror, that the man was drawing into London. I turned to him to protest, but he smiled and shook his head.

"Don't you worry; I'm going to see you through this—just for the sport of the thing," he said, raising his voice to a shout, so that he might be heard above the roar of the flying wheels. "I'm going to take you slap through London to my place, and I'm going to give you a change of clothes and some food. To-morrow, if you like, I'll whack you down to the coast, and ship you off somewhere. You're as safe as houses with me; I've taken an interest in you."

I could only sit still, and wonder what good providence had suddenly tossed this man into my world to do this thing for me. I could have kissed his hands; I could have worshipped him, as one might worship a god. I felt that my troubles were over; for the first time in all my life I had someone to lean upon, someone willing and anxious to help me.

And then as suddenly the whole thing came to an end. We had got through a village in safety, and had swung at a terrific pace round a corner, and there was a huge hay-waggon in the very middle of the road. There was no time to

pull up, and the road was too narrow to allow the car free passage on either side. I heard the man beside me give a gasp as he bent over his wheel, and then we swerved to the right, and flew up the bank at the side of the road, in a mad endeavour to pass the waggon.

We shot past it somehow, and I thought we should drop to the road again; instead, the car continued up the bank, seemed to hang there for a moment, even at the terrific pace we were going, and then began to turn over. I say began to turn over because in that fraction of a second events seemed to take hours to finish. I know I jumped, and landed all in a heap, and seemed to see, as I fell, the car before me turning over; and then for a moment or two I knew nothing.

When I recovered consciousness I got slowly to my knees, and looked about me. My head ached fearfully, but I seemed to have no very great injuries. A dozen yards in front of me lay the grey monster, with three wheels left to it, and those three upreared helplessly in the air. My friend the driver I could not see anywhere. I staggered to my feet, relieved to find that I could walk, and went forward to the car; and there, on the other side of it, lay my friend, doubled up and unconscious. He, too, seemed to have escaped any very great injury as by a miracle. I straightened him out and touched him here and there, in the hope to discover if any bones were broken; he only groaned a little, and even that sound was cheering. The man was not dead.

I had no thought of my own safety until I heard the rumble of wheels, and saw the cause of all the disaster—that hay-waggon—coming towards me. From the opposite

direction, too, I heard the sharp toot-toot of a motor horn, and knew that help was coming. And then, for the first time, I realised that that help was not for me, and that I must not remain where I was a moment longer: for if my situation had been bad before, it was now truly frightful. I was somewhere in the neighbourhood of London—near to a northern suburb—and I was in convict garb, partially concealed by a short grey coat, and I was hatless.

Fortunately for me, by this time it was dark, and I had only seen that hay-waggon looming up, as it were, against the evening sky. Knowing that my friend must soon receive better help than I could give him, I decided that that episode in my life at least was closed. I slipped off my goggles and dropped them beside him; then, after a momentary glance round, I decided to try for a fence at one side, opposite that bank that had been our undoing. It was not very high, just within reach of my hands. I made a jump for the top and scrambled over, and dropped among some undergrowth on the further side of it.

There is a humorous side to everything; even in my plight I was compelled to laugh at what I now saw through a chink in the fence. I peered out to see what became of my friend, and as I did so I saw that another motor-car had stopped by the overturned one, and that the driver had got down. Greatly to my relief I saw my friend sit up and stare about him; even saw him smile a little ruefully at the sight of his grey monster in its present condition. And then, although I could not hear what he said, I saw that he was asking questions eagerly about me.

For he had lost me entirely; it was evident that the poor fellow was in a great state of perplexity. I sincerely hope that some day he may read these lines, and so may come to an understanding of what happened to me; I heartily wished, as I looked through the fence then, that I could have relieved his perplexity. It was evident that after his accident he was not at all sure whether he had left me on the road at some place or other, or whether by a miracle I had been in some fashion snatched off the earth, and so snatched out of my predicament. As I feared, however, that he and the other man, together with the driver of the waggon, might begin some regular search for me, I decided that I could no longer remain where I was. I began to walk away, through thick rank grass and among trees, going cautiously, and wondering where I was.

In truth I was so shaken that I staggered and swayed a little as I walked. I tried to get my ideas into some order, that I might make myself understand what was the best thing for me to do. I came to the conclusion that I must first get a change of clothing; there was no hope for me unless I could do that. By this time telegraph wires would have carried messages to all parts describing me, and those messages would have travelled much faster even than that unfortunate racing car by which I had come so far. If I could break into a house, and by some great good chance find clothing that would fit me, all might be well. But at the moment I stood marked and branded for all men to discover.

Somewhat to my relief and also to my dismay, I found presently that I was walking in the grounds of a private house. I came upon a large artificial lake or pond, with stone

seats dotted about here and there near the margin of it; the stone seats were green and brown with moss and climbing plants that had been allowed to work their will upon them. In fact, all the grounds had a neglected appearance, and so had the house, too, when presently I came to it. I was just making up my mind which was the best window by which I might effect an entry, when I heard voices quite near to me, and dropped at once on an instinct, and lay still.

The two figures, I now discovered, were those of a man and woman, standing close together in a little clump of trees. They had been so still that I had walked almost up to them, and might indeed have blundered against them but for the voices. As I lay now I could hear distinctly every word they said. The man was speaking.

"My dear, dear little friend," he said, "you know I would do anything in all the world to help you. You're not safe here; I dread that man, and for your sake I fear him. Why don't you let me take you away from this dreadful house? You know I would be good to you."

"Yes, I know that, Gregory," replied the girl softly. "But I can't make up my mind—I can't be sure of myself. I can't be sure even that I love you well enough to let you take care of me."

"But you don't love anyone else?" he pleaded. And now, for the first time, as he turned his head a little, I saw the man's face. He was quite young, and I noticed that he was tall, and big, and dark, of about the same style and appearance, and even of the same age, I should conjecture, as myself. He was holding the girl's hands and looking down

into her eyes. I could not see her face clearly, but I judged her to be small, and fair, and slight of figure.

"No, there is no one else I love," she answered him. "Perhaps, some day, Gregory, I may make up my mind—some day, when things get too terrible to be borne any longer here. I'm not afraid; I have a greater courage than you think. And, after all, the man dare not kill me."

"I'm not so sure of that, Debora," said the man.

They walked away in the direction of the house, and I lay still among the dank grasses, watching them as they went. They disappeared round a corner of it, and still I dared not move.

After quite a long time I thought I heard in the house itself a sharp cry. Perhaps I had been half asleep, lying there with my head on my arms, but the night was very still, and it had seemed to me that I heard the cry distinctly. At all events it roused me, and startled me to a purpose. I must get into that house, and I must get a change of clothing. I made straight for it now, and presently found a window at a convenient height from the ground, and some thick stems of creeper up which I could climb to reach it. I stood there on the window-sill for a moment or two, a grey shadow among grey shadows; then I opened the window, and, hearing nothing, stepped down into a room.

I found myself in intense darkness. I left the window open so that I might make good my escape, and I began to fumble about for something by which I could get a light. I stumbled against a chair, and stood still to listen; there seemed to be no sound in the room. And then while I moved, in the hope to find a fireplace and some matches, I had that curious skin-stirring feeling that there was someone or something in the room with me, silent, and watchful, and waiting. I could almost have sworn that I heard someone breathing, and restraining their breathing at that.

I failed to find the mantelshelf, but I stumbled presently against a table. I stretched out my hands cautiously about it, leaning well forward over it as I did so, and my forehead struck against something that moved away and moved back again—something swinging in mid-air above the table.

I thought it might be a lamp, and I put out my hand to steady it. But that which I touched was so surprising and so horrifying that for a moment I held it, and stood there in the darkness fumbling with it, and on the verge of shrieking. For it was a man's boot I held, and there was a foot inside it. Someone was hanging there above me.

I made straight for the window at once; I felt I was going mad. Needless to say, I failed to find the window at all, but this time I found the mantelshelf. There my hand struck against a match-box, and knocked over a candlestick with a clatter. After two or three tries I got a light, and stooped with the lighted match in my hands and found the candlestick, and set it upright on the floor. So soon as I had steadied my hands to the wick and had got a flame, I looked up at the dreadful thing above me.

Suspended from a beam that went across the ceiling was a man hanging by the neck, dead—and the distorted, livid face was the face of the man I had seen in the garden but a little time before—the face of the man who had talked with the girl!

Nor was that all. Seated at the table was another man, with arms stretched straight across it, so that the hands were under the dangling feet of the other, and with his face sunk on the table between the arms. And this seemed to be an old man with grey hair.

# **CHAPTER II.**

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### I AM HANGED—AND DONE FOR.

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So soon as I could get my eyes away from that thing that swung horribly above the table, I forced them to find the window. But even then I could not move. It was as though my limbs were frozen with the sheer horror of this business into which I had blundered. You will own that I had had enough of sensations for that day; I wonder now that I was able to get back to sane thoughts at all. I stood there, with my teeth chattering, and my hands clutching at the grey coat I wore, striving to pull myself together, and to decide what was best to be done. To add to the horror of the thing, the man who lay half across the table began to stir, and presently sat up slowly, like one waking from a long and heavy sleep. He sat for some moments, staring in front of him, with his hands spread out palms downwards on the table. He did not seem to see me at all. I watched him, wondering what he would do when presently he should look round and catch sight of me; wondering, for my part, whether, if he cried out with the shock of seeing me, I should grapple with him, or make for the window and dash out into the darkness.

He did a surprising thing at last. He raised his eyes slowly, until they rested upon what gyrated and swung above him, and then, as his eyes travelled upwards to the face, he smiled very slowly and very gently; and almost on

the instant turned his head, perhaps at some noise I made, and looked squarely at me.

"Good evening, sir!" he said in a low tone.

Think of it! To be calmly greeted in that fashion, in a room into which I had blundered, clad grotesquely as I was, and with that dead thing hanging above us! Idiotically enough I tried to get out an answer to the man, but I found my tongue staggering about among my teeth and doing nothing in the way of shaping words. So I stared at him with, I suppose, a very white face, and pointed to that which hung above us.

"He's very quiet, sir," said the old man, getting to his feet slowly. "I was afraid at first—I didn't understand. I was afraid of him. Think of that!" He laughed again with a laughter that was ghastly.

"Cut—cut him down!" I stammered in a whisper, holding on to the edge of the mantelshelf and beginning to feel a horrible nausea stealing over me.

He shook his head. "I can't touch him—I'm afraid again," said the old man, and backed away into a corner.

What I should have done within a minute or two I do not really know, if by chance I could have kept my reason at all, but I heard someone moving in the house, and coming towards the room in which I stood. I did not think of my danger; everything was so far removed from the ordinary that it was as though I moved and walked in some dream, from which presently, with a shudder and a sigh of relief, I should awake. Therefore, even when I heard footsteps coming towards the room I did not move, nor did it seem strange that whoever came seemed to step with something

of a jaunty air, singing loudly as he moved, with a rather fine baritone voice. In just such a fashion a man flung open the door and marched straight into the room, and stopped there, surveying the picture we made, the three of us—one dead and two alive—with a pair of very bright, keen eyes.

He was a tall, thin man, with sleek black hair gone grey at the temples. He had a cleanly-shaven face, much lined and wrinkled at the corners of the eyes and of the mouth; and when he presently spoke I discovered that his lips parted quickly, showing the line of his white teeth, and yet with nothing of a smile. It was as though the lips moved mechanically in some still strong mask; only the eyes were very much alive. And after his first glance round the room I saw that his eyes rested only on me.

"Who are you? What do you want?" he demanded sharply.

I did not answer his question; I pointed weakly to the hanging man. "Aren't you going—going to do anything with him?" I blurted out.

He shrugged his shoulders. "He's dead; and the other one,"—he let his eyes rest for a moment on the old man —"the other one is as good as dead for anything he understands. The matter is between us, and perhaps I'd better hear you first."

"I can't—not with that in the room!" I whispered, striving to steady my voice.

He shrugged his shoulders again, and drew from his pocket a knife. Keeping his eyes fixed on the swaying figure above him, he mounted to a chair, and so to the table, deftly and strongly lifted the dead man upon one shoulder