

***HAROLD
MACGRATH***



***THE VOICE
IN THE FOG***

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CHAPTER I

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Fog.

A London fog, solid, substantial, yellow as an old dog's tooth or a jaundiced eye. You could not look through it, nor yet gaze up and down it, nor over it; and you only thought you saw it. The eye became impotent, untrustworthy; all senses lay fallow except that of touch; the skin alone conveyed to you with promptness and no incertitude that this thing had substance. You could feel it; you could open and shut your hands and sense it on your palms, and it penetrated your clothes and beaded your spectacles and rings and bracelets and shoe-buckles. It was nightmare, bereft of its pillows, grown somnambulistic; and London became the antechamber to Hades, lackeyed by idle dreams and peopled by mistakes.

There is something about this species of fog unlike any other in the world. It sticks. You will find certain English cousins of yours, as far away from London as Hong-Kong, who are still wrapt up snugly in it. Happy he afflicted with strabismus, for only he can see his nose before his face. In the daytime you become a fish, to wriggle over the ocean's floor amid strange flora and fauna, such as ash-cans and lamp-posts and venders' carts and cab-horses and sandwich-men. But at night you are neither fish, bird nor beast.

The night was May thirteenth; never mind the year; the date should suffice: and a Walpurgis night, if you please, without any Mendelssohn to interpret it.

That happy line of Milton's—"Pandemonium, the high capital of Satan and his peers"—fell upon London like Elijah's mantle. Confusion and his cohort of synonyms (why not?) raged up and down thoroughfare and side-street and alley, east and west, danced before palace and tenement alike: all to the vast amusement of the gods, to the mild annoyance of the half-gods (in Mayfair), and to the complete rout of all mortals a-foot or a-cab. Imagine: militant suffragettes trying to set fire to the prime minister's mansion, *Siegfried* being sung at the opera, and a yellow London fog!

The press about Covent Garden was a mathematical problem over which Euclid would have shed bitter tears and hastily retired to his arbors and citron tables. Thirty years previous (to the thirteenth of May, not Euclid) some benighted beggar invented the Chinese puzzle; and tonight, many a frantic policeman would have preferred it, sitting with the scullery maid and the pantry near by. Simple matter to shift about little blocks of wood with the tip of one's finger; but cabs and carriages and automobiles, each driver anxious to get out ahead of his neighbor!—not to mention the shouting and the din and discord of horns and whistles and sirens and rumbling engines!

"It's hard luck," said Crawford, sympathetically. "It will be half an hour before they get this tangle straightened out."

"I shouldn't mind, Jim, if it weren't for Kitty," replied his wife. "I am worried about her."

"Well, I simply could not drag her into this coupé and get into hers myself. She's a heady little lady, if you want to know. As it is, she'll get back to the hotel quicker than we

shall. Her cab is five up. If you wish, I'll take a look in and see if she's all right."

"Please do;" and she smiled at him, lovely, enchanting.

"You're the most beautiful woman in all this world!"

"Am I?"

Click! The light went out. There was a smothered laugh; and when the light flared up again, the aigrette in her copper-beech hair was all askew.

"If anybody saw us!"—secretly pleased and delighted, as any woman would have been who possessed a husband who was her lover all his waking hours.

"What! in this fog? And a lot I'd care if they did. Now, don't stir till I come back; and above all, keep the light on."

"And hurry right back; I'm getting lonesome already."

He stepped out of the coupé. Harlequin, and Colombine, and Humpty-Dumpty; shapes which came out of nowhere and instantly vanished into nothing, for all the world like the absurd pantomimes of his boyhood days. He kept close to the curb, scrutinizing the numbers as he went along. Never had he seen such a fog. Two paces away from the curb a headlight became an effulgence. Indeed, there were a thousand lights jammed in the street, and the fog above absorbed the radiance, giving the scene a touch of Brocken. All that was needed was a witch on a broomstick. He counted five vehicles, and stopped. The door-window was down.

"Miss Killigrew?" he said.

"Yes. Is anything wrong?"

"No. Just wanted to see if you were all right. Better let me take your place and you ride with Mrs. Crawford."

"Good of you; but you've had enough trouble. I shall stay right here."

"Where's your light?"

"The globe is broken. I'd rather be in the dark. Its fun to look about. I never saw anything to equal it."

"Not very cheerful. We'll be held up at least half an hour. You are not afraid?"

"What, I?" She laughed. "Why should I be afraid? The wait will not matter. But the truth is, I'm worried about mother. She would go to that suffragette meeting; and I understand they have tried to burn up the prime minister's house."

"Fine chance! But don't you worry. Your mother's a sensible woman. She'll get back to the hotel, if she isn't there already."

"I wish she had not gone. Father will be tearing his hair and twiggng the whole Savoy force by the ears."

Crawford smiled. Readily enough he could conjure up the picture of Mr. Killigrew, short, thick-set, energetic, raging back and forth in the lobby, offering to buy taxicabs outright, the hotel, and finally the city of London itself; typically money-mad American that he was. Crawford wanted to laugh, but he compromised by saying: "He must be very careful of that hair of his; he hasn't much left."

"And he pulls out a good deal of it on my account. Poor dad! Why in the world should I marry a title?"

"Why, indeed!"

"Mrs. Crawford was beautiful tonight. There wasn't a beauty at the opera to compare with her. Royalties are

frumps, aren't they? And that ruby! I don't see how she dares wear it!"

"I am not particularly fond of it; but it's a fad of hers. She likes to wear it on state occasions. I have often wondered if it is really the Nana Sahib's ruby, as her uncle claimed. Driver, the Savoy, and remember it carefully; the Savoy."

"Yes, sir; I understand, sir. But we'll all be some time, sir. Collision forward is what holds us, sir."

Alone again, Kitty Killigrew leaned back, thinking of the man who had just left her and of his beautiful wife. If only she might some day have a romance like theirs! Presently she peered out of the off-window. A brood of *Siegfried*-dragons prowled about, now going forward a little, now swerving, now pausing; lurid eyes and threatening growls.

Once upon a time, in her pigtail days, when her father was going to be rich and was only half-way between the beginning and the end of his ambition, Kitty had gone to a tent-circus. Among other things she had looked wonderingly into the dim, blurry glass-tank of the "human fish," who was at that moment busy selling photographs of himself. Tonight, in searching for comparisons, this old forgotten picture recurred to her mind; blithely memory brought it forth and threw it upon the screen. All London had become a glass-tank, filled with human pollywogs.

She did not want to marry a title; she did not want to marry money; she did not want to marry at all. Poor kindly dad, who believed that she could be made happy only by marrying a title. As if she was not as happy now as she was ever destined to be!

Voices. Two men were speaking near the curb-door. She turned her head involuntarily in this direction. There were no lights in the frontage before which stood her cab, which intervened between the Brocken haze in the street, throwing a square of Stygian shadow against the fog, with right and left angles of aureola. She could distinguish no shapes.

"Cheer up, old top; you're in hard luck."

"I'm a bally ass."

"No, no; only a ripping good sporty game all the way through."

Oddly enough, Kitty sensed the irony. She wondered if the speaker's companion did.

"Well, a wager's a wager."

"And you're the last chap to welch a square bet. What's the odds? My word, I didn't urge you to change the stakes."

"Didn't you?"

The voice was young and pleasant; and Kitty was sure that the owner's face was even as pleasant as his voice. What had he wagered and lost?

"If you're really hard pressed..."

"Hard pressed! Man, I've nothing in God's world but two guineas, six."

"Oh, I say now!"

"Its the truth."

"If a fiver will help you..."

"Thanks. A wager's a wager. I've lost. I was a bally fool to play cards. Deserve what I got. Six months; that's the agreement. A madman's wager; but I'll stick."

"Six months; twelve o'clock, midnight, November thirteenth. It's the date, old boy; that's what hoodooed you,

as the Americans say."

Kitty wasn't sure that the speaker was English; if he was, he had lost the insular significance of his vowels. Still, it was, in its way, as pleasant a voice as the other's. There was no doubt about the younger man; he was English to the core, English in his love of chance, English in his loyalty to his word; stupidly English. That he was the younger was a trifling matter to deduce: no young man ever led his elder into mischief, harmful or innocuous.

"Six months. It's a joke, my boy; a great big laugh for you and me, when there's nothing left in life but toddies and churchwardens. Six months."

"I dare say I can hang on till that time is over. Well, good night! No letters, no addresses."

"Exact terms. Six months from date I'll be cooling my heels in your ante-room."

"Cavanaugh, if it's anything else except a joke..."

"Oh, rot! It was your suggestion. I tell you, it's a lark, nothing more. A gentleman's word."

"I'll start for my diggings."

"Ride home with me; my cab's here somewhere."

"No, thanks. I've got a little thinking to do and prefer to be alone. Good night."

"And good luck go with you. Deuce take it, if you feel so badly..."

There was no reply; and Kitty decided that the younger man had gone on. Silence; or rather, she no longer heard the speakers. Then a low chuckle came to her and this chuckle broadened into ironic laughter; and she knew that Mephisto was abroad. What had been the wager; and what

was the meaning of the six months? It is instinctive in woman to interpret the human voice correctly, especially when the eyes are not distracted by physical presentations. This man outside, whoever and whatever he was, deep in her heart Kitty knew that he was not going to play fair. What a disappointing world it was!—to set these human voices ringing in her ears, and then to take them out of her life forever!

Still the din of horns and whistles and sirens, still the shouting. Would they never move on? She was hungry. She wanted to get back to the hotel, to learn what had happened to her mother. Militant suffragettes, indeed! A pack of mad witches, who left their brooms behind kitchen doors when they ought to be wielding them about dusty corners. Woman never won anything by using brickbats and torches: which proved on the face of it that these militants were inefficient, irresponsible, and unlearned in history. Poor simpletons! Had not theirs always been the power behind the throne? What more did they want?

Her cogitations were peculiarly interrupted. The door opened, and a man plumped down beside her.

"Enid, it looks as if we'd never get out of this hole. Have you got your collar up?"

Numb and terrified, Kitty felt the man's hands fumbling about her neck.

"Where's your sable stole? You women beat the very devil for thoughtlessness. A quid to a farthing, you've left it in the box, and I'll have to go back for it, providing they'll let me in. And it's midnight, if a minute."

Pressing herself tightly into her corner, Kitty managed to gasp: "My name is not Enid, sir. You have mistaken your carriage."

"What? Good heavens!" Almost instantly a match sparkled and flared. His eyes, screened behind his hand, palm outward (a perfectly natural action, yet nicely calculated), beheld a pretty, charming face, large Irish blue eyes (a bit startled at this moment), and a head of hair as shiny-black as polished Chinese blackwood. The match, still burning, curved like a falling star through the window. "A thousand pardons, madam! Very stupid of me. Quite evident that I am lost. I beg your pardon again, and hope I have not annoyed you."

He was gone before she could form any retort. Where had she heard that voice before? With a little shudder—due to the thought of those cold strange fingers feeling about her throat—her hands went up. Instantly she cried aloud in dismay. Her sapphires! They had vanished!

CHAPTER II

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Daniel Killigrew, of Killigrew and Company (sugar, coffee and spices), was in a towering rage; at least, he towered one inch above his normal height, which was five feet six. Like an animal recently taken in captivity he trotted back and forth through the corridors, in and out of the office, to and from the several entrances, blowing the while like a grampus. All he could get out of these infernally stupid beings was "Really, sir!" He couldn't get a cab, he couldn't get a motor, he couldn't get anything. Manager, head-clerk, porter, doorman and page, he told them, one and all, what a dotty old spoof of a country they lived in; that they were all dead-alive persons, fit to be neither under nor above earth; that they wouldn't be one-two in a race with January molasses—"Treacle, I believe you call it here!" And what did they say to this scathing arraignment? Yes, what did they say? "Really, sir!" He knew and hoped it would happen: if ever Germany started war, it would be over before these Britishers made up their minds that there was a war. A hundred years ago they had beaten Napoleon (with the assistance of Spain, Austria, Germany and Russia), and were now resting.

Quarter to one, and neither wife nor daughter; outside there, somewhere in the fog; and he could not go to them. It was maddening. Molly might be arrested and Kitty lost. Served him right; he should have put his foot down. The idea of Molly being allowed to go with those rattle-pated women! Suffragettes! A "Bah!" exploded with a loud report.

Hereafter he would show who voted in the Killigrew family. Poor man! He was made of that unhappy mental timber which agrees thoughtlessly to a proposition for the sake of peace and then regrets it in the name of war. His wife and daughter twisted him round their little fingers and then hunted cover when he found out what they had done.

He went out again to the main entrance and smoked himself headachy. He hated London. He had always hated it in theory, now he hated it in fact. He hated tea, buttered muffins, marmalade, jam, toast, cricket, box hedges three hundred years old, ruins, and the checkless baggage system, the wet blankets called newspapers. All the racial hatred of his forebears (Tipperary born) surged hot and wrathful in his veins. At the drop of a hat he would have gone to war, individually, with all England. "Really, sir!" Nothing but that, when he was dying of anxiety!

A taxicab drew up before the canopy. He knew it was a taxicab because he could hear the sound of the panting engine. The curb-end of the canopy was curtained by the abominable fog. Mistily a forlorn figure emerged. The doorman started leisurely toward this figure. Killigrew pushed him aside violently. Molly, with her hat gone, her hair awry, her dress torn, her gloves ragged, her eyes puffed! He sprang toward her, filled with Berserker rage. Who had dared.

"Give the man five pounds," she whispered. "I promised it."

"Five..."

"Give it to him! Good heavens, do I look as if I were joking? Pay him, pay him!"

Killigrew counted out five sovereigns, perhaps six, he was not sure. The chauffeur swooped them up, and set off.

"Molly Killigrew..."

"Not a word till I get to the rooms. Hurry! Daniel, if you say anything I shall fall down!"

He led her to the lift. Curious glances followed, but these signified nothing. On a night such as this there would be any number of accidents. Once in the living-room of the luxurious suite, Mrs. Killigrew staggered over to the divan and tumbled down upon it. She began to cry hysterically.

"Molly, old girl! Molly!" He put his arm tenderly across her heaving shoulders and kneeled. His old girl! Love crowded out all other thoughts. Money-mad he might be, but he never forgot that Molly had once fried his meat and peeled his potatoes and darned his socks. "Molly, what has happened? Who did this? Tell me, and I'll kill him!"

"Dan, when they started up the street for the prime minister's house, I could not get out of the crowd. I was afraid to. It was so foggy you had to follow the torches. I did not know what they were about till the police rushed us. One grabbed me, but I got away." All this between sobs. "Dan, I don't want to be a suffragette." Sob. "I don't want to vote." Sob.

And for the first time that night Killigrew smiled.

"Where's Kitty?"

He started to his feet. "She hasn't got back from the opera yet. She'll be the death of me, one of these fine days. You know her. Like as not she's stepped out of her cab to see what's going on, and has lost herself."

"But the Crawfords were with her."