

HIS RELICS

By James Branch Cabell



TAUNTON" was engraved in large, raised letters upon the granite coping over which she stepped to enter the trim burial plot wherein her dead lay.

The place is one of the "points of interest" in Cedarwood. Tourists, passing through Lichfield, visit it as inevitably as they do the graves of the Presidents, the Southern generals, and the many other famous people which the old cemetery contains; and the negro hackmen of Lichfield are already profuse in inaccurate information concerning its occupant. In a phrase, the postal card which pictures "E 9436—Grave of Roderick Taunton," is among the seven similar misinterpretations of localities most frequently demanded in Lichfieldian drug stores and news stands.

Her victoria had paused a trifle farther up the hill, where two big locusts overhung the roadway. She came into the place alone, walking quickly, for she was unwarrantably flustered by her late encounter. And when she found, of all people, Stourton Heleigh standing by her husband's grave, as in a sort of puzzled and yet reverent meditation, she was, and somehow as half guiltily, aware there was no possible reason for the repugnance—nay, even the rage—which a mere glimpse of this trudging, painted, and flamboyant Clarice Pendomer had kindled.

In consequence Mrs. Taunton, as the phrase runs, spoke before she thought: "She came with you!"

And he answered, as from the depths of an uncalled-for comprehension which was quite distinctly irritating: "Yes. And Harry, too, for that matter. Only

our talk got somehow to be not quite the sort it would be salutary for him to take an interest in. So we told Harry to walk on very slowly to the gate, and be sure not to do any number of things he would never have thought of if we hadn't suggested them. You know how people are with children."

"Harry is—her boy?"

"Oh! Say the *fons et origo*, poor little chap."

Mrs. Taunton observed, and again, as she realized within the moment, a thought too expeditiously: "I wish you wouldn't bring them here, Mr. Heleigh."

The man did not say anything.

And presently Mrs. Taunton was thinking chiefly of how awkward it was to be thrown alone with Stourton Heleigh. For the people of her circle had never overlooked his unsavory connection with the Pendomer divorce case and "that Mrs. Pendomer," as she well knew; and held it as an additional offense that when John Pendomer got his divorce at last, this Stourton Heleigh had not had even the tawdry decency to marry the deplorable woman. So very properly this Stourton Heleigh had been dropped by the people of Mrs. Taunton's circle, and to have him forced upon her thus was awkward.

The man did not say anything.

He was remembering the time these two had last spoken together with any such semblance of intimacy—that caustic time when Winifred Taunton had interrupted him in high words with her husband, and circumstances had afforded to Stourton Heleigh no choice save to confess, to this too perfect woman of all created beings, his true relations with Clarice Pendomer. Even as yet the bitterness of that humiliation was not savorless.

It seemed to him she was no older and had changed in nothing since the night when she had heard his stammerings through, and had merely listened, and in listening had been very unreasonably beautiful. So Diana might have looked upon Actæon, and more in wonder than in loathing, just at first.

He was aware of the long silence.

"Eh? Oh, yes," said Stourton Heleigh. "You wish I wouldn't bring them here. But then, you see, Roderick Taunton was our only friend when things bade fair to be even more unpleasant than they actually were. You shouldn't, I think, grudge even outcasts the privilege of being properly appreciative of what he tried to do for both of us. Besides, you always come on Saturdays, you know. We couldn't very well anticipate that you'd be here this afternoon."

So he had been at pains to spy upon her! She phrased it thus in her soul, and crisply answered: "I am leaving Lichfield to-morrow. I had meant this to be my farewell to them until October."

Mr. Heleigh had glanced toward the little headstone, with its rather lengthy epitaph, which marked the resting place of this woman's only child; and then to the tall shaft, whereon was engraved just "Roderick Taunton." The latter inscription was very characteristic of her viewpoint, he reflected, and yet reasonable, too, as one might mention a Hector or a Goethe, say, without being at pains to disclaim allusion to the lesser sharers of either name.

"Yes," he said. "Well, I shan't intrude."

"No—wait," she dissented. Her voice was altered now, for there had come into it a marvelous gentleness.

And Stourton Heleigh remained motionless. The entire world was motionless, ineffably expectant, as it seemed to him. Sunset was at hand. On one side was the high wooden fence which showed the boundary of Cedarwood, and through its palings and above it was visible the broad, shallow river, comfortably colored for the most part, like *café au lait*, but flecked with

many patches of foam and flat iron-colored rocks and innumerable islets, some no bigger than a billiard table, but with even the tiniest boasting a tree or two. On the other—westward—was a mounting vista of close-shaven turf, and many copings, like magnified geometrical problems, and a host of stunted growing things—with the staid verdancy of evergreens predominant—and a multitude of candid shafts and slabs and crosses and dwarfed lambs and meditant angels. Some of these thronged memorials were tinged with violet, and others were aglitter like silver, just as the ordered trees shaded them or not from the low sun. The disposition of all worldly affairs, the man dimly knew, was very anciently prearranged by an illimitable and, upon the whole, a kindly wisdom.

"I have avoided you since that night," she began again. Her voice was to the ear as cold velvet is to the touch. "I've never spoken to you except just those four times when we were accidentally thrown together, and not to have spoken would have aroused comment. I want to say that I am sorry. I've wanted to say it very often, especially since his death, only one never sees you nowadays. For he wished me to say it. He said I owed it to you for the way I spoke that night."

"Oh, but you didn't. For I committed the one unpardonable action, you see—I 'got into the newspapers.' That is precisely why 'one never sees me nowadays.' People—I mean the people who count in Lichfield—are charitable enough to ignore almost any crime which is just a matter of common knowledge and delightful gossip. But when a thing is printed in the morning paper you *can't* overlook it, you conceive, without incurring the suspicion of being positively illiterate. So as it is, I'm pretty much an Ishmaelite. What will you bet," the man said impishly, "that your coachman isn't petrified with horror this very moment?"

The truth was she had thought of this contingency a little earlier. It irritated her he should have guessed as

much. She was the more worried by his pervasive tone of flippancy. It jarred, it vaguely—for the phrase has no equivalent—"rubbed her the wrong way." The man had been so different once.

Yet he was uncanny in some respects. For he said within the moment: "I'm not a bit like Roderick Taunton, am I?"

"No," she answered, very quietly.

She stayed a tiny while quite motionless. Her eyes saw nothing physical. It was the attitude, Mr. Heleigh reflected, of one who listens to a far-off music and, incommunicably, you knew that the music was of a martial sort. She was all in black, of course, very slim and pure and beautiful. The great cluster of red roses, loosely held, was like blood against the sombre gown. He was aware of a great reverence and joy.

But aloud, "I'm envious," Stourton Heleigh declared. "He is the single solitary man I ever knew whose widow was contented to be simply his relict forever and ever, amen. For you will always be just the woman that Roderick Taunton loved, won't you? Yes, if you lived to be thirty-seven years older than Methuselah, and every genius and potentate in the world should come awooing in the meantime, it never would occur to you that you could possibly be anything, even to an insane person, except his relict. And he's been dead now all of seven years! So I'm envious, just as we ordinary mortals can't help being of you both; and—may I say it?—I am glad."

She was considering the change in him. His lean and always occultly countenance was far more furrowed than his age, remembered to the day even now, would warrant; and ineffably his shrewd brown eyes, so quizzically tender for the moment, defied your sympathy. They were the eyes of a seasoned stag, time-hardened to the chase, and distrustful above all of any seeming kindness.

She could not recognize in this man any least resemblance to the boy whom she had known, excepting just his

womanish mouth which was, as in the old time, very full and red and sensitive. And, illogically enough, both this great change in him and this one feature that had never changed, annoyed her equally.

II.

They were standing thus when a boy of eight or nine came unhurriedly into the "section." He assumed possession of Mr. Heleigh's hand as though the action were a matter of course.

"I got lost, Mist' Heleigh," the child composedly announced. "I walked ever so far, and the gate wasn't where we left it. And the roads kept turning and twisting so, it seemed I'd never get anywhere. I don't like being lost when it's getting dark and there's so many dead people round, do you?"

Mr. Heleigh was moved to disapproval. "Young man, I suppose your poor, deserted mother is looking for you everywhere, and has probably torn out every solitary strand of hair she possesses by this time."

"I reckon she is," the boy assented. The topic did not appear to be, in his eyes, of preëminent importance.

Then Winifred Taunton said, "Harry," and her voice was such that Stourton Heleigh wheeled with amazement in his face. The boy had gone to her complaisantly, and she stood now with one hand on either of his shoulders, regarding him. Her lips were parted, but they did not move at all.

"You are Mrs. Pendomer's boy, aren't you?" said Mrs. Taunton in a while. She had some difficulty in articulation.

"Yes'm," Harry assented, "and we come here 'most *every* Wednesday, and, please, ma'am, you're hurtin' me."

"I didn't mean to—dear," the woman added painfully. "Don't interfere with me, Stourton Heleigh! Your mother must be—very fond of you, Harry. I had a little boy once. I was fond of him. He would have been ten years old last February."

"Please, ma'am, I wasn't ten till April, and I ain't very *tall* for my age, but Tubby Parsons says——"

The woman gave an odd, unhuman sound. "Not until April!"

"Harry," said Mr. Heleigh then, "an enormous whale is coming down the river in precisely two minutes. Perhaps if you were to look through the palings of that fence you might see him. I don't suppose you'd care to, though?"

And Harry strolled resignedly toward the fence. Harry Pendomer did not like this funny lady who had hurt, frightened eyes. He did not believe in the whale, of course, any more than he did in Santa Claus. But, like most children, he patiently accepted the fact that grown people are unaccountable overlords appointed by some vast *bêtise*, whom, if only through prudential motives, it is preferable to humor.

III.

Mr. Heleigh stood now upon the other side of Roderick Taunton's grave—just in the spot that was reserved for her own occupancy some day. "You're ill, Winifred. You're not fit to be out. Go home."

"I had a little boy once," she said. "But that's all past and gone, and good times and bad times and all times pass over. There's an odd, simple music in the sentence, isn't there? Yet I remember it chiefly because I used to read that book to him, and he loved it. And it was my child that died. Why is this child so like him?"

"Oh, then, that's it, is it?" said Stourton Heleigh, as in relief. "Bless me, I suppose all these little shavers are pretty much alike. Humanity in the raw, you know. Still, it's no wonder it gave you a turn. You—you'd *much* better go home, however, and not take any foolish risks, and put your feet in hot water, and rub cologne on your temples, and do all the other suitable things."

"I remember now," she continued, without any apparent emotion, and as though he had not spoken. "When I came into the room you were saying that the child must be considered. You were both very angry, and I was alarmed—foolishly alarmed, perhaps.

And my—and Roderick Taunton said: 'Let him tell, then.' And you told me——"

"The truth, Winifred."

"And he sat quietly by. Oh, if he'd had the grace, the common manliness!" She shivered here. "But he never interrupted you. I—I was not looking at him. And when you had ended he said: 'My dear, I am sorry you should have been involved in this. But since you are, I think we can assure Stourton that both of us will regard his confidence as sacred.' Then I remembered him, and thought how noble he was! And all those years that were so happy, hour by hour, he was letting you—meet his bills!" She seemed to wrench out the inadequate metaphor.

You could hear the far-off river now, faint as the sound of boiling water.

After a few paces, Mr. Heleigh turned upon her. He spoke with a curious simplicity.

"There isn't any use in lying to you. You wouldn't believe. You'd only go to some one else—some woman, probably, who would jump at the chance of telling you everything, and a deal more. Yes; there are a great many 'they *do* says' floating about. This was the only one that came near being—serious. The man was very clever. Oh, he wasn't bad. He was simply Roderick Taunton. He incommoded Lichfield, however, by being too big for it. You would hear every by-end of retaliative and sniggered-over mythology; and in your present state you'd believe all of them. I happen to know that a great many of these stories aren't true."

"A great many of these stories," Mrs. Taunton repeated, "aren't true! A great many aren't! That ought to be consoling, oughtn't it?" She spoke without a trace of bitterness.

"I express myself very badly. What I really mean, what I'm aiming at, is that I wish you would let me answer any questions you might like to ask me, because I'll answer them truthfully. Very few people would. You see, you go about the world so like a gray-stone saint who has just stepped down from

her niche for the fraction of a second," he added, as with venom, "that it's only human nature to dislike you."

Mrs. Taunton was not angry. It had come to her, quite as though she were considering some other woman, that what the man said was, in a fashion, true. "There are sunlight and fresh air in the street," Roderick Taunton had been wont to declare, "and there is a culvert at the corner. I think it's a mistake for us to emphasize the culvert."

So he had trained her to disbelieve in its existence. She saw this now. It did not matter. It seemed to her that nothing mattered any more.

IV.

"I've only one question, I think. Why did you do it?" She spoke with bright amazement in her eyes.

"Oh, my dear, my dear!" he serio-comically deplored. "Why, because it was such a noble thing to do. It was so like the estimable young man in a play, you know, who acknowledges the crime he never committed and takes a curtain call immediately afterward. In fine, I simply observed to myself, with the late *Monsieur de Bergerac*: 'But what a gesture!'" And he parodied an actor's motion in this rôle.

She said unsmilingly: "To fling away not just a purse, but your whole life! For that's what it amounted to."

"You haven't *any* sense of humor," he lamented. "You used to have a deal, too, before you took to being so conscientiously cheerful, and diffusing sweetness and light among your cowering associates. Well, it was because it helped him a little. Oh, I'm being truthful now. He seemed to me, in our second-rate century, a man who lived, exultantly, among a lot of cardboard figures. He smashed some of them. I didn't care. I ought to have, perhaps, but I didn't."

"My friend, you are being almost truthful. But I want the truth entire."

"It isn't polite to disbelieve people," he reproved her. "Or, at the very least, according to the best books on etiquette,

you oughtn't to do it audibly. *Would* you mind if I smoked? I really could be more veracious then. There is something in tobacco that makes frankness rather a matter of course. I thank you."

He produced an amber holder, fitted a cigarette into it, and inhaled twice. He said, with a curt voice: "The reason, naturally, was you. You may remember certain things that happened just before Roderick Taunton came and took you. Oh, that is precisely what he did! You are rather a narrow-minded woman now, in consequence—or in my humble opinion, at least—and deplorably superior. It pleased the man to have, if you will overlook my venturing into metaphor, one cool room, very sparsely furnished, in his house, where he could come when the mood seized him. He took the raw material from me wherewith to build that room, because he wanted that room. I acquiesced, because I hadn't the strength wherewith to fight him."

She understood him now, as with a great drench of surprise. And fear was what she felt in chief—as though it had lightened—when she saw for just this moment the man's face, which was by ordinary so commonplace.

"I tried to buy your happiness, to—yes, just to keep you blind indefinitely. Had the price been heavier, I would have paid it the more gladly. Fate has played a sorry trick. *You'd* never have seen through him. My dear, I've wanted very often to shake you," he said. And she knew, in a glorious terror, that she desired him to shake her, and as she had never desired anything else in life. "Oh, well, I'm just the common, ordinary, garden sort of fool, you know," he sulkily concluded, "and I never did have any manners." And now the god was merely a discredited Stourton Heleigh again, and she was not afraid any longer, but only inexpressibly shaken.

"Isn't that like a woman?" he presently demanded of the June heavens. "To drag something out of a man with inflexibility, monomania, and moral

grappling irons, and *then* not like it! Oh, very well! I am disgusted by your sex's axiomatic variability. I shall take Harry to his fond mamma at once."

She did not say anything. A certain new discovery obsessed her like a piece of piercing music.

Then Stourton Heleigh gave the tiniest of gestures downward. "And I've told you this, in chief, because we two remember him. He wanted you. He took you. You are his. You always will be. He gave you just a fragment of himself. That fragment was worth more than everything I had to offer."

Mrs. Taunton very carefully arranged her roses on the ivy-covered grave. "I do not know. Meanwhile, I give these to our master. And my real widowhood begins to-day."

And as she rose he looked at her across the colorful mound, and smiled, half as with embarrassment. "Is it necessary to tell you that he loved you? And that the—others never really counted?"

"Not with him. Oddly enough, I'm proud of that, even now. But—don't you see? I never loved him. I was just his priestess—the priestess of a stucco god! Otherwise, I'd know it wasn't his fault, but altogether that of the others."

He grimaced and gave a bantering flirt of his head. He said, with quizzing eyes: "Would it do any good to quote Lombroso, and Maudsley, and Gall, and Krafft-Ebing, and Flechsig, and so on? And to tell you that the excessive use of one brain faculty must necessarily cause a lack of nutriment to all the other brain cells? It would be rather up to date." And then he said in all sincerity: "'A wild, impetuous whirlwind of passion and faculty slumbered quiet there; such heavenly *melody* dwelling in the heart of it.'"

She had put aside alike the drolling and the palliative suggestion like flimsy veils. "I think it wouldn't. When growing things are broken by the whirlwind they don't, as a rule, discuss the

theory of air currents as a consolation. Men, such as he was, take what they desire. It isn't fair—to us others. But it's true, for all that."

Their eyes met warily, and for no reason which they shared in common they laughed together.

"Poor little Lady of Shalott!" said Stourton Heleigh. "The mirror's cracked from side to side, isn't it? I'm sorry. For life is not so easily disposed of. And there is only life to look at now, and life is a bewilderingly complex business, you'll find, because the laws of it are so childishly simple—and implacable. And one of these laws seems to be that in our little planet might makes right." He stayed to puff his cigarette.

"Oh, Stourton, dear, don't—don't be just a merry Andrew!" she cried impulsively, before he had the time to continue, which she perceived he meant to do, as if it didn't matter.

And he took her full meaning, quite as he had been used in the old times to discourse upon a half sentence. "I'm afraid I am that, rather," he said reflectively. "But, then, all these years, you see, I've had to consort with second-rate people, because your kind were not exactly hungering for my society. And, somehow, I got into the habit of making these second-rate people laugh. It isn't very difficult. I'm rather an adept at telling stories which just graze impropriety, for instance. So these second-rate people, in any event, are glad to see me, because I am 'so awfully funny' and 'simply killing,' and so on. And I suppose it tells in the long run—like the dyer's hand, you know."

"It does tell." She was thinking it would always tell. And that, too, would be Roderick Taunton's handiwork.

Ensued a silence. Stourton Heleigh was painstakingly intent upon his cigarette. A nestward-plunging bird called to his mate. Then Winifred Taunton shook her head impatiently.

"Come; while I'm thinking, I will drive you back to Lichfield."

"Oh, no; that wouldn't do at all," he said, with absolute decision. "Why,

bless me, it would amount to a rehabilitation, to—a gauntlet flung at all Lichfield. For I'm not in the least the sort of person to be seen with."

She had considered this so long ago! And she heard him with a sort of fond impatience when he protested presently: "No, you see I have to return the boy. And I can't imagine your carriage waiting at the doors of 'that Mrs. Pendomer.'"

"Oh," she fleetingly thought, "he would have understood." But aloud she only said: "And do you think I hate her any longer? Yes, it is true, I hated her until to-day, and now I'm just sincerely sorry for her. For she and I—and you, and even the child yonder—and all that any of us is to-day—are just so many relics of Roderick Taunton, you see. Yet he has done with us—at last!"

She said this with an inhalation of the breath; but she did not look at him.

"Take care!" he said, with an unreasonable harshness. "For I forewarn you I am imagining vain things."

"I'm not afraid, somehow."

But she did not look at him. He saw, as with a rending shock, how like the widow of Roderick Taunton was to Winifred Burrell, and unforgotten pulses, very strange and irrational and dear, perplexed him sorely. He debated; and flung aside the cigarette as an outmoded detail of his hobbling part.

"You say I did a noble thing for you. I tried to. But quixotism has its price. To-day I am not quite the boy who did that thing. The man has set his imprint too deep upon us. We served his pleasure. We are not any longer the boy and girl who loved each other."

She waited in the rising twilight with a yet averted face. The entire world was motionless, ineffably expectant, as it seemed to him. And the disposition

of all worldly affairs, the man dimly knew, was very anciently prearranged by an illimitable and, upon the whole, a kindly wisdom.

So that, "My dear, my dear!" he swiftly said. "I don't think I can word just what my feeling is toward you. Always my view of the world has been that you existed, and that some other people existed—as accessories."

Then he was silent for a heart beat, appraising her. His hands lifted toward her and fell within the moment, as it were, in impotence.

She spoke at last, and the sweet voice of her was very glad and proud and confident.

"My friend, remember that I have not thanked you. You have done the most foolish and—the manliest thing I ever knew a man to do, just for my sake. And I have accepted it as though it were a matter of course. And I shall always do so. Because it was your right to do this very brave and foolish thing for me. I know you joyed in doing it. Stourton—you cannot understand how glad I am to know you joyed in doing it."

Their eyes met. I cannot tell you all they were aware of through that moment, because it is a knowledge so rarely apprehended, and even then for such a little while, that no man who has sensed it can remember afterward aught save the splendor and perfection of it.

And yet she looked back once. There was just the tall, stark shaft, and on it "Roderick Taunton." The thing was ominous and vast, all colored like wet gravel, save where the sunlight tipped it with clean silver very high above their reach.

"Come!" she quickly said to Stourton Heleigh. "Come, for I am afraid!"

