

# Carlton's Drive

By Algernon Blackwood

It is difficult, of course, to estimate the effect of such a thing upon another's temperament. The change seemed bewilderingly sudden; yet spiritual chemistry is a process incalculable, past finding out, and the results in this case were undeniable. Carlton had changed in the course of a brief year or two. And he dates it from that drive. He knows.

He told it to a few intimates only. Those who know his face as it is to-day, serene and strong, yet recall how it was scored and beaten with the ravages of dissipation a few years before (so that the human seemed almost to have dropped back into the beast), can scarcely credit his identity. Now—its calm austerity, softened by the greatest yearning known to men, the yearning to save, proclaim at a glance the splendid revolution; whereas *then!* The memory is unpleasant; exceedingly wonderful the contrast. His life was inoffensive enough, negatively, at least, till the money came; then, with the inheritance, his innate sensuality broke out. Yet it seemed a prodigious step for a man to make in so brief a time: from that life of depravity that stained his face and smothered his soul, to the Brotherhood of Devotion he founded, and himself led full charge against the vice of the world! But not incomprehensible, perhaps. He did nothing by halves. It was the swing of the pendulum.

He was somewhere about thirty, his nerves shattered by the savagery of concentrated fast living, his system too exhausted to respond even to unusual stimulant, when he found himself one early spring morning on the pavement beside St. George's Hospital. He had been up all night, and was making his way homewards on foot, his pockets stuffed with the proceeds of lucky gambling; and how he happened to be standing at that particular spot, watching the traffic, at eight in the morning, is not clear. Probably, seduced by the sweetness of the air, he had wandered, driven by gusts of mood as by gusts of wind. Though he had drunk steadily since midnight he was not so much intoxicated as fuddled—stupid. He was on the south corner, where the 'buses stop in their journey westwards. The sun poured a flood of light down Piccadilly; the street was brisk with pedestrians going to work; the hospital side-entrance behind him already astir. Across the road the trees in the park shimmered

in a wave of fluttering green. The pride of life was in the June air. In his own heart, however, was a loathsome satiety—sign of the first death.

In a line with the trees opposite stood a solitary hansom. A faint surprise that it should be there at such an hour jostled in his sodden brain with the idea that he might as well drive home—when, suddenly, he became aware that the man perched on the box was looking at him across the street with a fixity of manner that was both singular and offensive. Carlton felt his own gaze, bleary-eyed and troubled, somehow caught and held—uncomfortably. The other's eyes were fastened upon his own—had been fastened for some time—sinisterly, and with a purpose. Just at this moment, however, a sharp spasm of pain and faintness, due to exhaustion and debauch, shot through him, so that he reeled, half staggering, and, before he quite knew what he was doing, he had nodded to the driver, and saw that the horse was already turning with clattering hoofs to cross the slippery street. A minute later he had climbed heavily in, noticing vaguely that the driver wore all black, the horse was black, and on the whip was a strip of crêpe that fluttered in the breeze. As he got in, too, the effort strained him. But, more than that, something that was cold and terrible—"like a hand of ragged steel," he described it afterwards—clutched at his heart. It puzzled him; but he was too "done" to think; and he lurched back wearily on the cushions as the horse started forward with the jerkiness of long habit.

"Same address, sir?" the man called down through the trap. His voice was harsh "like iron"; and Carlton, supposing that he recognized a fare, replied testily, "Of course, you fool! And let her rip—to the devil!" The spasm of strange pain had passed. He only felt tired to brokenness, sick with his corrupt and unsatisfying life, a dull, incomprehensible anger burning in him against the world, the driver—and himself.

The hansom swung forwards over the smooth, uncrowded streets like a ship with a breeze behind her, for the horse was fresh, and the man drove well. He took off his opera hat and let the cool wind fan his face. That drive of a mile to his rooms was the most soothing and restful he had ever known. But, after a while, braced, perhaps, by the morning wind, he began to notice that they were following a strange route through streets he did not recognize. He had been lolling in the corner with half-closed eyes; now he sat up and looked about him. Time had passed. He ought to have reached home long ago. They were going at a tremendous and unholy pace, too.

He poked open the trap sharply.

"Hi, hi!" he called out angrily; "are you drunk? Where, in the name of—are you driving to?"

"It's all right, sir; it's the shortest way. The usual roads are closed." The man's voice—deep, with a curious rumbling note—had such conviction and authority in it that Carlton accepted the explanation with a growl and flung himself back into his soft corner.

Again, however, for a single second, that cold thing of steel moved horribly in his heart. He felt as if the "ragged hand" had given it another twist. Then it passed, and he gave himself up to the swinging motion of the drive. The hansom tore along now; it was delightful. Curious, though, that *all* the known streets should be "up"! Positively the houses were getting less, as though he was driving out into the country. Perhaps, too, the feeling of *laissez aller* that came over him was caused by some inhibition of the will due to prolonged excesses. Canton admits it was unlike his normal self not to *force* the man to drive where he wanted; but he felt lulled, lazy, indifferent.

"Let the fool take his own way!" his thought ran; "I shan't pay him any more for it!" Somebody was waving to him from the pavement with a coloured parasol—a girl he knew, one of his sort; gay and smiling, tripping along quickly. With a momentary surprise that she should be thus early astir, he smiled through the window and waved his hand. It gave him pleasure to see she was going in the same direction as himself. The instant he passed her the horse leaped forward with increased speed, so that the hansom rattled, shaking him a little as it lurched from side to side.

"Steady on, idiot!" he shouted, "or you'll smash me up before I get to the end!" And he was just going to bang open the trap and swear, when his attention was caught by another salutation from the pavement. It was a man this time—running hard; a man who played, drank, and the rest of it even harder than himself, a man who shared his trips to Paris. He was radiant and gesticulating. "Good journey, old man!" he heard him cry as the hansom shot past; "Hurry up! We're coming, too! We shall be there together!" Canton did not quite like this greeting. It reminded him for a second that he was a bit uncertain where the mad driver was heading for. It gave him a passing uneasiness—almost immediately forgotten, however. The pace was too delicious to bring to an end just yet. Presently he would call the fellow to order with a vengeance, but meanwhile—"let her rip!" His friends were all going the same way; it must be all right. His thoughts, he admits, were somewhat mixed; for great

speed destroys calm judgment; it exhilarated, but it also bewildered. The pace, assuredly, had something to do with his mental confusion, for it was terrific. Yet he saw on the pavement, from time to time, more friends and acquaintances, and somehow at the moment it did not strike him as *too* peculiar that they should be there, all moving hurriedly in the same direction. He had an odd feeling that they all knew of some destination agreed upon; that he, too, knew it; but that it was not "playing the game" to admit that he knew. Yet about some of them—their hurried steps, their gay faces, their waving hands—there was a queer fugitive suggestion of sadness, even of fear. One or two touched the source of horror in him even. It hardly surprised him that the horse, steaming and sweating, should start forward with a frightened leap as each figure in turn was sighted and left behind.

Probably he was himself too much a part of the wild, exhilarating rush to realize how singular it was. Certainly, it seemed as though some faculty of his mind was suspended during that drive.

But at last, after passing another friend, the horse gave a leap that really frightened him, flinging him against the boards. It was a man, twice his own age, who more than any other had helped him in his evil living, not by doing likewise, but by smothering his first remorse with a smile and a sentence: "Of course, my boy, sow your wild oats! You'll settle down later. No man is worth his salt who hasn't sown his wild oats!" He was sliding along—a kind of crawl, with something loathsome in his motion that suggested the reptile. Carlton nodded to him. The same second the horse gave its terrible bound. The whip for the first time slashed down across its flanks. He saw the strip of crêpe, black against the green and sunny landscape. For by now all houses were left behind, and they were rushing at a mad pace along a broad country road, growing momentarily steeper, and—downhill. At the same moment he caught his own face in the glass. To his utter horror he saw that a black veil, crêpe-like, hung over the upper part, already hiding the eyes, and that it was moving downwards, slowly creeping. The hand of steel turned again within him. He knew that it was Death.

Yet, most singular of all, he instantly found in himself the power to believe it was not there.

His hand brushed it off. His face was young, clean, and smiling once more. . . . And now the hansom flew. The horse was running away; he heard the driver shouting to it, and the shouting sounded like a song. The man was drunk after all. Mingled with his song,

too, came a confused murmur of voices behind—far away. What in the world did it all mean? Dashing aside the little curtain he looked back out of the window, and the first thing he saw was a face pressed close against the glass, staring straight into his eyes with a beseeching, pitiful expression. Good God! It was the face of his mother. He swore; the face melted away—and he then saw that the whole country behind him was black, and through it, down the darkened road, ran the figures he had passed. But how changed! The girl was no longer gay and smiling; her face was old, streaked with evil, and with one hand she clutched her heart as she ran—trying in vain to stop. Behind her were the others—worn and broken, with bloodshot eyes and toothless gums, all grinning dreadfully, all racing down the ever-steepening descent, yet all trying frantically to stop. One or two, however, still ran with a brave show as if they wished to; debonair, holding themselves with a certain appearance of dignity and pleasure. And some—the old man of the “wild oats” sentence at their head—were close upon the hansom, *pushing it*. . . The face of his mother slid once again upon the glass, between their evil, outstretched hands and himself, but less close, less visible than before. . . .

Carlton knew a spasm of pain that was terrible. He sat up. He flung open the doors, and his eyes measured the leap. But the faculty of mind that had all the time been in suspension returned a little, and he saw that to jump was—impossible. He smashed the trap open with his fist and cried out, “Stop! I tell you, stop!”

“Can’t stop here, sir,” the driver answered, peering down at him out of the square opening that let in—darkness. “It’s not allowed. It’s not usual, either.”

“Stop, I say,” thundered Canton, trying to rise and strike him.

But the driver laughed through that square of blackness. “Can’t be done, sir. You told me ‘same address.’ There’s no stopping now!” Canton’s clenched fist was close to the man’s eyes when the fingers grew limp and opened. He sank back upon the seat again. The face peering down upon him was—his own.

And in this supreme moment it was that some secret reserve of soul, hitherto untainted—stirred into life, he declares, by the sight of his mother’s face at the window—rose and offered itself to him. He accepted it. *His will moved in its sleep and woke.*

“But I say you *shall* stop!” he cried, catching the reins in both hands, and, when they snapped, seizing the rims, and even the spokes, of the wheels. His great strength acted like a brake. The hansom reeled, shook, then slackened. It was a most curious thing, but the force that twisted his heart with its hand of “ragged steel” seemed to lend him its power. His will moved and gripped; the machinery groaned, but worked. Canton did nothing by halves; he put his life into his efforts; the skin was torn like paper from his hands. The hansom stopped with a trembling jerk and flung him out upon his face in the mud. And the same second he saw the horse and driver, both torn from their fastenings, whirled past him overhead to disappear into a gulf that yawned dreadfully under his very eyes, blacker than night, deeper than all things. . . .

And when, at length, he rose to his feet, he found that he was tied with bands of iron to the shafts. Slowly, with vast efforts, groaning and sweating, he turned and began painfully to reclimb the huge and toilsome ascent, dragging the awful weight behind him . . . towards the Light.

For the glare that suddenly broke through the sky was the sunshine coming through the windows of the hospital room—St. George’s Hospital—where they had carried him when he fainted on the pavement half-an-hour before.

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