

Clipped Hedges

by

Beatrice Redpath

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CLIPPED HEDGES

By BEATRICE REDPATH

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The motor purred along the roads. Mark Wilgress scarcely noticed the country through which he passed; fields spotted with hay ricks; a stretch of wood that threw out a damp smell of rotting ferns and undergrowth; a small red farmhouse overtopped by a huge gray barn; an apple orchard where the fruit was being picked and tossed into scarlet mounds. He was thinking of the speech that he had made that afternoon, at a meeting to investigate certain municipal accounts which required some explanation.



He pushed back his chair with an impulse that he could not suppress; he threw down his napkin and got upon his feet.

It had been a good speech. He was thoroughly aware of that fact. He was looking forward to telling Amy about the meeting; she was always interested in whatever he had to tell her. She liked him to make himself a shade conspicuous, to have men take note of his ability. He wished that she could have been there to have heard him that afternoon.

It was pure inspiration that had made him make use of the simile . . . clipped hedges. Genuine inspiration. He had noticed the hedges around his own property when he was leaving home that morning, noticed how evenly the blue green line cut across the brighter green of the lawns. These trifling things soaked into the subconsciousness of a receptive mind.

He had forced his point by this apt simile. If the clipped hedges with which each man surrounds himself could be torn away, if each man would live so that the public could view his conduct, such things as the

misappropriation of public funds could not be. He had generalised a bit: spoken of the ugly secret's in most men's lives. He had not intended to preach. He was not a sanctimonious ass. He was tolerant enough of most things. He did not care so much what a man did as long as he had the courage to do it openly. But he knew that many men, men who were his friends, men whom he ran across every day, had done things which they would not care to have brought out into the searching light of publicity. There were things in the lives of many men which they were careful to conceal behind the clipped hedges of prosperous living.

He turned the car into the stretch of road leading to his house, and pressed forward on the accelerator. He liked to take this strip of road beyond the legal limit of speed. The car hummed like a huge insect, and he noticed with satisfaction how well the engine was running. He let her out a bit more, and then instantly cold sweat broke from every pore in his body. He jerked the wheel quickly, making the car lurch and swerve, in a mad effort to escape that fragment of blue that had appeared in the road directly before him. And then it had passed, and the motor had swung back into the centre of the roadway, and the steady hum of the engine was in his ears.

He noticed curiously, with a queer disconnected sensation, that his hands upon the steering wheel were trembling. He found it difficult to guide the car between the wide gateway. He tightened his lips together and held the steering wheel steady. That fragment of blue on the roadway!

Absurd! Preposterous! He had swerved in time, just in time. And yet, something very clear and cold in the back of his brain told him to stop, to turn, to go back; at the very least to turn his head and see whether there was a patch of blue lying in the middle of the road, or cast into the ditch. . . . Then panic . . . sweat making his body clammy . . . panic . . . binding his hands to the steering wheel, urging him on.

Was it panic, or just because it had been such a close shave? People who allowed their children to run across the roads deserved, oh, they deserved to have them run over. But then, he hadn't run over the child. He had swerved in time. Just in time.

He drew up at the front of the house and left the car there. He got out and felt his legs wobble under him. He took out his handkerchief and mopped his face, which felt uncomfortably moist. He must find Amy; what

was it that he had wanted to say to her? Something he had wanted to tell her as soon as he got back.

He turned slowly and walked across the lawn. He could see her now playing with the puppy. He had wanted to tell her something and now he had forgotten what it was. He had swerved in time, of course he had; his nerves were really very bad. He felt jumpy and nervous. He would have turned back of course, if he hadn't been so sure.

“That you dear? How did the meeting go off?”

“Oh, there you are. I was just looking for you.”

Of course. It was the meeting that he had wanted to tell her about. His speech. He had made a good speech. Somehow, what he had said seemed blurred now, smudged, like writing on a child's slate. A child's slate whose child anyway? . . . ridiculous to have it running across the road even if he had been going slower there would have been no time to stop no time whatever.

“Yes. What's the matter? Didn't it go off well?”

Amy was staring at him, standing so close that he could see the tiny freckles beneath her eyes. He pulled himself up suddenly, conscious that he was appearing strangely.

“Oh, yes the meeting. Splendid, my dear, splendid. I wanted to tell you about the speech that I made. The point I made was this” He stopped speaking, his eyes riveted on some figures appearing at the foot of the garden. “What's all the fuss about?”

Amy turned, following the direction of his gaze. A maid in a black dress with white streamers flying from her cap, was calling to some men who were coming through the far gate. A woman in a pink cotton dress ran out of the gardener's cottage, and there was a sudden, sharp, terrible scream, that seemed to hang in the air above the flower beds, like some hideous, distorted shape. Amy had turned already and run lightly across the intervening lawn while he followed her unwillingly. He had not reached the group before Amy was back, clinging to his arm, breathless, half sobbing, her eyes dilated with horror.

“The gardener's little girl run over Mark she's dead the poor baby oh, poor Mrs. Robb Mark, come oh, it's too awful!”

So, he had done it after all. He felt as though a cold liquid was being poured through him, stiffening him, turning his blood to ice. The maid with the white streamers stopped as she ran past, and Amy spoke to her.

“Oh, M’am . . . it’s terrible . . . they say four men in a motor were seen to go past . . . it’s them that did it . . . oh . . . the baby . . . if it were anyone but the baby, M’am.” And suddenly she threw her apron up over her head and ran sobbing distractedly back to the group beside the gate.

“Come, Mark,” Amy said, pulling his arm. “Oh, see what you can do for them. Poor souls! I must go to Mrs. Robb. The brutes . . . not even stopping. If they’re caught . . . oh, I hope they’re caught. Fiends like that . . . devils!”

“But . . . my dear . . . I don’t suppose . . . it was their . . . fault.”

“They could have stopped, at least. Not even waiting to see what they had done. Leaving the poor baby there on the road . . . dying. Oh . . . I hope the police get them. Could you believe that there were such fiends?”

Mark Wilgress stood in the little cottage listening to the talk that eddied around him. The women were upstairs with Mrs. Robb. He had seen them carry a still bundle of blue up the narrow stairs, and the cold liquid went on pouring and pouring through his veins. He had done this! And he had not confessed to having done it! If he could only think! Just about fifteen minutes since that blue fragment had appeared from nowhere, directly before him. How could you think about a thing like this in a few minutes; and anyway his brain would not think clearly, hadn’t been able to ever since that instant when he had swerved the car to one side of the road. His limbs had acted for him without any direction from his brain.

Of course when he began to think, he would act. He would tell them that he had run over the child. He must tell them this. Those four men could not be arrested. But he would wait until he had had time to decide just what he would say. He would tell Amy first; explain to her just how it had happened. Explain to her very carefully that he was neither a fiend nor a devil. A man could not be expected to rush forward and declare that he had killed a child before he had had time to think over just what he would say; just how he would explain why he had not turned around, why he had not stopped the car and picked up the child.

It was impossible to make clear to anyone that curious state of panic that had seized him and controlled his limbs. That was impossible to explain to

anyone who had not experienced the same thing. Quite impossible. The average person had to experience something similar before understanding. They could not know that a man's limbs might act for him, without any direction from the brain at such a moment. The brain had simply no time to direct, to control. It was all over too soon. And now he would have to consider it quietly before he could tell anyone that he had run over the child. That it was not the four men whom they suspected of having done it.

As he leaned up against the wall in the narrow house, he seemed to see a small gray rabbit running in a zig-zag maze of clipped hedges. He seemed to be standing watching it as it ran, first in one direction, then in another, between that blue green line of hedges.



It was simply that he had seen himself like a gray rabbit dodging zig-zag around a hedge.

Words spoken directly beside him broke into this curious state of mind.

“Someone may have seen the accident; may have taken the number of the car. We’ll get them all right.”

That remark appeared to send the rabbit zig-zagging off in a new direction. Had anyone seen the accident? A spasm of trembling made him lean more heavily against the wall. Had anyone been on the road at the time? He wondered why this idea made him feel so sick and weak, since it was only a matter of time before he would clear up the whole matter, before he

would tell quite plainly just what had happened. If they would only give him time to think. God! If they would just give him time.

It seemed as though Amy could talk of nothing else but the accident. She discussed it from every angle. She talked continually through dinner, while he made a pretense of eating the excellent roast beef, while the maid with the white streamers on her cap passed the plates, her eyes still reddened with weeping. He could not escape for one moment into himself to think it all out.

“I shouldn’t think it would be hard for the police to find some track of the car,” Amy’s voice went on, “so few cars pass this way. What do you think, dear?”

He mumbled a sort of reply, and then pushing back his chair with an impulse that he could not suppress, he threw down his napkin and got up on his feet.

“What’s the matter?” Amy’s blue eyes were anxious and questioning.

“Nothing. But if you will excuse me I don’t feel too well. It’s so close to-day”

Amy stood up, all commiseration.

“I know you poor boy it’s a dreadful day and then the shock and everything. I feel queer myself. Go and lie down and Katie can bring your coffee into the other room. It’s cooler in there.”

“Never mind about the coffee; I just want to be alone. My head aches.”

If they would only leave him quite alone. The minutes were flying past and still he had come to no decision as to what he should say. If he kept his eyes open, he would see a fragment of blue; if he shut his eyes, that gray rabbit would jump out and run between clipped hedges.

He could not understand about the rabbit. It was so curious, and it fascinated him in a horrible sort of way. He opened his eyes and saw Amy sitting in a chair quite close to him, her hands folded loosely on her yellow dress. The impulse came over him to tell her everything.

“Curious thing whenever I shut my eyes I seem to see a rabbit running between hedges.”

He could see how bewilderment spread over her face. It made her eyebrows fly up like two little black wings.

“This afternoon,” he went on, rather enjoying this dilatory method of confession, “I made a speech a jolly good speech. I spoke about hedges but I don’t understand about the rabbit I seem to be the rabbit why I don’t know. It’s such a furtive little beast. I’m not like that I don’t mean to be furtive.”

Amy stood up.

“Mark! I’m going to send for the doctor. You’re ill. Your face is all flushed, and you’re talking rubbish. Don’t talk any more.”

She bent down and took his arm, pulling him gently. “Come upstairs, I’m going to telephone for Dr. Baines.”

He followed her upstairs quite willingly. That was quite the best thing to do; to go to bed and lie quietly and think it all out. He could not think downstairs with the maid with the red rimmed eyes coming in and out of the room. The house was charged with emotion. He had made a mistake to speak yet. He had only frightened Amy.

The doctor was quite definite and concise in tone.

“You’ve been working too hard through the heat,” he said, standing beside the bed, grave and important in manner. “Relax a bit. You’re running the engine to pieces. You wouldn’t run your car when the engine was all heated up now, would you?” and he smiled with the air as though he were speaking to someone far beneath himself in understanding.

Mark Wilgress turned restlessly on his pillow. Why this continual talk about motors?

“You’ll be all right in a few days,” the doctor went on, preparing to leave, “if you don’t allow yourself to get notions in your head. You are run down and it’s a time that fancies take hold, if you let them.”

Amy had apparently told him about the gray rabbit. He stared at the doctor for a moment, wondering if he would try to explain that the gray rabbit was not a notion at all. It was simply that he had seen himself like a gray rabbit dodging zig-zag around a hedge. No. If he undertook to explain that he would have to explain too much. And he was not ready for that yet. Not until he had had time to think it out.

Each time that the telephone rang he started violently in the bed; and when he could hear the long steady ring of the front door bell, he sat up, straining to hear what was being said downstairs every time. He

imagined the police arriving and accusing him of having killed a child, before he had time to explain; before he had time to tell the thing himself.



Each time the telephone rang, he started violently in the bed.

As he lay there, tossed from one fear to another, suddenly he quite clearly realized that it was too late now to tell the truth. It would be impossible to explain why he had not stopped, impossible to explain why he had not spoken the very instant that he had heard that the child was killed. Oh, simply impossible. But once he had made that fact quite clear and definite, he closed his eyes and the grey rabbit popped out at him, standing with a twisted smile, looking straight at him. Did a rabbit smile? How ridiculous a thing was a man's mind. He wanted peace . . . peace . . . that was all . . . to escape from that furtive little beast which was so curiously himself.

It was three days since the accident. He had just dressed and come downstairs, and as he passed through the hall into the sitting room, he saw Amy sitting there, still in the yellow dress. His thoughts were flung back to the time that he had seen her last sitting there, and to the decision then that he had made to tell her the truth.

He came slowly into the room and sat down heavily in front of her, not noticing the way in which she looked at him, so inquiringly, as though he

were a stranger to her.

“I want to tell you something, my dear,” he said very solemnly, while panic and relief were strangely mingled inside of him. “I must tell you . . . that I ran over that child.”

He saw the quick way in which her eyelids lifted, the expression of alarm on her face. And then she stood up and took his arm in a gentle, sorry fashion.

“Mark, dear . . . you should not have got up. I’ve been talking to the doctor this morning and he advises a trip for your health. You must have change and rest. You are getting all sorts of ideas in your head. Come up and lie down, now.”

He stared at her very hard.

“Don’t you understand?” he repeated clearly, “I killed that child.”

“Dear, please don’t say such absurd things. You must not talk like that. You are going for a nice trip. You’ll get quite well, and forget all these funny notions that you have in your poor tired head.”

He looked at her silently, moistening his lips, but he did not speak. She thought that he was suffering from a serious mental breakdown. They were sending him away until he stopped talking about rabbits and dead children.

He leaned his head wearily against the back of his chair and shut his eyes. The gray rabbit was there . . . it had just popped its head through the hedge for a moment but it could not get out. It had slowly withdrawn its head again. Now it was behind that high blue hedge . . . a dragged, furtive little animal.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

A cover was created for this ebook which is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *Clipped Hedges* by Beatrice Redpath]