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THE MAKER
OF SWANS

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*The
Maker of Swans*

PARAIC O'DONNELL



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I

A Lamentation

One

In the dream, there was nothing. Nothing, and then fire.

It came upon the house with the fury of a sudden storm, a gale of flame that swept the cedars from the lawns and obliterated every window. It flung open the doors and thronged the staircases, possessing rooms with effortless violence. It surged among the hallways, avid and primrose bright, inundating the ballroom, rising in moments even to the chandeliers.

Eustace saw it all, and he did nothing. He stood in the fire's midst, unmoving and somehow unscathed as he waited to be consumed in his turn. He could not see her, the child, could not have hoped to find her in time. He could not see her, and knew she could not call to him.

It was that despair that ruptured his sleep, that flooding grief. When he heard the shots, he had lain awake for some moments already with the bedclothes thrown back, his hand spread on his chest to quieten his heart. He started slightly at the sounds—there were two, in quick succession—but almost welcomed the distraction. Eustace was accustomed enough to gunshots. They were not quite usual, perhaps, but they caused him no particular alarm. But the dream—the dream had been another matter. He could not remember when he had last felt such dread.

He clawed at the nightstand for the chain of his watch and found, when he had wrung the dimness from his eyes, that it was a shade after one. It might have been worse. His duties were often irregular, and it was not rare for him to be called from his bed at unpardonable hours. Still, he did not welcome such disturbances. The years of his service had done nothing to soften them.

Wearily, but with the smooth economy of long habit, he rose and drew a dressing gown about him. The house, even in these last days of October, was wretchedly cold. The great drapes, as he parted them, were heavy with damp. They would, even at noon, betray almost nothing of their original colour. There was little here that did.

He saw the Jaguar first. He had left the lamps lit on the avenue, and the car was a little way beyond the fountain, whose pair of stone dragons reared above it, mossy and hugely opposed. It had been brought to a halt, Eustace judged, from a considerable speed, and with no great excess of deliberation, veering from the driveway before returning to it, and gouging an almost elegant scroll of turf from the lawn. The driver's door was open, the interior spilling a yolky light.

Mr. Crowe—for of course it was him—had taken a position astride the car's bonnet. His legs were planted staunchly apart, his cloak swelling and snapping in the breeze. From this vantage, he commanded the avenue northwards to the gates, in which direction he appeared to be bellowing. When a second set of headlights appeared, in the darkened parkland beyond the fountain, he gave emphasis to his address with a volley from a pair of pistols. Eustace knew those guns. Mr. Crowe had collected them at the card table from a brigadier general who had been

left insensible by a stroke. They had first seen service against the Boers, sixty-odd years before, and were capable now of little more than a healthy racket.

The other car flared fully into view, pulling up with some violence only a little way short of the Jaguar, so that Mr. Crowe was forced to raise an arm against the glare of its headlights. Its sole occupant was a bearded and wary figure whose leather coat had been cut for a bigger man. He emerged with a considerable show of animation, only to retreat behind his car door when Mr. Crowe again opened fire.

Eustace yawned and scratched one cheek. As his attention returned to the Jaguar, he noticed for the first time that it held a passenger, a young woman. His gaze had been drawn by her movements—she was winding down the passenger-side window—and by the colour of her dress, which announced itself even at this distance.

It was a remarkable red, almost exultant. In a house like this, living always amid an ancient and untouchable drabness, you seized upon colours. Your eye was snared by them. The only other such colours that Eustace saw were those of the fruit that Mr. Crowe would want on those occasions—they were infrequent now—when he would set his mind upon some lavish entertainment, when he would assemble a houseful of showgirls and disreputable peers, insisting that no extravagance be spared.

On such evenings, there was always fruit in plenty. It would go all but untouched, but it was never stinted upon. Grapes lay on salvers in bloated and dusty heaps, liver-dark or the green of new oak leaves. Plump figs, tawny and oozing, were piled splendidly in crystal bowls. And the nectarines—Eustace was always taken by

them—these would be massed in wide dishes of pewter, tumbling in lush avalanches onto the surrounding linen. They seemed, on some part of their voluptuous surfaces, to exemplify every imaginable red: here coral or fox blood, there cinnabar or claret, chrysanthemum or rust.

Having lowered her window, the woman in the red dress hoisted herself, with the sluggish ceremony of those drunk on wine, to a seated position on its frame. Thus established, she lit a cigarette and rested her cheek on the dark lustre of the Jaguar's roof. The back of her dress was cut in a deep delta, baring a tongue of tenderly shadowed skin.

Mr. Crowe crouched for a moment. With the extremity of one pistol, he traced the knotted sequence of her spine. He plucked the cigarette from her fingers, wolfing and releasing a lungful of smoke before returning it. Finally, he placed a kiss on his fingertips, delivering it to her cheek before rising regretfully to his feet.

The bearded man, during this interlude, had crossed most of the distance between the two cars. Eustace had marked him already, coming by way of the grass so as not to give the warning of his footfalls. Mr. Crowe, when he saw him, set about reloading his pistols, hurling at his adversary some expressions of derision that Eustace could not hear.

The other man paid little attention. He seemed intent only on the woman, directing at her some harsh words of his own. When she ignored him, or answered only with a toss of her head, he began to taunt her, snatching at her hair with a clawed hand. She turned to him, finally, and blew a contemptuous plume of smoke over his face. Then she spat, precisely and copiously, at his feet.

Eustace took a quick breath. This would not end well.

The bearded man stared at the ground as if he doubted the physical truth of the insult. When he raised his eyes, the reason was gone from them. His chest rose and shuddered, as if some inner binding had been ruptured.

He slapped her face. It was a mean and unsparing blow, given with the heel of his hand. She fell forward, stunned, and slumped from the car door. Lowering herself out onto her hands, she crouched against the Jaguar. Mr. Crowe leapt from where he stood, his cloak spreading behind him. The other man could no longer be seen.

Eustace swore softly and let the curtain fall.

He let his pace slacken as he clattered down the front steps. He was too late, of course. That much had been evident the moment he hauled open the great oak doors, though he had hardly expected it to be otherwise. His living quarters were on the second floor, chosen for their remoteness from the grand rooms below. Even twenty or thirty years earlier, he would not have closed the distance in time.

In other respects, Mr. Crowe was a man of easeful habits, and never more so than in these last years. He would be unhesitating, though, in response to a provocation like the one Eustace had witnessed. His ferocity would be ungovernable. Whatever had happened, it had happened swiftly. It had been over, in all likelihood, by the time Eustace had reached the head of the stairs.

As he crossed the gravel towards the drive, he slowed further, allowing some evenness to return to his breathing. He took in what he could of the scene, on the avenue before him and in the surrounding

shadows. The contours of what had taken place were already plain, but there were things he must discover quickly, particulars without which he could make no reckoning of its consequences. He could not yet tell what this might bring to their door.

The cars, the Jaguar and its meek counterpart by the fountain, sat idling, their doors splayed. The woman in the red dress crouched below the window, her head lowered to her knees. Mr. Crowe had dropped to his haunches. He held her to himself with one arm, his head canted sorrowfully towards hers. He was singing to her, Eustace realised as he drew nearer, his tone tender and indistinct. He could not be sure of the aria.

The bearded man lay where he had fallen. Mr. Crowe's cloak had been cast over him with no particular ceremony. One foot protruded, and a trouser leg was hoisted above a white haft of shin.

Mr. Crowe had heard him approaching. When Eustace was twenty paces away, he raised his right arm in a gesture that was half an acknowledgement, half a warning. In that hand, he held one of the pistols still, but loosely; the trigger guard rested on two upturned fingers. The gun was not part of the gesture. Eustace took its meaning from elsewhere; from the stark tension of the upraised arm, the way it was held opposite to the woman. He was encircling her, it said, in his protection, sequestering what had occurred here. Mr. Crowe was turning him away.

Eustace knew all the forms of deference. He observed them, for the most part, with an almost unseen grace. He knew much else also, too much to be so easily deflected. He disregarded Mr. Crowe's raised arm, coming to a halt with a brisk snap of his heels. His impatience, as he surveyed the scene, was thinly glazed with calm.

‘The cars must be attended to first,’ he said. ‘The lights, at least. May I take it that the field day has concluded?’

Mr. Crowe gestured again with that right hand. A brief, dismissive flicker.

‘Who called you out, Eustace? I did not. I am in conversation.’

‘You are in the middle of the avenue, sir. As is the lady, who must forgive my disadvantage in having no means to address her. Shots have been fired—quite a number. The cars, the lights—these things must be attended to.’

Mr. Crowe loosened the muscles of his neck and massaged the bridge of his nose with an unoccupied finger. ‘This is Arabella, Eustace, who performs at *L’Étoile*, though her gifts are squandered in that place.’

The woman did not look up. She hunched her shoulders slightly, as if suppressing a shiver.

‘I am delighted to make Miss Arabella’s acquaintance. I would be glad to see that she is made comfortable in the drawing room.’

When Mr. Crowe responded by resuming his singing, Eustace persisted. ‘The fire has been banked down,’ he said, ‘but it will draw out the worst of the chill. The lady has suffered a shock.’

Mr. Crowe broke off. For a moment, he looked away in silence, his jaw stiff. ‘You never loved music, Eustace, or the fires that give rise to it.’

‘I have not, I hope, ever much burdened Mr. Crowe with the matter of what I love or do not.’

Since this elicited no answer, Eustace paused to summon what delicacy he could.

‘The young man, sir. Perhaps there is something that may be done for him.’

Mr. Crowe looked up, at last. His locks, never excessively tended, were in wild disorder. His face, with its strong juts and faint skew, was smirched—with oil and gunpowder, at least, and likely with much else. He seemed, as he spoke, to labour against some agitation in himself.

‘Eustace, will you not be told with gentleness? I did not call you. Let me tend to these private matters.’

‘These private matters, if we do not prevent it, will not remain so for long. We know well enough the difficulties that may follow such disturbances. The young man, Mr. Crowe. What is to be done for the young man?’

Mr. Crowe stood. It cost him some effort and discomfort, but he was roused and managed it quickly. He brought Arabella to her feet too, supporting her beneath her elbows. His courtliness had been eroded a little by his impatience. Towards Eustace, certainly, his manner was unvarnished.

‘Nothing is to be done for him, do you hear me? There is nothing to be done.’

He started towards the house. He would have marched there in fury, Eustace knew, if he did not have the girl to tend to. Fury or no, however, this could not lie until the morning. What must be done, whatever little advantage was to be saved from this, it fell to him.

‘The young man, sir.’ Eustace made no move to follow them. When he spoke, he gave a careful weight to his words. ‘What is done cannot be undone, but we must make certain arrangements, if we are not to invite further unpleasantness.’

When this brought no response, Eustace spoke more plainly.

‘Am I to leave him where he lies, then? Sir, as a matter of decency—’

Mr. Crowe turned fiercely. He had hardened his features, though they were crossed by an unruly spill of hair. The woman, momentarily overlooked, seemed slight as she steadied herself by his side. He could make himself imposing still, when he was moved to it.

'Decency, Eustace? Decency?' He swung his free arm towards the form beneath the cloak. 'What did that son of a whore know of *de-
cency*, who accosted me on my own lands like a brigand, who raised his hand against such a creature as this? I have dispatched him in the manner he deserved. Do you expect me to deliver a eulogy?'

Eustace said nothing.

'And you, Eustace—you were not always so punctilious in attending to the dead. Do not presume to lecture me.'

He was about to speak, but clamped his jaw to prevent himself. He looked away, shaking his head.

'Well, Eustace? You wish to interrogate me no further, then? We are free to go?'

He said nothing, keeping his eyes averted. Mr. Crowe turned away with a grunt, and began lurching again towards the house, still somewhat encumbered by his companion. Negligently, he discarded the pistol that he still held, tossing it out across the dark lawn. Eustace marked the place.

'Our aria, my love.' Mr. Crowe gave his attention again to his companion. 'It is an act of insufferable philistinism not to finish an aria that one has begun. Do you not agree? Come, we will conduct you to safety. And not merely safety, eh? For we have not abandoned all sport. We are not barbarians, after all.'

They trudged towards the house and its almost unlit majesty. Mr. Crowe growled through what remained of the aria.

‘Ah, cielo! Si può! Si, può morir!’

Eustace crossed towards the gun. He would retrieve it before he lost its position.

‘Di più non chiedo, non chiedo.’

Underfoot, the grass had begun to thicken with frost. The pistol would already be touched by it.

‘Si può morir! Si può morir d’amor.’

The cars too, when he stilled their motors. Over everything, there would be a gauze, a skin of cold.