

My Mysterious Neighbors

By Mrs. M.A. Denison

THEY had the room next to mine. My boardinghouse was one of a row—all boardinghouses, where the same carts came, all in a row, too, with meat and vegetables; where the landladies sometimes stood—all in a row—all in caps—to inspect the interior of said carts.

My landlady was decidedly the best looking of the whole. Most of them wore (as my brother once facetiously observed) “an air of pinch,” as if hard times had turned an extra screw on them, as indeed everything about them had an extra something—except their tables.

As I said before, or should have said, my mysterious neighbors had the next room to mine. They came in a carriage, the lady closely veiled, and when we sat all agog at the supper table expecting to meet them face-to-face—expecting to have the exquisite pleasure of passing our comments on the color of their eyes and the style of their general make-up—lo and behold! We did not see them at all—for they took supper in their own room. The next day and the next they absented themselves in the same way, not only at supper, but at breakfast and dinner, and finally we ascertained that they did not intend to be on exhibition for our benefit. Of course, we did not like it; we could not be expected to like it. We received our share of inquisitorial inspection, and wanted to put others through the same course of—vegetable tops.

Very well, if they avoided their fellow boarders in that style, it was very likely, yes, it was more than probable that they were no better than they should be.

“A runaway match,” suggested one.

“A couple of spiritualists—free lovers,” chimed in another.

“Something wrong, anyway,” said a third, and there we left it, satisfied that something was wrong, of course.

Day after day, I tried to get a glimpse of this mysterious couple. Sometimes I saw *him* come in, though it was always at that interesting time just before the hall lamps were lighted, and an indistinct figure passed by, whose immense whiskers and bushy beard suggested a resemblance to Kossuth. Once or twice I saw her. She had a beautiful figure, further than that this deponent saith not.

Our boardinghouse was an old building—the whole square was decrepit—whose large rooms contained more comfort in the way of air and breathing space, than the new-fangled edifices they put up nowadays have in their whole interiors. I had a front chamber, which to make as much like a parlor as possible and divest of all the commonplaces of boarding life, I had fitted up with a bedstead that took the shape of a well filled secretary during the day. There I wrote, read and dreamed in a quiet, contented way, except when thoughts of my mysterious neighbors forced themselves on me.

One night as I took my bed from the perpendicular, I felt a cold current of air rush past me. It was as cold as the month—January—and although the room was kept up to a temperate heat, it seemed to blow steadily, that cold rush, and tingle through my veins. Scanning closely, I saw a small aperture, which I had never noticed before. I was satisfied as I examined it, that by some means I had opened a sliding panel, and I tried to increase the space, but it would not budge an inch, one way or the other. Determined to inspect more thoroughly on the morrow and satisfied that—what had often been declared—my boardinghouse was really haunted, I stuffed the crevices with paper, and composed myself to rest. I heard the clock strike twelve; I had been sitting up unusually late, and was just conscious of gliding into a doze, when there seemed to be voices close to my head. In a moment I was wide awake, sitting bolt upright in bed, for these were the ominous words I heard:

“You know you held him till his breath was gone.”

“Well, it was your wish. Such a thought would never have entered my head but for you.”

“My wish! You cruel wretch!”

“Yes, your wish; your expressed wish. Was I not to take you to wife as my reward? Better it had taken me to the halter.”

“Be easy on that score,” said the feminine voice, “it may carry you there yet.”

“I wish no taunts, madam; if I go you go too, sure as—” The word need not be written here, but at that moment I felt as if the place signified was very near. My blood curdled. Was I living day by day next to a murderer—to a brace of murderers? Suppose they should take a fancy to hold some of their neighbors till *their* breath was gone? The voice of the woman was wondrous sweet—that of the man harsh and unmusical; both were low. There seemed to come after that, penitence, a soft whispering of words, and then, for a moment there was silence.

“Pshaw!” I said to myself, “I have been dreaming. The excitement of finding a panel in the room like those in old the stories, has bewitched my brain. This will do for a romance. I’ll get up and take notes. Hist!” There it was again, the same murmurous sound.

“Will you give me the ring now, Letsdale—the one, I mean, with the three garnets and the small diamond in the centre? There are more rings like that in the world, besides, he bought it for me.”

“Perdition! Why do you keep talking of him? Don’t you know walls have ears? Woman, keep your tongue!”

“Nonsense, I do not fear; fear is not in my composition. I looked around after it was done, mercy, I never saw such a face; it was more frightful than his. I, on the contrary, smiled because it was over.”

“Great Heaven! Is this to be my punishment? What in the name of Deity has set your thoughts running that way tonight, of all nights?”

“Because, perhaps, it is just three months this hour since you held him under water.”

“Perdition! I should forget it if you would let me.”

“But I won’t, till I have the ring and certainly one half of the five thousand. If, as you say, I shared in the work, I ought surely to share in the profits. That ring cost three hundred dollars, and I want it before we go.”

“A foolish vanity, woman; let us sell it. Three hundred dollars would pay our passage to Europe, and there’s so much clear gain. Absurd! To wear three hundred dollars on your finger.”

“Absurd, to risk your life for a pitiful sum like that. I tell you that I have set my heart upon having that ring, and I *will* have it. They told me of your miserly habits. ‘Miserly!’ said I, ‘wait till he gets me; I think his disposition will change very soon.’”

“Change! You would make the devil blacker,” growled the other, fiercely. “If I had the courage to finish him—remember—”

“That you have the means to dispatch me. Don’t think I shall accept the invitation of you ask *me* to a moonlight boatride—and there is no other means quite so secret. Will you give me the ring?”

“Woman, will you be quiet? Don’t you know the whole name is there, Eugene Mayfield? Would you ruin yourself?”

“Why, no. I think it would be safer on my finger than in the hands of a Jew-pedler, who might possibly know how to read. Eugene A. Mayfield, you mean—don’t you know A. stood for Augustus? Come now, be magnanimous, say that you will give it me, and half of the five thousand beside. I promise you, if you will do this, never to mention the circumstance to you again, or to speak even his name. But remember I shall be satisfied with nothing less.”

“Will not the ring satisfy you?”

“No; not alone.”

“The ring, say then, and one thousand?”

“No; nothing less than the ring and two thousand five hundred. I am not going to Europe like a beggar.”

“But I have already given you a splendid wardrobe.”

“It will be out of fashion there.”

“Wait till tomorrow—I will decide it then.”

“You are cunning. What if you took it into your head to run off with the whole?”

“Bah, do you think I would go without you, most peerless of women?”

“Bah, back again. I think I understand a sneer. I ought to by this time,” was the reply.

“Give me an hour to sleep on it then.”

“No, not a moment. I want the key of the green desk immediately. I am going now to strike a light.”

Then followed a bustle, a springing to the floor, a moving cautiously with hands, and then a sound as if a friction match had been rubbed. It seemed as if the very smell of brimstone floated towards me.

It took some time to realize what had actually transpired. I had been so horror-struck, so at times almost furious at their cool, deliberate villainy, and their heartless comments, that I longed to give a smart blow on the panel, as an evidence that I heard them. But prudence prevented me. I sat in bed, bolt upright, thinking. The papers I had torn from the crevice that I might listen more readily strewed the pillow in confusion. I was very cold, exposed constantly to that icy current of air, but I did not heed that. I had no doubt that a real murder had been committed, and after a long deliberation with myself, I got up softly, mended the fire, and sitting at my table, wrote off what was indelibly stamped upon my memory.

It was now the eighth of January; therefore on the eighth of November, exactly three months ago, a man named Eugene A. Mayfield was in some manner exposed to death by drowning, and held under water by the man who was my next door neighbor, till life was gone. I wrote the particulars about the ring and the money, and then marked out my course. Hearing nothing more, I went the next morning to my cousin, an eminent lawyer, and laid the case before him. To my surprise, he had known Mayfield, and was under the impression that he had gone some time ago to England. Once, he said, he had transacted a little business for him, and he remembered his appearance perfectly. He thought it was right for me to attend to the matter, and advised me to communicate immediately with officer Webb, a competent detective, who would not fail to ferret out the mystery. “By all means,” he said, “see to it as quickly as possible, for there is no knowing how soon they may start, and that will make more trouble.”

At the breakfast table next morning, it was the unanimous opinion of the company that I looked a little “stewed.” Miss Court, a sour-visaged single lady, smiled sideways into her tea, as she remarked that “perhaps I hadn’t slept well.”

“Ah, he was out too late,” cried Major Jolly, whose two bluff daughters tried to blush. “These girls, these girls! Mr. Morrison, they play the dickens with the young men’s hearts.”

“I’ll defend him;” it was my pleasant-faced landlady who came to my assistance – “to my certain knowledge he was not out of the house last night.”

“And how with that pretty daughter of yours?” asked the major slyly.

“For shame!” said little Abby—she *is* a sweet girl—blushing crimson (she had no paint to blush through), while her mother deigned not to speak.

I am not vain, but I think Abby would have married me in a moment at that time, and perhaps the neat widow would have given her heart and hand to the major; *perhaps*, I said. I bore their bantering with the air of a man who has heavier business on his hands than attending to jokes.

“What time do your—do the folks upstairs breakfast?” I asked of my landlady, Mrs. Upshur.

“La! You’re as solemn as an owl. Mr. Wells—excuse me; they don’t breakfast till half-past nine. Mary is making their coffee now.”

“And does he—does the gentleman go out before breakfast?”

“La! Mercy no; he’s too well off I guess to work for a living, though to be sure he’s gone all day. But what makes you so particular?”

“I have my reasons—I mean curiosity prompted me to inquire. Never mind, Mrs. Upshur. By the way, where is Miss Abby? Will she hem a couple of handkerchiefs for me, do you think?”

“Certainly, with pleasure. Doesn’t she hem beautifully?”

“Indeed she does; she’s a most remarkable girl, Mrs. Upshur.”

Having thus diverted the widow’s mind from my mysterious neighbors, I went up into my room and made a signal at the window. Thereupon a man wrapped up to the chin, the visor of his bearskin cap almost touching his immense, upturned collar, came into my boardinghouse, and was soon closeted with me. I showed him the aperture, which had not been closed, and which I took good care to keep from discovery.

“They are stirring,” said Welsh, in a whisper.

I trembled from head to foot, but he was as calm and collected as if he had been going to take breakfast instead of a brace of murderers.

“I’ll give them time to dress and sit down to breakfast,” said Welsh. “The sheriff will be here immediately, and we three will surprise them at the table; there is nothing like taking a man off his guard, especially if there is anything cowardly about him.”

Very soon I had another visitor—two, I should say. The sheriff brought his brother along. The decisive moment came. We saw Mary the servant take the coffee in their room, and come out again. She started at the question:

“My good girl, do they sit with their backs or their faces to the door?”

The question had to be repeated.

“Their backs are this way,” she replied, gave us one earnest look; and then rushed down the stairs.

The door was opened slowly and noiselessly, and almost before they had turned their heads they were arrested for the murder of Eugene A. Mayfield on the eighth of November.

“My God! How did they know?”

Her question condemned her. Her white cheeks and large, hollow eyes almost starting from their sockets, condemned her. The man was a ghastly white as she – his pale lips blundered out:

“I deny it! It is false!”

The woman—I pitied her. I do not know but what my sympathy was strongly enlisted because she was so supremely beautiful. I think in all my travels I never saw a lovelier face. I could not bring myself to realize that this was she who had talked so calmly so resolutely of a foul deed. Her aspect of extreme terror haunted me long after. She could not command either her features or her limbs, but almost grovelled on her seat. They were driven to jail.

Three months after this, the man on the woman’s confession was condemned to death. A coward at the last, she doomed her companion in guilt to the hangman’s rope. It seemed that in substance the story was as follows:

Julia Weeks was married to Mayfield, an Englishman with no connections in this country. They were to travel soon, when by some chance, Letsdale became acquainted with Julia, and a guilty passion, which they wickedly called love, sprang up between them. Mayfield had money; Letsdale had none. Little by little the guilty pair lost all shame, and finally they plotted the death of the unsuspecting and good-hearted Mayfield. They planned to go a journey together. They crossed a river, and when they had arrived at the place where the current ran with furious swiftness to the sea, Letsdale knocked his friend overboard, and then, like a fiend he was, to prevent him from saving himself, he held him under water till he was dead. The solemn heavens alone knew where the poor drenched body was carried. It was probably never found.

Letsdale was hung. The guilty woman escaped death, but not imprisonment. I visited her once in her cell. Her face was changed; it was demonic. She cursed me with terrible maledictions.

I still retain my chamber at the old boardinghouse. The panel is permanently replaced, and a pretty woman hemming a very fine ruffle, occupies my twin armchair. She is my wife, and her first name is Abby.

Published in
Flag of Our Union October 30, 1858

Ballou’s Dollar Monthly Magazine January, 1859