

*Leaf the Twenty Fourth*  
*The Mystery of Darewood Hall*  
by John Williams

SOME months ago, while crossing Broadway, I fancied that I saw before me an old friend whom I had known many years before. I ran up to him, and it was as I expected. His name was George Elliot, and he had been a college chum of mine. I had not seen him for a long time. When I first became acquainted with him, he was the picture of health; but now I was grieved to see that all his former robustness had disappeared, and his whole appearance indicated very indifferent health. Of course, I offered him the hospitality of my house, which he at once accepted. After we had dined and were seated before a cheerful fire, I inquired of him what had occasioned the great change in his appearance. He drew nearer to the fire, and in a singularly musical voice, told me the extraordinary story. Did I not know the friend's unimpeachable character for veracity, I should hesitate to lay it before the public. I shall make no further preface, nor attempt any explanation of the phenomenon witnessed by him, but give it to the reader in my friend's own words.

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Soon after graduating in the Columbia college, New York, I accepted a situation as tutor in a family who lived near Columbia, in South Carolina. The compensation offered me was very liberal, and I thought myself fortunate in procuring so eligible a situation. After several days' travel I reached my destination, and was soon installed in my new home. My pupils were two boys—the elder, twelve, and the younger nine. They were very diligent, and made rapid progress in their studies. I was treated with great kindness and consideration by the members of Mr. Clare's family, and my time passed very agreeably.

Mr. Clare was a planter, and possessed great wealth. His family consisted of himself, his wife, the two sons I have just referred to, and a daughter, eighteen years of age.

Ada Clare was one of the most beautiful young girls I had ever seen. Her hair was soft brown, while her eyes were a dark hazel. Her form was exquisitely moulded, and her handsome features were not only faultless, but revealed high intellectual culture. She had a beautiful mind, which was filled only with the highest aspirations—no groveling thoughts ever obtaining an entrance there.

It is scarcely to be wondered, that isolated as I was in that lone house, I should be attracted to Ada Clare. We were necessarily thrown much together, and I could but admire her high intellectual attainments. There was a communion of thought and feeling between us which soon generated into love. One day—how well I remember it—I took her hand in mine, and poured into her ear a flood of impassioned eloquence, in which I revealed my love. The looks she gave me when she turned her face to mine, and with tears of happiness in her eyes, is deeply engraven on my heart—I see it always. I need scarcely say I was accepted, and it was decided that I should at once explain the position of matters to her father.

But the happiness of knowing that I was beloved by Ada, made me defer the explanation day after day. Oh, that happy, happy time! It was the glorious summer of my life. After my labors of

the day were over, we would wander in the various pretty walks in the neighborhood, and build up Utopian dreams for the future. When the shade of evening came on we would sit down on some rustic bench, and with my arm encircling her taper waist, we would gaze on the wondrous sky, and endeavor to read our destiny in the rolling orbs above us. A strange superstition seized us—we each chose a favorite star and called it after ourselves. She chose the white star in the constellation of the “Harp”—Lyra. We would sit and watch it for hours together. It is a pure star—as pure as her own virgin soul, and even now when I gaze upon it, I feel as if she were looking down upon me from her abode of bliss. You may call it childishness, but not a single clear night passes without my holding communion with my lost Ada through her star. But to my story.

Days, weeks, months passed away, in the intoxication of my love. To say that I adored her would be but to feebly express my feelings; there are no words in the English language sufficiently strong to paint one tithe of my devotion for that angel of purity and goodness. At last I summoned up courage and went to her father, and opened my whole heart to him. He listened to me very attentively and quietly, and told me he would give me an answer that same evening.

How anxiously I waited for the time—no one but those who have loved as madly as I did can form any idea. At last the time came, and he called me into the parlor, and made known to me his determination. He spoke to me very kindly, and while he did not positively discountenance my proposal, he stated that he thought Ada was too young to enter into a decided engagement, and made known his intention of sending her on a visit to a sister of his who lived at a place called Darewood Hall, a short distance from Wilmington, in North Carolina. She would there have an opportunity of seeing the world, as his sister led a very fashionable life, and received a great deal of company; if, after a year’s probation, Ada should remain in the same mind, he would offer no further objection. He concluded by informing me that his daughter would leave the next day, as he did not think it necessary that a letter should be sent to announce her intended visit. Invitations had been extended so often that her arrival would not take them by surprise.

I will not attempt to portray the anguish of mind I experienced at the thought of this separation. I was consoled, however, with the reflection that a year would soon pass away, and I felt so certain of Ada’s constancy that I already considered her as mine forever.

That night our last interview took place. Every word that was uttered, every look bestowed upon me is as vividly present in my memory today, as if the interview had taken place an hour ago. It was a glorious autumnal evening. The sky was decked with its myriads of burning gems, among which shone the star of my beloved brighter than all. We sat down on the old rustic bench, and in low sad voices spoke of our separation. The thought of our meeting again after the year’s probation soon raised our spirits, and in anticipation of the future we forgot the present.

“George,” said Ada, after a pause in our conversation, “is it not the soul that lives in us?”

“Certainly, Ada,” I returned.

“Then why can there not be a union of soul between us—in that event, death cannot ever separate us.”

The strangeness of the idea made me think, and the more I reflected the more feasible I thought the compact. We then lifted up our hands to the blue arch above us, and made a vow that we would be true to each other body and soul, and that even death should not lessen our love. We further agreed that whoever should die first, the other should appear to the survivor. This strange oath appeared to be all that was wanting to dissipate the feeling of anxiety at our approaching separation. We conversed more calmly after it; at last the time arrived for us to part. I drew her frantically to my breast, and imprinted a thousand kisses on her rosy lips.

The next day, at an early hour, she took her departure, and I was left alone. I do not know how the next few days passed: I only know I wandered about the house and grounds like one bereft of all hope. Vague anxieties which I had not experienced while she was present agitated me, and an inward dread of some impending misfortune took possession of my heart.

One night, a week after Ada had left me, I wandered in the garden alone, and cast up my eyes to her star. The sky was beautifully clear, and the stars shone with peculiar brilliancy; but a strange change had taken place in the white Lyra—*it was blood red!* At first I could not believe my eyes, and shielded them for a moment with my hand—I looked again, but there it was shining with a red lustre. At that moment one of my pupils entered the garden.

“Ernest,” said I, pointing out the star to him, “do you see that star?”

“Certainly,” he replied, “you have often shown it to me—it is Lyra in the constellation of the Harp.”

“What color is it, Ernest?”

“It is a pure white.”

“And yet to my eyes it appeared a deep bloody red!”

I tried to persuade myself it was some hallucination of my senses. I looked at the other stars; they all shone with their natural color.

I returned slowly to the house—my mind distracted with evil forebodings, and my heart oppressed with vague fears. What could this strange circumstance mean—was it a warning—was it Ada’s soul speaking to me through her star? I retired to bed, and tossed about several hours, unable to sleep. At last I fell into an uneasy slumber. I was suddenly awakened by a shriek—a shriek so piercing that it still rung in my ears when I assumed a sitting posture. I thought at first it was only some hideous dream; but this idea was dissipated by a recurrence of a shriek still more terrible than before. I distinctly recognized Ada’s voice, and jumped from the bed in a state of mind impossible to be described. I rushed to the window—the sound of that dear loved voice appeared to be borne on the breeze until it was lost in the far off distance. I mechanically gazed

on the star of my beloved. It still continued the same hideous color, but there was a dark sharp-pointed cloud in its vicinity, to which my heated imagination gave the form of sword or dagger.

It was rapidly approaching my beloved star, and in another instant it had hidden it from sight. At the moment of conjunction, another fearful shriek saluted my ears, as distinctly as if uttered by someone in the chamber. I could not disobey this third warning, but hastily packing my carpet bag, and leaving a note on my dressing table, informing my employer that particular business called me away, I left by the omnibus, which started at an early hour in the morning for Columbia. From thence I took the cars to North Carolina, and by traveling night and day reached Wilmington in two days.

Darewood Hall was situated about fifteen miles from this town, and I hired a horse to convey me there. It was late in the evening when I arrived, and I was immediately struck with the desolate appearance of the house. There was not a single light to be seen in any of the windows, and the carriage-way to the house was overgrown with thick and rank weeds. I advanced to the hall door, and knocked long and loudly, but received no reply. Now thoroughly alarmed, I directed my steps to some neighboring negro huts. Here I obtained information which somewhat reassured me; for I was told that the family had been absent for three months on a visit to the North, and I was further informed that no visitor had been there; in fact, that the house was shut up. I then thought that Ada, by some means, must have learned in Wilmington that her aunt was absent from home, and having numerous friends there, had stayed with them until her relatives should return. Reassured by the reflection, I was about to retrace my steps to Wilmington, when some influence which I cannot explain made me return to the hall. I walked round it, and found that the door situated at the back part of the building was open. The same irresistible influence made me enter the house; and I visited every room. The furniture appeared in considerable disorder, and an accumulation of dust was visible on everything. The last room I entered was a bedroom, in which the bed appeared not to have been made since the last person slept in it. A strange feeling, which I could not define, came over me when I entered this chamber; it seemed as if I had seen it before, and that all the objects in it were familiar to me. Whilst examining this apartment, I could hear the wind howling outside the house, and in a few minutes the rain came pattering against the roof in large heavy drops. I glanced out of the window, and saw it had set in wet for the night. I therefore determined that I would sleep there, and return in the morning to Wilmington. I threw myself, dressed as I was, on the bed, and the fatigue and want of rest from which I had suffered, soon caused me to fall into a deep slumber.

How long I slept I know not, but I was awakened by the sound of footsteps. I opened my eyes, and the moon's rays were streaming in the window, by which fact I knew that the weather had cleared up. I glanced round the room, but saw no one, and yet I heard the pattering of feet; but the sound appeared to come from an adjoining chamber. I was in the act of rising from the bed, when I saw some object darkening the doorway. It advanced slowly forward until the moonbeams shone directly upon it. Great God! what was my horror to recognize Ada—*my* Ada! but so white, so ghastly, that my blood froze in my veins. As she stood there, she pointed to a spot on her breast, which to my horror I saw was red and dripping with blood. I have often asked myself since that fearful night, if this was merely a vision or a reality, and I am compelled to state that it was all real.

I made a spring towards her for the purpose of clasping her in my arms, but stretching forth both hands, she made me a motion to stop. I obeyed her gesture, then an ineffable smile moved her lips, and she raised her hands to heaven. She then stretched her hands toward the door, and waved them as if wishing me to follow. I obeyed, and she passed out of the house, down the stairs, through the back entrance, and led the way over some fields. At last I saw some water shining through some trees, and in another minute we came to the banks of a large river, the existence of which I was unaware before. We proceeded some distance along the banks until we came to a small triangular piece of ground, which was covered all over with thick sedge grass. Ada glided through this grass until she reached the centre of the plot. She pointed to one particular spot, and again smiling sweetly on me, she pointed to heaven and disappeared.

The moon rendered everything distinct, and I could see the ground which she had pointed had been recently disturbed. I looked about for something to dig with, and found a short distance from the spot a spade, which bore evidence of having been recently used. I immediately began to dig, and had soon made a considerable hole. My spade at last came in contact with something soft, which proved to be clothes. You can judge of my horror when I at last dug out the dead body of my beloved Ada. Any words that I could use could not express the anguish I felt at the sight. I threw myself on the inanimate body, and frantically pressed it in my arms. I called her by every endearing name. I then perceived there was a frightful wound in the region of the heart. I was about conveying the body to the house, when I saw something glisten in the grave. I took it out and found it, to be a hackman's [badge with the number 99 engraved] upon it. I now knew that I had discovered the murderer of my angel. I conveyed the body to the hall, and then mounting my horse, rode as fast as the animal could gallop to Wilmington. In half an hour after my arrival, the driver of the hack number 94 was in prison. When he was acquainted with the evidence before him, he made a full confession. It appeared that he had driven Ada to the Hall, and finding it shut up, she had ordered him to return to Wilmington; but the sight of the jewels she wore, and the well filled purse, had inspired him with the hellish idea of killing her. He carried out his purpose, and buried her in the piece of waste ground; as he was filling in the grave, by some accident his badge had fallen into the hole, and he had covered it up with earth. Two months after his arrest he was tried, convicted and executed.

I caused Ada's body to be conveyed to her father's house, and she was buried in the family vault.

Since that day, my health has visibly failed. I long to die that I may meet my Ada again. I have told you the exact truth, and all that I ask is, that you will not make it public until I shall be dead.

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My friend then finished the story, and the next day left the city. Last week I received a letter, from which I learned that my poor friend had died. My promise of secrecy being now removed, I have related this strange episode in his life.

*Leaves from the Note Book of a New York Detective: The Private Record of J. B.* Ed. John Williams. Hartford: J. B. Burr, 1865.