

The Lock Of Hair
Or
The Murder At Haughton

by Mary C. Vaughan

“I thought you would have rung your bell before this time, ma’am. I guess your fire is e’ema,pst out,” said Hetty Sims, otherwise known as Aunt Hetty, bustling into the parlor, at twilight, or what she chose to call “early candle-lighting”. “Aint ye cold, Mis’ Sorley? There’s nothing but a few coals left.”

The figure, sitting there in the angle of the fire-place, answered not, but that fact did not daunt Aunt Hetty.

“I should have been in before,” she continued, “but s’posed ye had company. ‘Twas the minister, warn’t it? I had my ands in the bread when he knocked, or I should have gone to the door.

Still no answer.

“I guess she’s asleep,” commented Aunt Hetty, audibly; “an’ if she is, I’d better hold my tongue and not wake her. It does old folks a deal of good to sleep!”

Just at that moment the fire blazed up brightly, and Aunt Hetty turned round from her task of blowing it with her apron, to look at her beloved mistress. There was something awful in the rigid stiffness of her position. Her head had fallen forward upon her breast, one hand hung by her side, the other grasped the arm of the chair. Her features were shaded by the position in which she sat.

The fire was burning now, and as Aunt Hetty rose she put her hand upon the rug to lift herself by its aid. It splashed into a pool of something warm, wet, sticky that was oozing out upon the hearth.

“I guess the minister set his umbrella down here,” she said, and then she glanced at her hand. All the palm was covered by a dark, awful smear, and from her extended fingers dripped the clammy mass.

“Oh!” shrieked Aunt Hetty. “Law! Oh, gracious! Mis’ Sorelli! I do believe it’s blood!”

She went up to her mistress and clutched her arm. She was alarmed, but her alarm was vague.

“Mis’ Sorelli! Oh my! Dear Ma’am! Oh! My mistress! Can’t you speak to me? It’s Aunt Hetty, dear!” and she shook the still figure in her increasing terror, and putting her hand beneath the brow, raised up the drooping head.

And then she saw—oh, what an awful sight! A ghastly wound in the white neck, that half severed the head, a horrible stream, still oozing down over the dark widow's dress, a pallid face with wide open eyes, congealed in that awful stare of horror that preceded her violent death. Mrs. Sorelli sat in the same tranquil position she always used, with a hand tightly clasping the arm of the chair, and in the other that hung rigidly by her side a tuft of hair still grasped. It was a coarse but brilliant lock of jetty blackness, long, straight, unpliant.

All this Aunt Hetty took in, in one horrified glance. And then her shrieks summoned all the human help upon the premises. Uncle Jacob Hyser, the lame, decrepit old man who came once a week, "pottering around and doing chores," as Aunt Hetty said. He was sitting before the kitchen fire now, eating some bread and cold meat, and toasting his old rheumatic legs; and for once Aunt Hetty was glad of his presence. He came hobbling through the passages, grumbling and exclaiming. Uncle Jacob thought women very troublesome creatures, "full of notions," and by no means sound of mind.

"What on airth's the matter," quoth he, stumbling into the parlor. "What ye screeching for, Aunt Hetty? Is the house afire, or what?"

"Murder's the matter, ye old fool," answered Aunt Hetty. "Run down to the village, quick, and call somebody! Can't ye see that Mis' Sorelli's killed?"

"Oh Lord! Did ye do it, Aunt Hetty? Marsy! You don't say she's dead, do ye?"

"Yes, I do, and here ye stand asking questions when ye ought to be half way to the village. But law, ye'd never get there. I s'pose I shall have to go myself. But don't you go out of this room."

"Aunt Hetty, Aunt Hetty! I darsent stay here alone, nohow. Wal, if you will go," shrinking from her wrathful face and uplifted hand, "gim'me a light. The fire might go out, and I never could stay in the dark."

"Light it yourself," answered the grim woman, pushing one of the candles on the mantle toward him. And in a moment she was out in the stormy night, running along the miry road that led to the village, more than half a mile away.

Old Jacob retreated to the corner farthest from that awful presence which he watched during those minutes that stretched themselves in his imagination, into years before Aunt Hetty returned with the doctor and a train of affrighted town people.

No earthly help was available to her who still sat in the quiet, lonely house of the afternoon, now dead. People swarmed into the house, crowding in the rooms, and jostling in the passages, wondering, whispering, ventilation strange theories. At nine o'clock the coroner arrived, and found the corpse untouched, still sitting in that awful rigidity.

He was a hasty, choleric man, and he had before his arrival jumped at the conclusion that Mrs. Sorelli's servants must have committed the murder, for the sake of plunder. He acted upon this

suspicion at once, and ordered the arrest of old Jacob Hyser and Aunt Hetty Simms, before even viewing the body.

They were, however, permitted to tell their story, and then, as it appeared that they alone knew anything about the mysterious murder, they were retained as witnesses. There was no evidence upon which they could be committed, but the coroner did not feel himself justified, he said, in letting them go free.

The funeral took place in due time, and the excitement, which the murder had caused in that quiet community subsided. One or two strangers, about this time, took up their temporary abode in the village, and as they came quite unheralded, and without ostensible business, curiosity concerning them soon banished every other interest.

Mrs. Sorrelli had lived among them as a stranger. She had no friends, no relatives, and few visitors. It was not even known whence she came. Her name was evidently a foreign one, but she was evidently an American. Where her life had been spent, or who was her husband, and who the associates of her youth, nobody could succeed in learning. Even old Hetty did not know, or, if she knew, did not impart the secret. Twelve quiet years, unmarked by any change, had Mrs. Sorrelli passed in her cottage near Haughton. No strangers had ever visited her, except on rare occasions a lawyer from a distant city, who came on business, and who now came as soon as tidings of her death reached him, produced the papers necessary to give warrant to his acts, and then took possession of the cottage and all it contained. He removed Mrs. Sorrelli's papers, jewels, and such valuables as were most portable, and left the remainder, with the house, in charge of Aunt Hetty, who was once more at liberty. If Mrs. Sorrelli had any friends, they communicated with the lawyer. Haughton people knew nothing of them. Mrs. Sorrelli had lived among them a mystery, and her death was the crowning incident of that mystery.

By direction of the coroner, Aunt Hetty had faithfully preserved the lock of hair which had been clutched in the dead hand. When the lawyer came and removed the effects of the deceased lady, he had taken this, much against the will of Aunt Hetty, who expected some dire penalty of the law to befall her for permitting it to be removed from her possession. But no disastrous result followed. Weeks lengthened into months, and months to years, and when the almost forgotten murder was mentioned in Haughton, it was as a matter destined to be forever hidden. Everything had resumed its monotonous course. The strangers who came soon after the murder had long disappeared. It was now known that they were detectives, and had been foiled in their investigations. Suspicion had never fastened upon any one in Haughton, and no stranger had been seen in the neighborhood previous to the murder. Yet no one doubted that there must have been one, who disappeared as soon as the fatal deed was committed—one to whom that lock of hair, clutched in the victim's death spasms, belonged. And so six years went by.

Aunt Hetty, taking her solitary breakfast one morning, was startled by a loud, long knocking at the door. The long unused knocker creaked under the vigorous blows dealt by the newcomer, and through the empty passages and closed up rooms the echoes answered loudly to the unaccustomed sound. With many groans and exclamations Aunt Hetty hastened to the door.

A dark young man stood there, evidently impatient, for he had just lifted his hand to the knocker a second time.

“Mrs. Sorelli?” he said. “Does she live here?”

“She used to,” replied Aunt Hetty, “but she’s been dead these six years. What do you want?”

“I want to come in, at present, and afterward I shall want some breakfast, and then a room prepared for me, and some talk with you, perhaps. I may want other things, but I can tell you better hereafter.”

“You can’t come in till I know who you are. And as staying here and getting your breakfast, it’s again my orders to have any company.”

“A fig for your orders,” answered the stranger, rudely pushing past her. “I am Anthony Sorelli, and my father was the husband of the lady who lived here, as she claimed, but I doubt. At any rate, I have a right here, and it will not be well for you to dispute it.”

“Be you Mrs. Sorelli’s son?” asked Aunt Hetty, as with pale, scared face and trembling limbs she followed him into the parlor.

“The Signora Sorelli is my mother,” he answered haughtily. “And now be so good as to open those blinds and bring me some breakfast. But first show me to a bedroom.”

“There’s no room ready but the one that used to be Mrs. Sorelli’s” said Aunt Hetty, tremblingly. “And nobody’s slept there since we laid her on the bed there, with that great gash in her throat. We never found out who murdered the poor lady. Is it that you have come about?”

“Will you stop your prating and show me this room, woman!” exclaimed the stranger, advancing threateningly. And Aunt Hetty was compelled to unlock the door of that room associated in her mind with such dreadful recollections, and usher him across that threshold only to be crossed by her with awe and trembling, on her days of cleaning and inspection.

In half an hour she brought him breakfast, and he detained her to answer numerous questions relative to the late inmate of the house. But he had calculated too little on the native shrewdness of his witness. Aunt Hetty was firmly determined that no information should be given until she knew whether this intrusive guest came as a friend or foe to her late mistress. On this subject the nature of his questions served very soon to convince her. Antonio Sorelli was the son of the man whom Mrs. Sorelli had once called her husband, and it was very evident that his feelings were inimical to her, and that his enmity had followed her beyond the grave. Beyond the fact that Mrs. Sorelli’s papers were in the hands of her lawyer, he obtained very little information.

At the close of the conference Aunt Hetty went back to her kitchen, shaking her head. She by no means liked the present aspect of things, but she felt herself powerless. Mr. Sorelli had surely some shadow of right, and she had none that could avail against him. All day she heard him rambling about the house, and the sounds from the late Mrs. Sorelli’s bedroom indicated that he

was moving heavy pieces of furniture and instituting a general search among the deceased lady's effects. Her clothing, all her papers which did not seem of importance, together with other articles of small intrinsic value, had been left there. Aunt Hetty regretted now that she had not attempted to fit up some of the dismantled rooms for her guest.

But one remedy for her momentary weakness suggested itself. A telegraph line had lately been erected in the village; she resolved to summon the lawyer by means of this mode of communication. She had no sooner furnished the stranger with his dinner than she set out for the village, where, after ascertaining what it was necessary for her to do, she concocted the following message, which speedily was flashing along the wires:

"There's a feller here with black hair like that you know on. Come as soon as you can."

This done, she returned to her home quite satisfied with her errand, and quietly sat herself down to await the result. She knew that she must wait at least two days, but she resolved not to relax her vigilance and permit this man to escape.

Her precautions, however, were in vain. He remained through the following day, and late in the evening summoned Aunt Hetty for some purpose. She found him sitting in the parlor, answered his questions, and provided him with fresh candles and fuel. She then retired, after securing the doors, and though she slept ill, heard no alarming sounds until the following morning, when she arose, and having prepared breakfast for the stranger, carried it to his room.

To her surprise it was vacant. Mr. Sorelli had departed, and left no trace.

That evening the lawyer arrived, accompanied by an experienced detective, and before midnight a pursuit was organized. If found, the stranger could at least be arrested for robbery, for though there had been little of value for him to take, it was quite evident that Mrs. Sorelli's escritoire and receptacles for papers had been searched, and a few relics, which Aunt Hetty knew had been cherished by the deceased lady, were gone. Mr. —, the lawyer, who alone knew anything of her history, believed that young Sorelli was her murderer, for he knew much of the persecutions she had formerly endured, and the attempts that had been made to invalidate her marriage, and legitimate the son of the woman who had become her successor in her husband's affections, and her own rights. He also knew that an important paper—no less than the certificate of her marriage—had been lost at the time of her murder.

Once more a great crowd had been gathered at the cottage. Once more Aunt Hetty and Uncle Jacob were witnesses. It was for them, who alone had seen him, to identify the prisoner who had just been brought in, and this they did at once, unmindful of the terrible frown with which he regarded them.

He was committed to the county jail for forcible entry and robbery of the house, and while he lay there the lawyer was slowly weaving around him the web, which was to enmesh him. Having the clue, various circumstances came to light, all tending to show that Sorelli was the murderer. He was shown to have been in the country at the time, and to have arrived at the nearest point by

rail, and had been conveyed by a wagon within two miles of Haughton, on the very day of the murder.

His object had, doubtless, been to intimidate Mrs. Sorelli, and compel her to yield up the documents which proved her rights and his illegitimacy. Having failed in this, he had deliberately committed the murder, taken from her the certificate, and departed unseen.

The lock of hair clutched in the fingers of the dead became a powerful witness against him. Strangely enough, it corresponded exactly in color, quantity and strength with his own, and just above the temple was a bald spot about the size of the lock, which seemed to have been pulled thence.

It was probably thought that time enough had elapsed to render his present visit safe, more especially as no suspicion had ever fastened to him; and this time he came with the hope of securing an important deed which Mrs. Sorelli had once in her possession, and which, in the father's necessary communication with Mrs. Sorelli's lawyer, he had learned had not been transferred to him. This was found among the effects of Sorelli, and he had doubtless discovered it in some secret drawer that had escaped the lawyer's vigilance.

Circumstantial evidence alone convicted him, but the universal comment of the jury declared its justice. He expiated his crime upon the gallows, and Aunt Hetty Sims became the heroine of Haughton. She looked upon herself, and was believed by others to be, the principal instrument in bringing to light the perpetrator of a mysterious crime, and punishing all who had been engaged in the persecutions heaped upon a most unfortunate and unhappy lady.

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