

Leaf the Twenty-Eighth
Magnetic Influence
by John Williams

(I am indebted to Doctor Macfarland for the following strange story. J. B)

I AM an old man now. My hair was silvered with gray years ago. My days on earth cannot be many. My memory begins to fail me. Events which occurred in the early part of my life are fading from my mind. And yet, strange to say, every now and then recollection appears to be lighted up in my brain, as if memory were not extinct, but only slept. Perhaps the vehicle for the expression of the thoughts of the soul is becoming dull—age having impaired its usefulness.

Yesterday I was reading in a French journal an account of some recent extraordinary chemical discoveries. How strange it is that a word will sometimes call up a whole flood of reminiscences which have entirely passed from the mind! It would seem as if memory is something material imbedded in the brain, and that is only reproduced when another thought enters the organ, and acts upon it in some subtle manner. Of course this is purely an hypothesis incapable of proof; but certain it is, that, reading about the recent chemical discoveries in France, awoke in my mind the recollection of an event which transpired many years ago, and in which I acted a subordinate part. Years ago I almost determined to make the matter public, but the fear that the improbability of the history would convey a reflection on my veracity, restrained me. With age has come obtuseness, and I care nothing about the opinion of the world now. I know what I relate is true, and this is sufficient for me. Nor shall I attempt to explain the extraordinary phenomena of which I have to speak. I have no doubt a natural explanation could be given, but I am too old now to attempt it. Without further digression, I will relate what I have to tell.

Thirty-five years ago I was practicing as a physician in the State of Virginia. It was a rustic spot, and in spring and autumn it was really beautiful. The village on all sides was surrounded by majestic trees, which had braved time for many a year, and which every summer embedded the white cottages in a mantle of greenery. This village boasted of its country tavern, its parsonage, its blacksmith's shop, its country store, and other buildings usually found in such places. But the great pride of the place was a large building, which went by the name of the Grange.

It was a very old mansion—having been erected in the days of the early settlers of the state. It was situated about one mile from the village in question, and was at the same time the pride and fear of the inhabitants. It was an Elizabethan structure—rambling, large, and commodious. One side of it was completely embedded with ivy, and the windows—around which the evergreen had been trimmed—resembled paths cut through the foliage. The front was gray and discolored; the windows were small, gothic, sloped, and latticed. It was situated on a beautiful eminence, so that it was a conspicuous object for miles. The Grange was surrounded on all sides by a species of park, which extended at the back of the dwelling for several acres, and was terminated by a beautiful stream of water, which rippled gentle music over its pebbled bed all the year round, excepting a short time when it congealed under the baleful eye of the dread king of winter. The rooms were lofty, the staircases wide, and the oak, so plentifully used in its internal construction, was almost black with age.

When I first went to live in the village of Daughton, the Grange was occupied. The owner had lived in it for years, but had resided most of the time in New York. One day, however, the whole village was in a state of commotion by the arrival of workmen, who had come to put the Grange in a condition of thorough repair. A hundred rumors were immediately afloat, but which all eventually were absorbed in one report—namely, that Mr. Templeman was about to be married and would bring his bride home to his family mansion. This rumor proved to be a correct one, for in a short time the house was repaired, the old-fashioned furniture was dusted, the cobwebs were removed from the picture gallery, a bevy of black servants were installed there from one of Mr. Templeman's Southern plantations, the building was declared to be ready, and it received the owner and his bride.

The village was immediately all excitement. Who had seen the bride? Was she pretty? Was she young? Did she seem happy? These, and a hundred other questions were asked, but no one could give a satisfactory reply to any one of them. The fact was, no one had seen her face, for she was closely veiled when she arrived.

Days, weeks, months passed away, and Mr. Templeman had never been seen, excepting by persons in his own household. It was noticed when he first returned to the home of his father he appeared to be in excellent, indeed, it might be called robust health; but by degrees a change came over him; he grew pale and visibly declined. His eyes, too, had a strange expression about them; usually they had a dull, dreamy look, very different from the light of intelligence which shone in them when he first came home; but then again they would suddenly lighten up in the most surprising manner, and he would then seem to be bewildered, and scarcely knew what he was doing.

One day he called upon me at my house. I was not burdened with many patients at that time, and was generally at home.

“Dr. McFarland,” said he to me, “I wish to consult you respecting myself. I have something the matter with me, it is undermining my health, but what it is I know not. All that I do know, is that I am getting weaker and weaker every day.”

“What are your symptoms, Mr. Templeman?”

“Well, doctor, to tell you the truth, I don't know myself. I only am aware of the fact, that I am declining every day. I cannot sleep at night; I lay and toss about for hours together. I do not suppose I get more than three or four hours sleep on an average.”

“To what can you ascribe this want of sleep—have you no mental trouble?”

“None at all.”

“Is your mind fixed on any one particular pursuit?”

“I indulge a good deal in chemical experiments, and devote a considerable portion of my time in investigating that beautiful science, but this soothes, rather than irritates me.”

I examined my patient, and found that every organ of the body was in a normal condition. The heart and lungs were perfectly healthy; digestion was good; in fact, it was impossible for me, after an hour's careful investigation, to discover the slightest vestige of disease; and yet he was evidently failing; he was losing flesh, and if some remedy were not discovered, he must ultimately die.

“Mr. Templeman,” I exclaimed, after I had finished my examination, “your affection is evidently one of the nervous system. You must—”

While I was yet speaking he rose suddenly from his chair, and his eyes, which before had been dull and heavy, suddenly grew brilliant as two diamonds.

“Excuse me,” said he, advancing towards the door; “SHE is calling me. I must go.”

“She!” I exclaimed. “Who do you mean? No one has called you.”

“My WIFE!” he replied, and rushed out of the house.

I was very much astonished at this strange conduct, and was at a loss how to account for it. I immediately followed him to the door; there was not a soul in sight. My first impression was that his brain was affected.

The next day I received a message from the Grange, requesting my immediate presence, as Mr. Templeman was seriously ill. I obeyed the summons at once, and was shown into a very large bed chamber, the heavy old-fashioned furniture of which contrasted strangely with the modern carpet with which the floor was covered. On a stately four-post bedstead reclined my patient. His eyes were wild and haggard, and his cheek was as pale as a corpse.

“Doctor,” said he, as soon as he saw me, “I am glad you have come. I am sick—very sick.”

I examined his pulse, and strange to say, I found that it was quite natural; his respiration too was quite easy, and had it not been for his wild gaze and pallid face, I should not have thought there was anything the matter with him. I asked him a few questions, to which he responded in a natural manner.

“You appear to be suffering very much,” I exclaimed, after he had replied to all my enquiries—“is there any fear oppressing your heart?”

“Doctor, you are right. You have guessed it—there is fear oppressing my heart—one that haunts me night and day—a demon that never quits my side—riding or walking, awake or asleep—it is my constant guest—it is the demon of SELF-DESTRUCTION!”

“Self-destruction! what mean you?”

“I mean that I am haunted day and night with the idea of suicide. I feel an almost irresistible impulse to lay violent hands upon myself.”

“Have you no reason for this feeling?”

“None at all. I am wealthy, enjoy every comfort. I—”

At that moment his features assumed the same expression they had done the day before in my office.

“Oh! God of Heaven!” he exclaimed, pointing towards the door; “she has just left her room—she advances along the corridor—she stops to adjust her hair—she comes to the door—she is here!”

With that he gave a shriek and fell back on the bed insensible. At this moment the door opened and his wife entered the room. I had not time at this moment to even glance at her; my whole attention was occupied by my now unconscious patient. In a very short time I succeeded in restoring him to life, in which office I was assisted by a pair of milk-white hands, which, when they touched mine, sent a thrill through my whole system.

After we had restored him to consciousness, he fell into a deep slumber, and Mrs. Templeman beckoned me out into another room. It was now for the first time that I had an opportunity of examining the woman about whom report had been so busy. She led the way into the picture gallery, and we sat down on a sofa. When I gazed on Mrs. Templeman, a strange feeling which I could not account for took possession of me. A mist at first appeared to float before my eyes, through which I could see the dim form of my companion. This, however, cleared away by degrees, and I could gaze upon her without emotion. She was gorgeously beautiful, such beauty as I have never seen before nor since.

Her hair was as black as the raven’s plume, and her eyes were intensely black, but they were large, lustrous and piercing in their gaze. They seemed to enter one’s very soul, and when she looked straight at me, I felt deprived of all power or strength. She was of tall and commanding stature, but her form was gracefully moulded. Her skin was as white as the purest alabaster, her neck and shoulders might have served as a model for the Titian Venus; her cheek was tinged with the hue of perfect health, and her long eye-lashes gave a peculiar expression to her face which it is difficult to describe. It must not be supposed from my description of Mrs. Templeman, that I experienced anything like admiration for her beauty. It was entirely the reverse, and even now when I try to analyze my feelings I cannot do it. I felt at the same time attracted and repelled by her presence. It was certain when she gazed on me I felt the influence much more than at other times. When she appeared to be thinking of something else, I could look upon her and be in her presence without the slightest emotion.

“What do you think of Mr. Templeman’s case?” said she in a voice so peculiar, that I could compare it to nothing else than the notes given forth by an Æolian harp.

I told her my opinion, namely, that I considered he was suffering from some nervous disorder, and that a change of scene would be more likely to restore him to health again than anything

else. She fully agreed with me, and promised to exert her influence to make him take a trip to Paris. After we had discussed this matter fully, I was attracted by the pictures and stood up to examine them. I walked from one end of the gallery to the other. When at the lower end I was struck with a full length portrait of Oliver Cromwell, but through the canvas were the distinct mark of two bullet holes. I thought it rather strange, and turned round to Mrs. Templeman, and made some inquiry in reference to it. I fancied she appeared confused, for she changed the conversation. In a short time after that I left, promising to return the next day.

The next morning I was there early, and was immediately shown into my patient's bed chamber. I found him something better, but very weak and nervous. I had reflected a great deal on his case, since the previous day, but could only come to the conclusion that his wife's presence had a mysterious influence over him; but how, or in what way this could occur I did not attempt to explain. I resolved to converse with him on the subject.

"Mr. Templeman," I began, "Mrs. Templeman's presence appears to have a strange effect upon your nervous system."

"You are right, Doctor," he replied, "she is killing me."

"Killing you! what do you mean?"

"I repeat it, she is killing me, not by poison or by any physical means, but simply by the influence of her mind."

"The influence of her mind?"

"Yes; my mind is completely subjugated to hers; what she wills I must do. I am perfectly satisfied if she were to will me to put my hand into that fire, I should be compelled to do it."

"You can scarcely be serious in what you say."

"Alas it is only too true. Listen to me while I tell you something, for I feel to keep this matter secret any longer would be death to me. I met Mrs. Templeman in New York for the first time some three years ago. At that period she was married. I was introduced to her, and was struck with her superb beauty. I lost sight of her for three years, but when I met her again she was a widow. I was attracted by her magnificent appearance, and married her. I had not been married a week before I was conscious that there was some strange influence at work with -my mind. Whenever my wife looked fixedly at me, thoughts and feelings would arise which did not seem to emanate from myself. It was some little time before I found out the exact truth of the matter, but when I did discover it—when I did find out that I was a slave—that I no longer possessed will, mind, or power, a terrible feeling of desire to rid myself of life, haunted me. With this feeling I have contended for months, and I find each day it becomes stronger and stronger. That it will ultimately end by my committing suicide—if this spell is not broken—I am perfectly satisfied."

"What makes you so certain on this point?"

“I will tell you. I find Mrs. Templeman has been, married twice before.”

“Indeed!”

“Yes, and *both of her husbands committed suicide!*”

There was something very strange and fearful in this revelation. When I remembered the influence this strange woman had over myself, I felt my blood turn to ice.

“But does she not treat you kindly?” I asked.

“Kindly—yes. The same kindness that a serpent shows the bird when he is sure of his prey. He does not attack him, but remains at the bottom of the tree, until the bird falls directly into his mouth.

“Do you suppose this influence is voluntary on her part?”

“I know it is. When her mind is occupied with something else, she loses influence over me, and for that time I feel myself a man again. It is at such moments that an irresistible desire to kill her rises up in my mind. I have thought of a thousand different ways—sometimes it is poison—at others I will slay her while she sleeps—but she paralyzes me in a moment by her will.”

“Hush, my dear sir, such thoughts as these will lead me to suspect that your brain is disordered.”

“But it is not, doctor. I thought I had effected my purpose the other night. I was in my study, reading, when I fancied I heard voices in the picture gallery. It was near midnight, and my first idea was that robbers had broken in. I took my gun, and accompanied by my two dogs, I entered the picture gallery. I saw, as plainly, as I see you now, my wife stretched on the floor and the form of her late husband bending over her in a threatening attitude. Although I had seen him only twice in my life, I knew him perfectly. The desire to flee myself from my cursed thralldom was too powerful. I raised the gun to my shoulder and fired. When the smoke cleared away there was no one to be seen; and, almost immediately afterwards my wife came running into the gallery by the same door that I had entered, to inquire what was the matter. I am now inclined to think that the whole was a hallucination. The next day, I examined the spot to which I had pointed when I discharged the gun. I found that the bullet had pierced the portrait of Oliver Cromwell.”

“You are right in your supposition; that must have been an optical illusion.”

“I suppose so; but what course do you recommend me to pursue?”

I then told him that he had better at once leave the country, and recommended Paris to him as the place where he would most likely meet with persons and events that would restore his nervous system to a healthy condition again. He agreed to the proposal, and in a week he started off to New York, and left by a packet sailing from that city to Havre.

A week passed on without anything occurring, when one day I received a message from the Grange, requesting my immediate presence there to see Mrs. Templeman. I thought by the urgency of the message that she must be very sick. I was, therefore, very much surprised to find her sitting in her boudoir apparently in perfect health.

“Doctor,” said she, as soon as I entered the room, “I have not sent for you professionally. I wish to consult you on another matter.”

I bowed, but made no reply.

“You are aware,” said she, “that my husband has devoted himself a great deal to chemical pursuits. For days together he has been at work in the vault underneath this house; especially was this the case a few days before he left for Paris. Now I will confess to you that I have an irresistible curiosity to know what he has been doing there. At the same time I am not free from a species of superstitious dread about descending into that cold, damp, dark, place. Will you examine the vault for me?”

“Did Mr. Templeman express a desire that no one should enter it during his absence?”

“He gave the most strict orders to that effect, and especially begged *me* not to visit the vault. It is that very fact which makes me so desirous of seeing it. I should never have thought of it, if he had not been so earnest in the matter.”

“Madam,” I replied, “I regret that I cannot comply with your request. Mr. Templeman’s wishes must be law with me.”

She tried in vain to combat my resolutions, but I was determined, and soon after left her, anything but pleased with me.

The next evening a report was current in the village that Mrs. Templeman had suddenly disappeared, that she had not been seen since the evening before, when she retired to bed.

Search was immediately made in every direction for her, but it was all fruitless. It was then that I suddenly thought about the vault, and suggested that some one should search it, relating the particulars of the conversation I had had with her on the subject.

The necessary search was made, and to the horror of everyone she was found on the floor of the vault stone dead. There was no wound visible, and a jury of inquest returned a verdict of “Death by the visitation of God.” The vault contained nothing particular, and there were certainly no evidences of any occupation followed by Mr. Templeman there. A few bottles and vials containing chemicals was all that could be found. I noticed, however, that there was a strong sulfurous smell plainly apparent.

This sad termination of the life of such a beautiful woman was a nine days wonder, and a vast variety of opinions were given on the subject. By degrees, however, it ceased to be talked about, and in a month or two it seemed to be entirely forgotten.

It was about three months after the occurrence that I was seated in my little parlor one night, resting myself after a long country ride. I was informed by my black boy that a gentleman wished to see me. I gave orders that he should be admitted, and almost immediately afterwards Mr. Templeman entered the room, but oh! so changed that I scarcely knew him. He was wasted to a perfect shadow, his arms appeared to hang helpless by his side; his eyes were sunk deep in their sockets, but still shone with an unearthly glare; his features were pinched and his face was as colorless as that of a corpse; in fact, his whole appearance was more that of a living corpse than anything else. He sat down, and for a moment or two he did not utter a word. At last in a hoarse whisper he exclaimed: "She is dead!"

I proceeded to condole with him at his wife's sudden decease, but he interrupted me.

"I murdered her—I killed her; her blood is on my soul! it has been eating into my heart ever since that fatal night. I have not slept for weeks."

"Compose yourself, sir," I replied, "you accuse yourself wrongfully, she died while you were on the road to Paris."

"True, but I killed her notwithstanding. Listen. I will tell you how. You are aware that I have been devoting a considerable time to chemical experiments. In the course of my investigations I discovered an explosive substance which would ignite at the slightest friction, being even more explosive than fulminating mercury, but it also possessed this property, namely, that when it exploded any person near it would be struck dead, as if from a stroke of lightning, and no mark or wound would show how the person had met his death. The truth is, that it kills through the nervous system.

I prepared some of this terrible chemical and placed it in the vault in such a manner that whoever should open the door would explode the compound and must meet with certain death. I then told my wife on no account to visit the vault, but I knew that the very fact of my telling her this would make her do it. You know the result—I am a murderer!"

I tried to soothe him as well as I could.

Suddenly he rose up in his chair; his eyes assumed a fearful expression. Stretching forth his hand he exclaimed: "She calls me! from her cold, dark grave she calls me? I cannot resist—I must go."

And he fell back again into the chair—dead!

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