

*Leaf the Eighteenth*  
*The Phantom Face*  
by John Williams

JAMES BARTLETT was a particular friend of mine. I always regarded him with the most sincere affection. He possessed many good points. I never knew him to do a mean dishonorable act. When I first became acquainted with him he always enjoyed the best spirits, and was the life and soul of all our little *reunions*. A change, however, suddenly came over him; he grew moody and absent; his lips no longer even smiled, and he would often start as though some secret thought troubled him. He grew pale and thin, so much so that I several times interrogated him as to his malady; but he always treated the matter lightly. In the evening I have especially noticed that he would oftentimes be strangely affected—a violent trembling would seize his whole body, and he would catch me convulsively by the arm, giving utterance to some such phrase as “there! again! again!” I thought that his nervous system was out of order, and recommended a change of air and scene.

One day I learned to my grief and amazement that my friend was dead. I immediately ran to his lodgings, and found him exactly as he had been first discovered, for his body had not been touched. His face was horribly convulsed. On the table were a few pages of MSS., of which I took possession. When I returned home I read them, and now give them to the reader without altering one word.

My poor friend was pronounced to have died of disease of the heart, and his remains now lie in Greenwood Cemetery, Brooklyn.

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There! there it is reflected in the mirror, opposite which I am writing. A face so fearful, so horrible that I will not attempt to describe. How the eyes gleam upon me! What a hideous smile lurks about the toothless mouth! Avaunt, thou accursed! Avaunt, I say!

It is gone! the mirror now only reflects my own image. For a few hours I shall be free from this damning spectre. Let me in that time, if I can sufficiently command my thoughts, relate my story.

Edith Clarkson! my pen has written the name almost without my being aware of the fact. Poor Edith! God is my witness that I loved her with my whole soul. But she is dead! Killed by my hand! That glorious form is now mouldering in the grave. That voice, the music of which still lingers in my ear, is still for ever. Poor Edith! Dear sainted spirit now dwelling in Heaven look down from this blessed abode and forgive me !

Edith and I was cousins—brought up together from our earliest youth. How well I remember the poetry time of our life! Those days of happy youth when we wandered hand in hand together and plucked the wild flowers, which I wove in her auburn tresses. What a beautiful world it was to me at that period. But we separated—separated with natural vows of constancy and devotion. Edith remained in the country, and I came to this Babylon. But Edith I did not forget thee. My letters to thee told thee how much I loved thee. And thy letters, sweet girl—what tenderness—

what devotion! Oh how often did I re-peruse those precious epistles! I traced thy sinless soul in every line.

Time sped gaily on with me. My studies were nearly completed. I had obtained honors in the profession I had chosen, and in a few months more I should obtain the height of my ambition—diploma authorizing me to practice as a physician.

Twelve weeks only were between me and the realization of all my hopes. I had been studying hard. I needed relaxation, and by the advice of the professors themselves, I was recommended to visit home for a change. With what alacrity did I seize on the idea, for I should see Edith, my Edith, my best ‘beloved again!

That eventful morning when I entered the Hudson river cars, which were to convey me to my old home, will never pass from my memory. The cars rattled on—old familiar landmarks came in sight—here a shady nook where I breathed my first vows to the idol of my soul—there an overhanging rock from which I had in my early days gazed with wonder on the swollen flood below. Then came nodding corn fields, the spire of the old church, and lastly the quaint old gables of my boyhood’s home. The cars stopped. I leaped from them—almost flew up the noisy bank, and in another minute I was at home.

Edith was there, waiting for me in the hall. I caught her in my arms and pressed her to my heart, while with my lips I stifled the words of welcome she addressed to me.

“Edith! Darling—dearest Edith!” I murmured.

“Dear, dear James,” was the soft reply uttered by the blushing girl, as she hid her heavenly face on my breast.

The following day we resumed our old habits. She accompanied me in my rambles, and hand in hand we gazed on the beauties of the glorious scenery of that part of the Hudson. What a happy, happy time! Before us flowed the silver river murmuring the softest music in our ears; behind us rose, towering hundreds of feet above our heads, green sloping banks; thick with umbrageous verdure. On the other side of the river the great Catskills reared their lofty heads to a towering height. And then the glorious sensation of having by my side that angelic being whose every word fell like balm on my throbbing heart. What Paradise could equal this? But why dwell on these scenes—the recollection of them only makes my present condition more dark and gloomy.

One, two, three weeks passed, and my soul was overburdened with happiness—my physical nature appeared ready to succumb to so much joy—when a change, so sudden, so violent, occurred, as to bereave me of my senses.

One day my cousin received a letter; with that letter set the sun of happiness, and in its place rose the gloomy phantom of despair. What that letter contained I do not know to this day, but I judge it must have been some malicious statement from some one who knew me in New York. With that letter a change came over Edith—sad and bitter change. She would walk with me no longer; she turned her eyes away from me when I spoke to her. She treated me coldly, if not disdainfully.

I implored her, I besought her to let me know the reason of this revulsion of feeling on her part. Her only reply was disconnected sentences.

I felt that I was judged wrongfully, and this sense of wrong grew upon me. I invented a thousand things to account for it. Three days after the receipt of this letter, a young gentleman, whose father lived in the neighborhood, paid us a visit. Edith received him and treated him very graciously. The next day I saw them together in the woods.

The demon jealousy was then lighted up in my heart. This was why she had deserted me; this was why she had scorned me; she loved another! Horrible, soul destroying thought! Madness now crept into my blood. How that day passed I know not. I have some recollection of wandering miles from home, and shrieking and shouting in the wood. I returned home late at night. The moon was at its full, and even now I remember distinctly noticing the gleam of silver made on the water by its slanting rays.

I went to my chamber without saying a word to a soul, and then I saw it for the first time. Yes, there it was, gleaming and gibbering at me in evident derision. But such a ghastly, such a horrible face as no mortal man had ever seen before. My blood turned to ice. I followed the phantom. It went before me, and I found myself in the open air. The phantom face dissolved away in the moonlight. Reaction had set in, and now I was hot and burning. I walked to the river side, and who should I meet but my cousin Edith, standing on a grassy knoll, with her eyes fixed on the night queen.

“Edith, dearest Edith,” I murmured, approaching her, “hear me, Edith. Why—why do you treat me thus, darling? My own dear girl, speak! speak!”

“Leave me, sir,” said Edith. “I do not wish to speak to you. I have done with you forever.”

“Give me a reason. Do you no longer love me?”

“I do not.”

“I know why,” I returned, jealousy taking possession of my heart. “You love another. Yes, you are false—false as hell,” I shrieked.

Edith looked alarmed, and turned to escape me.

“By the Heavens above us,” I exclaimed, “you shall not be his.”

And I seized her in my grasp.

“Unhand me, sir,” she exclaimed, now thoroughly alarmed, “or I will call for assistance.”

My only reply was a mocking laugh. The echo returned to my ears, and I could almost fancy it came from my detested rival.

What followed I cannot tell. The next thing I heard was a dull and heavy splash, and a smothered cry, and I saw something white floating down the stream.

I had pushed Edith into the river!

I returned home and buried my head in the bed; but that splash and that cry rang in my ears. I lifted up my head, and there was the hideous face right before me, gazing with diabolical malignity into my eyes. That look scorched my brain, and I was seized with a brain fever.

When I recovered, days and weeks had elapsed. It was then broken to me by degrees that Edith had been found drowned, and it was supposed that she had missed her footing, and fallen into the river.

I got better, but that devilish face visited me every night. No repose, no sweet slumbers; if exhausted nature were cheated into a few hours' forgetfulness, when I opened my eyes, if day had not already dawned, there was the hideous, horrible face. My days are numbered; this accursed phantom is dragging me to the grave.

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Great God! there it is again—more terrible, more fearful, more horrible than it has ever been before. Avaunt, accursed phantom! avaunt, I say! What! wilt thou not obey me? The face approaches. Great God! I feel its toothless jaws pressing against my face—an icy chillness seizes my heart—I faint—I die—Oh God—pardon—par—.

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Here ended my friend's MSS.

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