

Who Killed Him? Or, The Twisted Ring

DEAD—mysteriously murdered in his bed. Those silver locks, dabbled in blood! the awful sight haunted me; more appalling, perhaps, because I knew it only from description, than the fearful reality, because the imagination reveled in horrors. In the still hours of the night, in the tumult of the day, came the cry for vengeance; above the roar of battle, on the sultry plains of India, it thrilled through my veins, giving a headlong dash in action that won me the name of the bravest man in the service.

To solve this mystery, which had baffled all research, was to me an expiation, for a sadness amounting to horror hung over the memory of the lost.

We had parted in the bitterest anger. The parent who had been all indulgence, all fond affection to my boyhood and youth, had been roused to vindictive fury by a marriage contracted without his consent; his indomitable pride would listen to no excuse; with curses and maledictions on his part, he had driven me forth from the old manor house, and we never met again.

In the background of that picture, for ever engraven on my memory, stood my cousin Marian, in her haughty, stately beauty. Her golden hair floated lightly over her white muslin robe, and her deep blue eyes blazed with the scornful, withering contempt she was too proud to express.

Well, I knew she never would forgive my slighting her charms and my father's express commands, to gratify a fancy for a little wayside violet—Alice, the curate's daughter. In the heyday of youthful passion I cared little for the broad possessions my father threatened to settle on her. They were of more value to me now, as the rightful inheritance of my son.

Alice, the fair flower I had gathered to my bosom, had gone to the shadowy land, withered with the heat of her torrid home. I was free at last; on the invalid list, returned for life to England. I could not control the feverish impatience of my soul to be at home. The old manor house was entailed, and passed with the title to me, and there, where my father had died, I must find the secret of that death.

I was content to spend a day in London, but hastened to the North of England.

I left the carriage at the entrance to the grounds, and walked up the long avenue, closed to the world since that dark funeral procession. The wind sighed through the old trees, the fallen leaves rustled under my feet, and the massive stone doorway still bore the funeral hatchment.

There was no sign of life till I turned into a narrow winding path leading to the housekeeper's wing, and eagerly anticipated her warm welcome.

I opened her door, and nothing could exceed my disappointment and grief to learn of her death, one month before. I had built such hopes of aid from her sagacity and intelligence, her love and devotion to our family, that I sunk down in her old familiar armchair and buried my face in my hands.

I listened almost vacantly to the detail of her illness and death from her daughter's lips. I was looking at the closet where stood the pots of jam with curious labels, which had fascinated my boyish taste: at the old dark damask curtains, behind which I had hidden, when near detection purloining sweets when [line cut off]

What could it be? Would light come from her grave to show the way?

A fire was lighted in the old library, and after hastily partaking of some refreshments, I sat down by a shaded lamp to investigate the housekeeper's box.

I paused, for the presence of the dead seemed to overshadow the spot. In that room I had parted from my father; I could close my eyes and see him—and Marian's dazzling beauty, as she looked on me. Truly her pride had been well gratified since, as the Countess of A—, the beauty of the London fashionable world, with diamonds a crowned head might envy.

I opened the box; it contained a square ruled book—a diary kept by the old servant for my pleasure when I should return; a little paper lay beneath it, holding an antique ring of twisted gold, curiously enameled, and fastened by a diamond star. I had purchased it in Venice for my cousin Marian, and when last I saw it it shone on her fair white hand.

Why was it here? Was there some dark mystery that the old woman dared not investigate?

I opened the book, and the old handwriting, so faded and yellow, affected me strangely.

She began with my banishment, and detailed the sorrow and consternation of the old servants, my father's fitful, moody temper, my cousin Marian's triumphs as a beauty and a belle, with all the little incidents of the daily life at the old place. It was told so quaintly that tears filled my eyes. It went to the birth of my son. It described the gay and joyous manner of my father when he received my letter, of his summoning in all the servants to drink the health of the young heir, of the paleness of Miss Marian when called upon to rise and join in the toast, and her reluctance to do so.

She then narrated all the events of the evening which preceded his death—viz. of the excitement of Sir James when she took his tea to the library, of his telling Miss Marian that he should alter his will the next day, that to Edward's son should pass the estates forfeited by his father, never noticing the cold displeasure of her manner.

She described the girl's wonderful beauty as she sat in the gleaming light of the open wood fire, in her ruby satin dress, and the rich falls of lace shading her rounded arms, white and perfect as statuary. She noticed that her hand trembled as she took her tea, and the paleness of her cheek; but seeming to dismiss her as a disagreeable subject, became even garrulous on old master's joy. Underneath was written—"That night Sir James was murdered."

Here was a lapse of a week, and then minutely she described the awful scene. From [line cut off] memorandum book in which were registered notes paid by a farmer a day before, and missing; then his name and address left with her to communicate if necessary.

Then she passed to the reading of the will, and the regret of the whole country that young Sir Edward was disinherited; that Ellesmere Priory and Avondale Castle were left to Miss Marian; of her hasty departure for London; the payment of legacies and dismissal of servants; then the closing of the old manor, and an unbroken, monotonous life for months.

As I idly turned the pages I was once more spellbound, for I came to a mysterious dream and its results.

She seemed walking alone through a vast forest; the ground was covered with dead leaves, which rustled beneath her feet while the wind, sighing mournfully, scattered them down over her head. They grew deeper at every step, while the dim twilight seemed to fade away till she could just distinguish a figure ahead of her. Occasionally this figure would stop and beckon to her; then she would lose sight of him altogether behind some huge tree, but all her struggles to overtake him were unavailing. At length they came to an opening, and a bright, luminous light played round the head of her old master, Sir James. He stopped, and said to her: "Griggs, go home and look in the 'Monk's Closet.'"

The scene vanished and she awoke. Although perfectly aware of this place of concealment, which was constructed ages before, she shrank with an indefinable dread from entering it. The passageway opened by the foot of Sir James's bed. The day passed, and when night came she was again visited by her old master in a different way.

She floated on a smiling Summer sea; one person only in the boat, and his face was turned away. Suddenly the waves rose mountains high, and, with a roaring, hissing sound, the boat was engulfed. As they sank into the abyss, her master turned and said, again: "Search the 'Monk's Closet.'"

So great was her fright, she could not sleep, and as soon as morning dawned she proceeded with trembling steps to the place.

No one but herself knew of this place of concealment, out of the family, and a winding way led to a distant corridor. With a candle in her hand she went slowly on and stood in the square stone room; on the floor lay a hammer, clotted with blood and gray hair: something glittered beside it; she stooped and picked up the *twisted ring!*

What was she to think? She had seen that ring on Miss Marian's hand that night in the library. She dared not trust her bewildered senses to even think, for the honor of the name, but she left it till I should return.

Here followed years of infirmities, of anxieties to see me. She almost struggled with death to live to tell me face to face.

I gazed with a kind of fascinating horror on the ring. Could that hand, so soft, so beautifully molded, have dealt the murderous blow? Could I even accuse one of my blood of so fearful a crime and bring such a doom, however well deserved, upon her head?

Could I even consult the detective without committing myself? I tossed on a sea of perplexities, of doubts, of despair.

In this conflict of feeling I passed the most horrible days and nights, till I wrote at last to Brimmer, stating my return to England, and asking did he ever learn more relative to my father's murder.

To my surprise I received a letter by return mail, asking my presence at once in London, as he had traced one of the stolen notes, and had a clew to the guilty person.

In an hour I was on the road, and the next night in the rooms of the detective, who soon stated his convictions. He had sought for years for these notes: one came into his hands, and it was but child's play to trace it.

A handsome Frenchman had married Honorine, lady's-maid to the Countess of A—. Discovering these notes in a secret drawer of a cabinet, she appropriated them, and, in her turn, hid them from her husband, fearing his gambling propensities. He had taken one for his amusements. She had confessed the theft.

“You see, sir,” said Brimmer, “things were not all right for a robbery, although they were scattered round. There was gold left, and the window was broken on the *inside*, I could tell with one eye; still it is not proof of guilt in the Countess A—, because the old man may have given her the notes: it is only suspicious. Had she reason to wish his death?”

“Reason! ay, indeed she had reason, when it made her the richest heiress in England,” I thought; and combined with the ring there was corroboration sufficient to send her to the hangman's hands. In spite of all, so terrible was the fate before her, I hesitated to tell the man. I would wait till tomorrow.

I left Mr. Brimmer with the intention of at once returning to the hotel, but suddenly a feverish anxiety to see Marian seized me. I wanted to look at her, to satisfy myself as to her guilt.

I called a cab and drove to the mansion of Earl of A—. Every window blazed with light, and the hall was lined with exotics, while orange trees bordered the marble stairs, and all the appointments of wealth showed preparations for a grand ball. The Countess Marian entertained royalty that night.

My dress was disordered, my face pale and haggard, and the powdered footman regarded me with grave distrust. I gave him no time for reflection, but ordered him peremptorily to announce her ladyship's cousin from India.

In a few minutes her French maid, with a simper, bowed me into the boudoir, and in this temple of luxury I awaited an interview.

It was hung with pink silk and paneled with mirrors. The rarest statuary and gems of art met my eye, while the warm breath of flowers from an adjoining conservatory, and the splash of falling waters, lulled my senses into a momentary repose.

I started up spasmodically and stood as one in a delicious dream, for before me, transcendently beautiful, stood my cousin Marian.

Noiseless in her movements, she seemed to float in her white shimmering robe, studded with diamond stars; every movement gave tinted lights of the rainbow from the diamond necklace on her fair white neck, the stars in her golden hair, and on her round, white arms.

Every charm of her youth had blossomed, and she seemed something beyond mortal.

I trembled as she touched my hand and I felt the glitter of her deep blue eyes, dazzling in light, fixed upon me.

My voice sounded strange and husky as I murmured something in reply to her greeting.

“Marian,” I screamed, as I seized her round, white arm, “did you murder my father?”

Her blue eyes dilated with a kind of paralyzed terror, her lips paled, and she burst into a strange and horrible laugh.

“Have you returned a maniac, Cousin Edward?” said she.

“No, no! would to God I had, Marian! but your maid, Honorine, has been arrested for passing notes stolen the night my father died. She has confessed she took them from your cabinet.”

The countess trembled.

“And if she did?”

I held up the twisted ring before her eyes.

“Where was this found, Marian?” I said.

A deep gasp, a groan, and Marian fainted for the first time in her life.

Unwilling to call the servants, I restored her senses by some pungent essence I found in a bottle near me.

“It is true, Edward,” she said, faintly, “I did commit the deed. I hated you—more, because I loved you once. Leave me tonight, tomorrow do what you will.”

The roll of carriages announced the arrival of guests, and I left.

As I left that luxurious room, and thought of the change to Newgate, I shuddered. Could she realize the fearful fate before her?

“Forgive me, Edward, before we part,” said she, extending an icy hand.

I touched it, and left her standing, like a marble figure, frozen in the midst of beauty and life.

I went to my hotel, and sleep came at last— heavy, deep and prolonged, such as I had not known for months.

When I awoke Mr. Brimmer stood by my bedside with a morning paper in his hand; he did not speak, but pointed to a paragraph.

‘SINGULAR AND UNACCOUNTABLE SUICIDE.’— This morning, at an early hour, the beautiful Countess A— was discovered dead, in her ball-dress, in her boudoir.”

Her wonderful beauty, her grace her wealth, were all set forth. Happy in her domestic life, the idol of society, no reason could be found for the mystery, of which I alone held the key. A vial of prussic acid lay by her aide.

A bribe to Brimmer secured his silence. The will of the Countess Marian restored my estates, which went to my son unshadowed by the horrors of the past.

Frank Leslie's Pleasant Hours, vol. 37 (August 1884-January 1885), p. 353-354.