

Unconsidered Threats
by Mary C. Vaughan

There was the hush of an awful silence over the house, broken only now and again by a suppressed sob that had more of terror than grief in its sound.

All the windows were darkened, all the doors closed. The dinner hour was near, but there were no savory odors from the kitchen, no bustle of preparation; and the dining-room was dark, smelling like a vault within its closed shutters. A faint ray of nearly extinguished gas glimmered from one of the brackets, instead of the blaze from the great chandelier, which usually, at that hour, made a noonday glare in the handsome apartment, as it illuminated the beautiful china and silver and crystal of the dinner-service, and the smiling faces and handsome toilets of the “guests” at Mrs. Silverton’s large and fashionable “establishment.”

No key clicked in the lock, no impatient ring of the bell told that the ladies were returning from their afternoon shopping or promenade, or the gentlemen from their business and bread-winning. This latter phrase is only metaphorical, for Mrs. Silverton prided herself on never receiving any person who had not long since passed the bread-winning stage, and come to count his income by thousands.

This very fact made the horror and the mystery of the past night more terrible. “If it had only been a low common place, my dear!” Mrs. Silverton had over again exclaimed to her intimates, “why, I am sure a dozen men might have been murdered in some places that I have – read about – without creating such a stir.” And then Mrs. Silverton would composedly clasp her white hands upon her well-developed bosom, lean back with closed eyes in her luxurious chair, and mentally contemplate the publicity the establishment would probably receive from the gratuitous advertising the papers were all giving it. Some persons might have deemed publicity of that kind undesirable, but Mrs. Silverton knew that she possessed tact and genius, and believed she could turn it all to good account.

Meantime, she was already turning it to good account. With that ghastly object up there in the third story front, no one, of course, would think of eating; lunches might be needed, but no elaborate meals, and some dollars might be saved in food, gas, &c., &c. All these thoughts went on while she sat with countenance dressed in the exactly proper shade of seriousness, and a slight but rather becoming pinkness of the eyes and cheeks, which told that she had been weeping.

Of course no one could expect her to mourn much for the murdered man. He had come to her house a stranger, and for the three months of his stay had remained so. He sat at her table and passed through her halls, and over her stairs, but his voice was seldom heard, and he had made no acquaintances.

A sad, melancholy man, a mysterious history had traced its lines on every feature of his face, and every movement of his angular figure. What was his history none knew. He had been vouched for by one well known, by reputation at least, to Mrs. Silverton – a gentleman of high standing, now absent on a long journey through Europe and the East. No inquiries were now possible. No

person had ever visited him, nor was it known that any friends or relations of his resided in the city. So far as any inmate of Mrs. Silverton's house knew, he had been entirely isolated from human acquaintanceship or sympathy.

A lonely, melancholy man, he seemed to have no solace but his cherished companion, a fine-toned violin, from which he might at almost any hour of the day or night, have been heard drawing forth the most ravishing music. This it had already been whispered, and was more than suspected, was the cause of his horrible death. A dreadful, but as yet almost voiceless suspicion brooded over some of the occupants of the house. And this it was that so intensified the horrible dread and mystery that wrapped in so strange silence and gloom the usually busy and noisy house.

Full to the very attics, save that room where one lay in a silence never to be broken, voices and bustle usually pervaded all the rooms, and gave that impression of abounding life and activity which a large boarding house or hotel always presents.

Yet, sometimes there was illness in the house, always betokened by a sort of elaborate stillness, an artificial hush, characteristic of the great caravanserai – one of the chief peculiarities, as is one of the chief humbugs of American life.

During the winter, in the latter part of which the event of which we are writing occurred, this had been the case.

Mrs. Marshall was very ill, and the doctor had ordered the house to be kept still – as still as possible, was whispered about. The result was mysterious flittings from room to room on tiptoe, elaborate movements on the stairs, and great pretense of caution, usually resulting in an increased amount of noise, (but which was satisfactory, as pretenses usually are) and a vast amount of that strident and hissing whispering which is, of all sounds the most aggravating to an invalid.

Only Mr. Southmore was not bitten by the prevailing panic. He evidently had heard of Mrs. Marshall's illness, since it had been a topic of conversation at successive dinners and breakfasts, each new arrival at these meals feeling bound to go through the usual form of inquiry. But if he heard he gave no sign – asked no question.

Nor did he, in any respect, alter the course of his daily life. He went in and out as usual. He did not shut his door with unusual care, nor change his creaking boots for slippers. And above all, his violin was heard wailing, chanting, exulting, as it had always been – the only voice the lonely man ever found for the mysterious pain and sorrow and aspiration that ruled his life.

Mrs. Marshall's room was on the same floor. She was used to the violin, and fond of music. She had not felt it an annoyance except sometimes late at night, until, at one of the daily congresses of ladies in her room, she found herself condoled with as a most patient, suffering martyr on its account. One had said, "I wonder you endure it;" another, "if Mr. Marshall were only here, the man would not dare annoy you so;" and still another, "he must do it purposely, for he knows the

doctor says you must not be disturbed, and he must see what pains we all take to keep the house still, even the children behaving like lambs.”

At this moment some “lambs” upon the stairs set up a most un-lamblike howling and banging, and Mrs. Marshall, accepting the hint, resolved to add to her present highly exalted interestingness by enacting her new role. She grew nervous and hysterical, and could not be pacified till the great hush of austere silence was restored. She said nothing, however, about the precious darlings, whose mothers were in the room, but directed her vituperations against Mr. Southmore, till, gradually working herself into a paroxysm of excitement and self-pity, she declared she “hated him;” that if she “ever got well, she would be revenged on him;” that “he ought to be killed;” and a score of other half insane and foolish speeches.

And these speeches might have been forgotten, had not the constant pity and condolence of her friends brought as constant renewal of them, keeping alive the feeling they had aroused, till it became almost as intense and unreasonable as its expression. And yet Mrs. Marshall was a kind woman, who would not needlessly have harmed the smallest thing that had life, and even amidst her wildest sallies of talk, had never, for one instant, a comprehension of the real and awful meaning of the words that were afterwards to be remembered against her so fearfully.

Meantime Mr. Southmore had continued to solace himself with the violin. At the request of Mr. Silverton, he played no more at a late hour of the night, but otherwise it was just as usual. Mrs. Marshall was convalescent; could the exact truth have been known, she greatly enjoyed Mr. Southmore’s playing, for he was a most accomplished performer, and she had a passionate fondness for music. But a kind of pleasant notoriety had attached to her vituperation of Mr. Southmore. It afforded a ready subject of conversation, and the role of a martyr was, on the whole, agreeable to her. On how small motives the most important actions of our lives – important for weal or woe – often hinge.

Now the winter had passed, and with it the illness. Mrs. Marshall had, for some time, been able to leave her room, and once or twice the house, but she still declared she hated Mr. Southmore, and only a day or two ago, in full female conclave at the lunch table, had, in a moment of excitement, raised by one dissenting voice, wished he was dead, and declared that any man or woman who would take his life would be a public benefactor.

One morning the house was thrilled with the tidings of his death. He had been found lying still, and white, and cold upon his bed, and near him the fatal, bloody knife that, with unerring certainty, had pierced his heart.

At first it was supposed that he died by the act of his own hand, but the medial experts, called to testify at the coroner’s inquest, testified that the blow had been struck from behind, probably as he lay sleeping, and entering beneath his shoulder, had found a vital region.

All was mystery. Nothing betokened that any but the usual occupants had been in the house during the night. Nothing was disturbed in the room of the murdered man, or stolen from any other. No one had been seen to enter or depart, and after wonder and surprise had expressed themselves in a thousand forms, and conjecture had subsided into silence, the memory of the

threats so often uttered by Mrs. Marshall began to revive. People hardly dared whisper the awful thought. No one believed in the full stress or force of them. But now, there lay stark and gory the corpse of the murdered man, and clear upon the memory of a score of hearers burned the awful threats that had so often sounded in their ears.

Mrs. Marshall was weeping and sobbing in her room. She was not strong, as yet, and the solemn awe and mystery of this death almost prostrated her. She remembered the wrath she had nursed, and the harsh words she had so often used. Her conscience smote her horribly for these, but not for the thought, ever cherished, of really doing him an evil. She did not understand, even now, why those from whom she sought sympathy turned against her – why she met only cold glances and averted faces – why the little children fled from her, and there were whispered conferences upon the landings and in the rooms of her whilom friends, from which she was rigorously excluded. As she approached, the whisperings would cease, or the conversation receive a forced turn. Even yet, and through all that long night, so sad and sleepless, no thought that any really connected her with the dead man's fate ever reached her mind.

And yet the whisper had spread to the outer air, and gone abroad upon the winds. A shrewd detective had already begun to “work up” the case, and all the night through either himself or some of his myrmidons lurked where the glimmer of the faint light in her room was ever in their sight, and no person could leave or enter the house unobserved.

No person had come forward to lay any claim of relationship, or even acquaintanceship to the body of the murdered man, and that day he was to be buried. A lawyer, who had a few times transacted some business of minor importance for him, had volunteered to superintend his funeral, on finding that there remained in his bureau money enough, and more, to defray all expenses. He and a cortege from the house, and the crowd whom curiosity would bring together, would form the mourning train, when all that remained of the mysterious stranger should be borne to the grave.

But there was still one thing to be done. With the earliest morning light the officers of the law entered the house, and arrested Mrs. Marshall on suspicion of having caused his death.

The woman was stunned – for a time unconscious. Her husband was again absent from home, all unsuspecting of the dreadful charge his dear wife was called to meet alone. No woman of all the pretended friends who had once gathered around her came now to speak one word, or perform one act of sympathy or solace. A servant came silently, and applied some restoratives under the orders of the officers, and in the same manner helped the stricken woman to dress, and stood by in sulky silence while her room was searched. And then the officer took her down stairs and placed her in the waiting carriage, without a word of sympathy from any of those who had so lately been her dear five hundred friends. Long before the funeral train had returned from Greenwood she had had her examination before a magistrate, and was committed to the Tombs. And the evening papers held up her case before the world that condemned more than it pitied, while she lay half fainting in the stupor of her grief and bewilderment in the stony cell, not colder, not more pitiless than the hearts which so lately had beaten with pretended, perhaps for the time, real sympathy for her.

I have not space if I could describe all the acute and fearful sufferings that followed as a swift punishment upon this unhappy woman. The obloquy, the disgrace, the fearful apprehension of a terrible fate; these and the physical suffering. Surely they were sufficient for one who had meant no ill; and yet they scarred and scared her whole being.

Of course her husband at once returned to her, and all that love could suggest, as well as the counsel of those learned in the law was done.

The case never came to trial. It soon became evident that she had been prejudiced, and that beyond her foolish and ill-considered words there had been no hold for suspicion.

The real culprit, the pretended friend whom Mr. Southmore had offered a night's lodging in his room, and in his usual silent manner conveyed thither, and who had as silently fled, was found. The crime was brought home to him by ample and indisputable evidence, as well as by his own confession. Southmore was the victim of a vengeance long sought, and that would have been just had man's vengeance ever been so.

Mrs. Marshall was discharged. Broken in health, and overwhelmed by an unquenchable remorse, it was long before she re-entered society or could enjoy any of the pleasures of life. She did not return to Mrs. Silverton's but to a quiet home of her own, where she at least won back some measure of the peace she had lost.

Mrs. Silverton, contrary to her hopes and expectations, did not gain for her house the popularity she desired. Perhaps if Mrs. Marshall had been hanged for the murder she did not commit, the result, in this respect, might have been different.

Published in
The New York Ledger, February 2, 1867