

The Monomaniac

by Thomas Waters

THE following narrative relates more to medical than to criminal history; but as the affair came in some degree under my notice as a public officer, I have thought it might not be altogether out of place in these slight outlines of police experience. Strange and unaccountable as it may I at first appear, its general truth will hardly be questioned by those who have had opportunities of observing the fantastic delusions which haunt and dominate the human brain in certain phases of mental aberration.

On arriving in London in 1831, I took lodgings at a Mr. Renshawe's, in Mile End Road, not far from the turnpike-gate. My inducement to do so, was partly the cheapness and neatness of the accommodation, partly that the landlord's maternal uncle, a Mr. Oxley, was slightly known to me. Henry Renshawe I knew by reputation only, he having left Yorkshire ten or eleven years before, and even that knowledge was slight and vague. I had heard that a tragical event had cast a deep shadow over his after-life; that he had been for some months the inmate of a private lunatic asylum; and that some persons believed his brain had never thoroughly recovered its original healthy action. In this opinion both my wife and myself very soon concurred; and yet I am not sure that we could have given a satisfactory reason for such belief. He was, it is true, usually kind and gentle, even to the verge of simplicity, but his general mode of expressing himself and conducting business was quite coherent and sensible; although in spite of his resigned cheerfulness of tone and manner, it was at times quite evident, that whatever the mental hurt he had received, it had left a rankling, perhaps remorseful, sting behind. A small, well-executed portrait in his sitting-room suggested a conjecture of the nature of the calamity which had befallen him. It was that of a fair, mild-eyed, very young woman, but of a pensive, almost mournful, cast of features, as if the coming events, briefly recorded in the lower right-hand corner of the painting, had already, during life and health, cast its projecting shadow over her. That brief record was this:—"Laura Hargreaves, born 1804; drowned 1821." No direct allusion to the picture ever passed his lips in my hearing, although, from being able to chat together of Yorkshire scenes and times, we speedily became excellent friends. Still, there were not wanting, from time to time, significant indications, though difficult to place in evidence, that the fire of insanity had not been wholly quenched, but still smouldered and glowed beneath the habit-hardened crust which concealed it from the careless or casual observer. Exciting circumstances, not very long after my arrival in the metropolis, unfortunately kindled those brief wild sparkles into a furious and consuming flame.

Mr. Renshawe was in fair circumstances—that is, his income, derived from funded property alone, was nearly £300 a year; but his habits were close, thrifty, almost miserly. His personal appearance was neat and gentlemanly, but he kept no servant. A char-woman came once a day to arrange his chamber and perform other household work, and he usually dined, very simply, at a coffee-house or tavern. His house, with the exception of a sitting and bed room, was occupied by lodgers; amongst these was a pale, weakly looking young man, of the name of Irwin. He was suffering from pulmonary consumption—a disease induced, I was informed, by his careless folly in remaining in his wet clothes after having assisted, during the greater part of the night, at a large fire at a coach-factory. His trade was in gold and silver lace-work—bullion for epaulettes,

and so on; and as he had a good connection with several West-end establishments, his business appeared to be a thriving one; so much so, that he usually employed several assistants of both sexes. He occupied the first floor, and a workshop at the end of the garden. His wife, a pretty-featured, well-formed, graceful young woman, of not more than two or three-and-twenty, was, they told me, the daughter of a school master, and certainly had been gently and carefully nurtured. They had one child, a sprightly, curly-haired, bright-eyed boy, nearly four years old. The wife, Ellen Irwin, was reputed to be a first-rate hand at some of the lighter parts of her husband's business: and her efforts to lighten his toil, and compensate by increased exertion for his daily diminishing capacity for labor, were unwearied and incessant. Never have I seen a more gentle, thoughtful tenderness, than was displayed by that young wife towards her suffering, and sometimes not quite evenly-tempered, partner, who, however, let me add, appeared to reciprocate truthfully her affection; all the more so, perhaps, that he knew their time together upon earth had already shrunk to a brief span. In my opinion, Ellen Irwin was a handsome, even an elegant young person; this, however, is in some degree a matter of taste. But no one could deny that the gentle kindness, the beaming compassion, that irradiated her features as she tended the fast-sinking invalid, rendered her at such times absolutely beautiful—angelized her, to use an expression of my wife's, with whom she was a prime favorite. I was self-debating for about the twentieth time one evening, where it was I had formerly seen her, with that sad, mournful look of hers; for seen her I was sure I had, and not long since either, It was late; I had just returned home; my wife was in the sick room, and I entered it with two or three oranges:—"Oh, now I remember," I suddenly exclaimed, just above my breath; "the picture in Mr. Renshawe's room! What a remarkable coincidence!"

A low, chuckling laugh, close at my elbow, caused me to turn quickly towards the door. Just within the threshold stood Mr. Renshawe, looking like a white stone image rather than a living man, but for the fierce sparkling of his strangely-gleaming eyes, and the mocking, triumphant curl of his lips. "You, too, have at last observed it, then?" he muttered, faintly echoing the undertone in which I spoke: "I have known the truth for many weeks." The manner, the expression, not the words, quite startled me. At the same moment a cry of women rang through the room, and I immediately seized Mr. Renshawe by the arm, and drew him forcibly away, for there was that in his countenance which should not meet the eyes of a dying man.

"What were you saying? What truth have you known for weeks?" I asked as soon as we had reached his sitting-room.

Before he could answer, another wailing sound came from the sick room. Lightning leaped from Renshawe's lustrous, dilating eyes, and the exulting laugh again, but louder, burst from his lips; "Ha! ha!" he fiercely exclaimed. "I know that cry! It is Death's—Death's! Thrice blessed death, whom I have so often ignorantly cursed! But that," he added quickly, and peering sharply in my face, "was when, as you know, people said"—and he ground his teeth with rage—"people said I was crazed—mad!"

"What can you mean by this wild talk, my friend?" I replied in as unconcerned and quieting a tone as I could immediately assume. "Come, sit down: I was asking the meaning of your strange words below, just now?"

“The meaning of my words? You know as well as I do. Look there!”

“At the painting? Well?”

“You have seen the original,” he went on with the same excited tone and gestures. “It crossed me like a flash of lightning. Still it is strange she does not know me. It is sure she does not! But I am changed, no doubt—sadly changed!” he added, dejectedly, as he looked in a mirror.

“Can you mean that I have seen Laura Hargreaves here?” I stammered, thoroughly bewildered. “She who was drowned ten or eleven years ago?”

“To be sure—to be sure! It is so believed, I admit, by everybody—by myself, and the belief drove me mad! And yet, I now remember, when I was calm—when the pale face, blind staring eyes, and dripping hair, ceased for awhile to pursue and haunt me, the low, sweet voice and gentle face came back, and I knew she lived, though all denied it. But look, it is her very image!” he added fiercely, his glaring eyes flashing from the portrait to my face alternately.

“Whose image?”

“Whose image!—Why Mrs. Irwin’s, to be sure. You yourself admitted it just now.” I was so confounded, that for several minutes I remained stupidly and silently staring at the man. At length I said, “Well, there is a likeness, though not so great as I imagined”—

“It is false!” he broke in furiously. “It is her very self.”

“We’ll talk of that tomorrow. You are ill, over-excited, and must go to bed. I hear Dr. Garland’s voice below; he shall come to you.”

“No—no—no!” he almost screamed. “Send me no doctors; I hate doctors! But I’ll go to bed—since you wish it; but no doctors! Not for the world!” As he spoke, he shrank coweringly backwards, out of the room; his wavering, unquiet eyes fixed upon mine as long as we remained within view of each other: a moment afterwards, I heard him dart into his chamber, and bolt and double lock the door.

It was plain that lunacy, but partially subdued, had resumed its former mastery over the unfortunate gentleman. But what an extraordinary delusion! I took a candle, and examined the picture with renewed curiosity. It certainly bore a strong resemblance to Mrs. Irwin: the brown, curling hair, the pensive eyes, the pale, fairness of complexion, were the same; but it was scarcely more girlish, more youthful, than the young matron was now, and the original, had she lived would have been by this time approaching to thirty years of age! I went softly downstairs and found, as I feared, that George Irwin was gone. My wife came weeping out of the death-chamber, accompanied by Dr. Garland, to whom I forthwith related what had taken place. He listened with attention and interest; and after some sage observations upon the strange fancies which now and then took possession of the minds of monomaniacs, agreed to see Mr. Renshawe

at ten the next morning. I was not required upon duty till eleven; and if it were in the physician's opinion desirable, I was to write at once to the patient's uncle, Mr. Oxley.

Mr. Renshawe was, I heard, stirring before seven o'clock, and the char-woman informed me, that he had taken his breakfast as usual, and appeared to be in cheerful, almost high spirits. The physician was punctual: I tapped at the sitting-room door, and was desired to come in. Mr. Renshawe was seated at a table with some papers before him, evidently determined to appear cool and indifferent. He could not, however, repress a start of surprise, almost of terror, at sight of the physician, and a paleness, followed by a hectic flush, passed quickly over his countenance. I observed, too, that the portrait was turned with its face towards the wall.

By a strong effort, Mr. Renshawe regained his simulated composure, and in reply to Dr. Garland's professional inquiry, as to the state of his health, said with a forced laugh: "My friend Waters has, I suppose, been amusing you with the absurd story that made him stare so last night. It is exceedingly droll, I must say, although many persons, otherwise acute enough, cannot except upon reflection, comprehend a jest. There was John Kemble, the tragedian, for instance, who—"

"Never mind John Kemble my dear sir," interrupted Dr. Garland. "Do pray tell the story over again. I love an amusing jest."

Mr. Renshawe hesitated for an instant, and then said with reserve, almost dignity of manner: "I do not know, sir"—his face, by the way, was determinedly averted from the cool, searching gaze of the physician—"I do not know, sir, that I am obliged to find you in amusement; and as your presence here was not invited, I shall be obliged by your leaving the room as quickly as may be."

"Certainly—certainly, sir. I am exceedingly sorry to have intruded, but I am sure you will permit me to have a peep at this wonderful portrait."

Renshawe sprung impulsively forward to prevent the doctor reaching it. He was too late; and Dr. Garland, turning sharply round with the painting in his hand, literally transfixed him in an attitude of surprise and consternation. Like the Ancient Mariner, he held him by his glittering eye, but the spell was not an enduring one. "Truly," remarked Dr. Garland, as he found the kind of mesmeric influence he had exerted beginning to fail, "not so very bad a chance resemblance; especially about the eyes and mouth"—

"This is very extraordinary conduct," broke in Mr. Renshawe: "and I must again request that you will both leave the room."

It was useless to persist, and we almost immediately went away. "Your impression, Mr. Waters," said the physician as he was leaving the house, "is, I dare say, the true one; but he is on his guard now, and it will be prudent to wait for a fresh outbreak before acting decisively; more especially as the hallucination appears to be quite a harmless one."

This was not, I thought, quite so sure, but of course I acquiesced as in duty bound; and matters went on pretty much as usual for seven or eight weeks, except that Mr. Renshawe manifested

much aversion towards myself personally, and at last served me with a written notice to quit at the end of the term previously stipulated for. There was still some time to that; and in the meanwhile, I caused a strict watch to be set, as far as was practicable without exciting observation, upon our landlord's words and acts.

Ellen Irwin's first tumult of grief subsided, the next and pressing question related to her own and infant son's subsistence. An elderly man of the name of Tomlins was engaged as foreman; and it was hoped the business might still be carried on with sufficient profit. Mr. Renshawe's manner, though at times indicative of considerable nervous irritability, was kind and respectful to the young widow; and I began to hope that the delusion he had for a while labored under had finally passed away.

The hope was a fallacious one. We were sitting at tea on a Sunday evening, when Mrs. Irwin, pale, and trembling with fright and nervous agitation, came hastily in, with her little boy in her hand. I correctly divined what had occurred. In reply to my hurried questioning, the astounded young matron told me in substance, that within the last two or three days Mr. Renshawe's strange behavior and disjointed talk had both bewildered and alarmed her. He vaguely intimated that she, Ellen Irwin, was really Laura somebody else—that she had kept company with him, Mr. Renshawe, in Yorkshire, before she knew poor George—with many other strange things he muttered, rather than spoke out; and especially that was owing to her son reminding her continually of his father, that she pretended not to have known Mr. Renshawe twelve or thirteen years ago. "In short," added the young woman with tears and blushes, "he is utterly crazed; for he asked me just now to marry him—which I would not do for the Indies—and is gone away in a passion to find a paper that will prove, he says, I am that other Laura something."

There was something so ludicrous in all this, however vexatious and insulting under the circumstances—the recent death of the husband, and the young widow's unprotected state—that neither of us could forbear laughing at the conclusion of Mrs. Irwin's story. It struck me, too, that Renshawe had conceived a real and ardent passion for the very comely and interesting person before us—first prompted, no doubt, by her accidental likeness to the portrait; and that some mental flaw or other caused him to confound her with the Laura who had in early life excited the same emotion in his mind.

Laughable as the matter was in one sense, there was—and the fair widow had noticed as well as myself—a serious, menacing expression in the man's eye not to be trifled with; and at her earnest request, we accompanied her to her own apartment, to which Renshawe had threatened soon to return. We had not been a minute in the room, when his hurried step was heard approaching, and Mrs. Waters and I stepped hastily into an adjoining closet, where we could hear and partly see all that passed. Renshawe's speech trembled with fervency and anger as he broke at once into the subject with which his disordered brain was reeling.

"You will not dare to say, will you, that you do not remember this song—that these pencil-marks in the margin were not made by you thirteen years ago?" he menacingly ejaculated.

“I know nothing about the song, Mr. Renshawe,” rejoined the young woman, with more spirit than she might have exhibited but for my near presence. “It is really such nonsense. Thirteen years ago I was only about nine years of age.”

“You persist, then, unfeeling woman, in this cruel deception! After all, too, that I have suffered; the days of gloom, the nights of horror, since that fearful moment when I beheld you dragged, a lifeless corpse, from the water, and they told me you were dead!”

“Dead! Gracious goodness, Mr. Renshawe, don’t go on in this shocking way! I was never dragged out of a pond, nor supposed to be dead—never! You quite frighten one.”

“Then you and I, your sister, and thrice-accursed Bedford, did not, on the 7th of August, 1842, go for a sail on the piece of water at Lowfield, and the skiff was not, in the deadly, sudden, jealous strife between him and me, accidentally upset? But I know how it is: it is this brat, and the memories he recalls, that—”

Mrs. Irwin screamed, and I stepped sharply into the room. The grasp of the lunatic was on the child’s throat. I loosed it somewhat roughly, throwing him off with a force that brought him to the ground. He rose quickly, glared at me with tiger-like ferocity, and then darted out of the room. The affair had become serious, and the same night I posted a letter to Yorkshire, informing Mr. Oxley of what had occurred, and suggesting the propriety of his immediately coming to London. Measures were also taken for securing Mrs. Irwin and her son from molestation.

But the cunning of lunacy is not easily baffled. On returning home the fourth evening after the dispatch of my letter, I found the house and immediate neighborhood in the wildest confusion. My own wife was in hysterics; Mrs. Irwin, I was told by half-a-dozen tongues at once, was dying; and the frightful cause of all was, that little George Irwin, a favorite with everybody, had in some unaccountable manner fallen into the river Lea, and been drowned. This, at least, was the general conviction, although the river had been dragged to no purpose—the poor child’s black beaver hat and feather having been discovered floated to the bank, a considerable way down the stream. The body, it was thought, had been carried out into the Thames, by the force of the current.

A terrible suspicion glanced across my mind. “Where is Mr. Renshawe?” I asked. Nobody knew. He had not been seen since five o’clock—about the time, I soon ascertained, that the child was missed. I had the house cleared, as quickly as possible, of the numerous gossips that crowded it, and then sought a conference with Dr. Garland, who was with Mrs. Irwin. The distracted mother had, I found, been profusely bled and cupped, and it was hoped that brain-fever, which had been apprehended, would not ensue. The physician’s suspicions pointed the same way as mine; but he declined committing himself to any advice, and I was left to act according to my own discretion. I was new to such matters at that time—unfortunately so, as it proved, or the affair might have had a less painful issue.

Tomlins and I remained up, waiting for the return of Mr. Renshawe; and as the long, slow hours limped past, the night-silence only broken by the dull moaning, and occasional spasmodic screams of poor Mrs. Irwin, I grew very much excited. The prolonged absence of Mr. Renshawe

confirmed my impressions of his guilt, and I determined to tax him with it, and take him into custody the instant he appeared. It was two in the morning before he did so; and the nervous fumbling for full ten minutes with his latch-key, before he could open the door, quite prepared me for the spectral-like aspect he presented on entering. He had met somebody, it afterwards appeared, outside, who had assured him that the mother of the drowned child was either dead or dying. He never drank, I knew, but he staggered as if intoxicated; and after he had with difficulty reached the head of the stairs, in reply to my question as to where he had been, he could only stutter with white trembling lips: "It—it—cannot be—be true—that Lau—that Mrs. Irwin is—dying?"

"Quite true, Mr. Renshawe," I very imprudently replied, and in much too loud a tone, for we were but a few paces from Mrs. Irwin's bedroom door. "And if, as I suspect, the child has been drowned by you, you will have before long two murders on your head."

A choking, bubbling noise came from the wretched man's throat, and his shaking fingers vainly strove to loosen his neck-tie. At the same moment, I heard a noise as of struggling, in the bedroom, and the nurse's voice in eager remonstrance. I instantly made a movement towards Mr. Renshawe, with a view to loosen his cravat—his features being frightfully convulsed, and to get him out of the way as quickly as possible, for I guessed what was about to happen—when he, mistaking my intention, started back, turned half round, and found himself confronted by Mrs. Irwin, her pale features and white nightdress dabbled with blood, in consequence of a partial disturbance of the bandages in struggling with the nurse—a terrifying, ghastly sight even to me; to him utterly overwhelming, and scarcely needing her frenzied execrations on the murderer of her child to deprive him utterly of all remaining sense and strength. He suddenly reeled, threw his arms wildly into the air, and before I could stretch forth my hand to save him, fell heavily backwards from the edge of the steep stairs, where he was standing, to the bottom. Tomlins and I hastened to his assistance, lifted him up, and as we did so, a jet of blood gushed from his mouth; he had likewise received a terrible wound near the right temple, from which the life-stream issued copiously.

We got him to bed; Dr. Garland and a neighboring surgeon were soon with us, and prompt remedies were applied. It was a fruitless labor. Day had scarcely dawned before we heard from the physician's lips that life with him was swiftly ebbing to its close. He was perfectly conscious and collected. Happily, there was no stain of murder on his soul: he had merely enticed the child away, and placed him, under an ingenious pretence, with an acquaintance at Camden Town; and by this time both he and his mother were standing, awe-struck and weeping, by Henry Renshawe's death-bed. He had thrown the child's hat into the river, and his motive in thus acting appeared to have been a double one. In the first place, because he thought the boy's likeness to his father was the chief obstacle to Mrs. Irwin's toleration of his addresses; and next, to bribe her into compliance by a promise to restore her son. But he could not be deemed accountable for his actions. "I think," he murmured brokenly, "that the delusion was partly self-cherished, or of the Evil One. I observed the likeness long before, but it was not till the—the husband was dying, that the idea fastened itself upon my aching brain, and grew there. But the world is passing; forgive me—Ellen—Laura"—He was dead!

The inquest on the cause of death returned, of course, that it was “accidental:” but I long regretted that I had not been less precipitate, though perhaps all was for the best—for the sufferer as well as others. Mr. Oxley had died some five weeks previously. This I found from Renshawe’s will, where it was recited as a reason that, having no relative alive for whom he cared, his property was bequeathed to Guy’s Hospital, charged with 100l. a year to Ellen Irwin, as long as she lived unmarried. The document was perfectly coherent; and although written during the height of his monomania, contained not a word respecting the identity of the youthful widow and the Laura whose sad fate had first unsettled the testator’s reason.

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