

A Noble Sacrifice

A Tale of Washington, D. C.

by Sinclair

“HOLLO, Bob.”

“Hollo yourself.”

“Anything new today?”

“Not a thing. It has been awfully dull, and I haven’t heard any news today.”

“Well, as you don’t seem to be able to stir me up a murder or two or anything else equally lively and interesting, I shall meander up town.”

And suiting the deed to the words I left to go to my office.

Before I go any further I will take the liberty of introducing myself. I was, at the time I am writing of, the police reporter on a large Washington daily. The young man whom I was addressing was one of the telephone operators at Police Headquarters, — Bob Richards, — and our conversation took place in the telephone room in that building. It was my regular custom to drop in at Police Headquarters every afternoon about four o’clock, get what news I could there, and then, wending my way up to the office, turn in whatever “copy” I might have collected during the afternoon.

It was a beautiful day at the commencement of May. The countless number of little parks for which Washington is so justly famous looked lovely in their new spring suits; the trees were one mass of verdant foliage; the birds sang their brightest lays as if hailing with satisfaction the return of warm weather; Pennsylvania Avenue was thronged with a gay crowd of handsomely dressed and beautiful women, — women that one can see only in Washington, — in fact it was an enlivening scene, and one that might make a man, unless he was a chronic dyspeptic, forget his troubles for the nonce.

I walked along the avenue, recognizing here and there a friend, bowing to an acquaintance, and passing “cheek by jowl” with many a distinguished public man. Presently the president drove past in an open landau, drawn by a pair of handsome bays. Several people raised their hats to him, and he acknowledged the salutation by gracefully bowing. Senators, Congressmen, cabinet ministers, heads of bureaux, government clerks, elegant young dandies, fashionable ladies, members of the *demi monde*, gamblers, and lobbyists, some on foot, and some in carriages, many of whom were distinguishable from the common crowd by their dress or bearing, were all being drawn by various ways to one common end, — dinner.

As for myself I never allowed my meals to bother me, and being most irregular in my habits it made very little difference to me whether I got my prandial meal half an hour earlier or later. So I leisurely strolled along, a good cigar in my mouth, and my eye open for an “item.”

Near the corner of Ninth Street I was arrested by the sight of an object which has before this caused older heads than mine to pause in their journey through life — a beautiful woman.

Coming toward me was a lady and gentleman. “A daughter of the gods, divinely tall,” was she. Very fair, with blue eyes, an exquisite complexion, and light golden hair, she was attired in a dress of purple plush that fitted her form faultlessly. There was such ease and grace in her every movement, and her bearing was so patrician, that no one could see her without being struck by her beauty. It would puzzle the ordinary male, I think, to describe her hat. I only know that in the rapid glance I cast at her I thought that bewitching was the only word that properly described it. The only jewelry she [wore] was a pair of large solitaire diamond earrings. Her hands were gloved in long gray kids, in her left hand she carried a dainty lace parasol. Her companion’s appearance was not less striking than her own. He was very tall, nearly six feet I imagined, with a lithe, well-proportioned figure. He was as dark as his companion was fair, with a heavy black mustache and a pair of piercing black eyes. He wore a suit of the latest cut of imported gray goods, his hat, gloves, boots, and jewelry, all bespoke a man of means, but there was nothing loud or flashy about his appearance. The lady I took to be an American, the gentleman a Spaniard.

As they passed me I must confess I was impertinent enough to stare the lady full in the face, and afterward to turn and watch the backs of their figures until they were out of sight. My first thoughts were to turn and follow them, but my engagements prevented me from doing so, and I felt a repugnance in playing the part of spy. Still I was deeply interested in knowing who the handsome couple were, and my fancy immediately began to weave a little romance round them. “Were they husband and wife?” I asked myself. No, I thought not. “Was she married?” Yes, I was certain of that. So, some gay Lothario with another man’s wife. And yet the face was too pure and innocent for me to attribute anything bad to its possessor. “Who were they then?” I was acquainted with nearly everybody worth knowing; if they were residents I should have met or heard of them before, so of course they must be strangers.

I got up to the office, and turned in my copy to the city editor. I looked at the assignment book, and found I was marked down for a scientific society lecture. It was a very dry and to me uninteresting subject. Although I heard the lecturer discourse about “molecules” and “atoms,” and mechanically wrote, yet my thoughts followed that picture of female loveliness, and her face appeared on the paper. At last Mr. Dryasdust closed his notes, I hastily put my papers in my pocket, and left the building. I then went to the various hotels, and, by cautious inquiries addressed to the clerks, sought to find out if the objects of my search had registered. But my interrogations elicited no information.

My principal duties on the paper were to look after “crimes and casualties” (I was familiarly known round the office as “Horrors”), but in addition I had the usual miscellaneous work that falls to the lot of every reporter in a large city. During the next couple of weeks I was at cabinet ministers’ receptions, balls, private parties, and dinners, and my one hope was that I might meet

either the lady or gentleman, and find out more about them. I cannot tell why I was so interested; it is one of those mysterious things that no one knows. I only know that all my energies were aroused to find out who and what they were.

It must have been nearly three weeks after the day I have first mentioned at the commencement of this “o’er true tale,” that I was sitting in the office writing up the account of a most cold-blooded murder that had occurred just after the evening papers went to press that afternoon. I had finished a column article, and threw myself back in my chair prepared to find solid comfort in the enjoyment of a pipe. I had taken some half dozen whiffs when the telephone rang out. The office boy went to answer it, and called out, —
“Horrors, you’re wanted.”

I went to the instrument, and inquired, —

“Well, what do you want?”

“Is that you, Frank?” came back the well-known voice of Bob Richards, who was on duty that night at headquarters.

“Yes,” I replied.

“Just received a despatch, that the body of a woman has been taken out of the river, and is at the Georgetown station. You had better go after it.”

“Much obliged. O. K.”

And I hung up the instrument on the hook.

Putting a cigar in my mouth, I took the next car, and reached my destination in about twenty minutes. In front of the station house was the usual morbid and curious crowd of small boys, men, and women, that always congregate whenever anything exciting or horrible is going on. Nodding to the lieutenant, who was standing in the office, I asked where the “stiff” was.

“Out in the shed,” he said, pointing toward the rear. “I guess you know your way.”

I had been there too often on similar ghastly errands not to know it, and so walked leisurely over to a little outhouse in the yard. At the door stood a policeman, who, recognizing me, touched his hat, and opening the door disclosed the interior of the shed, a small, low, white-washed building, empty except in the centre stood a board on trestles on which lay something covered by a white sheet. A reporter becomes hardened to scenes of suffering, and the sight of death, and it was in a very heartless tone that I said to the policeman, —

“Young or old, pretty or homely?”

“Indeed she is pretty and quite young.”

I lifted up the corner of the sheet that covered the face, and letting it drop, with a cry of amazement reeled almost to the door.

“Wot’s the matter?” said the policeman, calm and imperturbable as every well-regulated policeman should be.

Regaining my composure almost instantly, I replied, —

“She reminds me of some one I once knew.”

Again urged by the terrible fascination I approached the corpse, and throwing the sheet back gazed on the lovely features of the woman who had made such an impression on me. Long and ardently I gazed on the face, looking in the cold pallor of death even more beautiful than when I had last seen it in the full flush of health. Never had fancy of painter conceived, nor artist painted, nor sculptor modeled a lovelier image of an angel than her who lay in this miserable little shed. The features were in perfect repose, and looked like chiseled marble. Not a scar or mark was visible, and it was evident the body had only been in the water a very short time, as it was not bloated or discolored. I threw back the sheet still farther. The woman had on a blue French bunting which clung to her form like Grecian drapery, and showed its graceful curves. The heavy golden hair hung down in luxuriant profusion over the breast, and seemed to frame the face, and increase its statuesque appearance by the contrast. A fly settled on her forehead. I lightly brushed it off with my handkerchief. I feared it might disturb her sleep. Yes, she slept, but it was the sleep that knows no awakening.

Sorrowfully I re-entered the station. It seemed to me as if the beautiful woman I left behind me was a part of my own life. If she had been a near and dear friend I could not have been more grieved. I soon gleaned what facts were known. Some men out in a boat had seen a dark object floating on the river. To their horror they discovered it to be a woman’s body. They had taken it to the bank, and communicated with the police. How it came there or who she was nobody knew. In the office, talking with the lieutenant, was James Clarke, the oldest detective on the force. Drawing Clarke aside I told him what I knew about the case, and that I had suspicions of foul play. We agreed that we would say nothing about it until the inquest was held next day. So I returned to the office, and wrote a short paragraph of the finding of the body, and grew eloquent over the dead’s surpassing loveliness, which provoked the facetious remark from the city editor that “Horrors was mashed again, and this time on a stiff,” whereat the other boys laughed.

Next day I repeated to the coroner what I had told Clarke the night before. At Clarke’s request the coroner decided he would not call me, but ordered a *post mortem* to be made. The *post mortem* revealed a remarkable state of things. Not a trace of poison nor any natural cause was found that could have produced death. The various organs were in perfect condition. It was the general verdict of the surgeons who assisted at the operation that death had ensued before the body was placed in the water; there was neither water nor sand in the lungs; the stomach was natural; the heart, except for a slight venous congestion, was normal. What was the cause of death then? Pursuing their investigations they arrived at the following theory, a theory that seemed rational: —

The deceased had been placed under the influence of a powerful anaesthetic, what the physicians declined to state, but believed it to be ether. In this condition she had been put in the water, and, without a struggle, quietly passed away. There was a slight predisposition to heart disease, the ether had at once attacked that organ, and acted with the deadly results.

These facts being laid before the jury they returned the usual verdict of “death at the hands of some person or persons unknown.” The woman’s identity was completely lost. Her underclothing, all very fine, was unmarked; she was dead, and seemed not to have left a single clew behind her. The police department kept all her clothes, and took her photograph. I obtained permission from the coroner to cut off a long tress, which I carefully tied up, and put away. The affair created great excitement for a few days; the authorities offered five hundred dollars’ reward for the detection of her murderers; then the matter dropped, and there were few people outside of police officials who ever gave the nameless woman, resting in a pauper’s grave, a single thought. But I had not forgotten her. Her memory haunted me constantly, and do what I would, she seemed to call on me to track her murderers to their doom. I agreed with Clarke that we would work up the case, but we had so little to make a start on that it seemed almost hopeless that we should ever bring the villains to justice. After making a few preliminary inquiries, and being foiled at every turn, we determined to bide our time, and trust to circumstances. Of one thing I was certain: I should meet the dark-complexioned man again.

Two years rolled round, years that had been busy ones with me, and left me very little time to think about that lovely face. Save for a tress of golden hair, which I sometimes gazed at, I believed the occurrence to have been almost the imagination of my fancy. Clarke and I occasionally talked the matter over, but we had no hope now that justice would ever be done. It was one of those mysterious crimes with which police annals are always full, and which never are detected.

It was in the winter at the very height of the season that I went one night to Ford’s Opera House. It was the first appearance in Washington of a world-renowned soprano in Italian opera, and, as a consequence, the house was crowded by the fashionable world. In the intermission between the first and second acts I strolled round the main aisle back of the parquet, making a note of the distinguished people present. The president and a party of ladies and gentlemen were in the left-hand lower box. In the opposite box was the British minister and his daughter. The other boxes had equally prominent people in them. Among the audience I noticed three or four cabinet ministers, several assistant secretaries, the heads of many important bureau, a majority of the diplomatic corps and society generally. But in all that vast audience there was one face that riveted my attention, and caused every drop of blood in my body to rush in a wild torrent to my heart. In the fifth row from the stage, in the end seat, sat the man whom I had last seen on that memorable May afternoon two years ago. He looked supremely handsome and supremely indifferent, in fact, I thought, a trifle bored. Occasionally he would raise his opera glasses and survey the house, but never more than for a few seconds at a time. He was in evening dress, a set of very handsome diamond studs in his shirt bosom, and a diamond solitaire ring of unusual size and brilliance on the little finger of his left hand. His right hand was gloved. These details I took in in a minute. As a reporter I had acquired the faculty of catching details and striking points by one rapid glance. Again I looked at his face. Was I mistaken in my man? No, a thousand times

no. I should have known that face anywhere, and I felt as certain as mortal could be that the man I longed to stand face to face with was within an arm's length.

The overture to the second act commenced, and the man's eyes were instantly fixed on the orchestra. I at once made up my mind as to what course to pursue. Going to the box office I asked permission to use the telephone, and was placed in connection with police headquarters.

"Is Clarke there?" I asked.

"No," was the reply, "he left here about ten minutes ago, and said he was going right home."

I then ordered a district messenger boy to be immediately sent to the theatre. While waiting for him, I wrote the following note:

"*Clarke*, — Come here at once; have struck important clew in that matter. Bearer has a carriage. If not home come to my office as soon as you get this, and wait for me. Most important that I see you tonight.

"FRANK."

Giving my note to the boy I put him in a hack, and told the driver where to take him, promising the man an extra reward if he lost no time about it. My instructions to the boy were explicit. If Clarke should be out and it was not known where he had gone he was to leave the note, with strict injunctions that it be given to Clarke as soon he came in, and report to me. If it was known where Clarke was, he was to try and find him.

Leaving word with the door-keeper that I was to be sent for immediately the boy returned, I entered the Opera House. The man I was so deeply interested in was hanging on every note that fell from the *prima donna's* lips. When she finished her air he applauded her *con amore*, but yet with an easy and polished air. I could see that he was a musical critic, and that evidently music was one of his ruling passions. The act closed, and I stood there watching to see whether my gentleman would go out or not. No, there he sat with that same *blasé* air that I had before noticed. A few minutes afterward one of the ushers told me I was wanted outside. To my joy I found Clarke there.

"What is it?" he said.

"Wait a minute."

Having paid the boy, and dismissed the hack, I drew Clarke aside, and told him of my discovery.

"Are you sure that he is the man?"

"I can swear to it."

"All right, then. Let me see him, and I will tell you what our future plans must be."

I told Clarke I would enter the house first, and that he should stroll over to me, and I would point out the man. Taking up my station again, I was in a few minutes joined by the correspondent of one of the New-York dramatic papers, and the business manager of the opera troupe. We began discussing the merits of the performance when Clarke joined us. Introductions followed between him and the manager, and then I drew attention to the many handsome women in the audience. Clarke took the cue at once.

“Yes,” he said, “but there are a lot of handsome men here tonight.”

“I think,” replied the manager, “Washington can show as many beautiful women and handsome men as any city in the country.”

I pointed out several distinguished-looking men, naming each of them, and then, letting my eye wander over the house, said, —

“By the way, there is a face that would delight a painter. Look at that man in the end chair of the fifth row. What do you think of it, Clarke?”

The party all looked at the man, and Clarke narrowly scanned him. A little more casual conversation followed, and then the curtain was rung up for the third act.

“If that is your man,” said Clarke, in an undertone, “and he has had anything to do with that business, we have got a determined man to deal with.”

“I tell you I am as certain that the person sitting yonder is the man I saw on the avenue with the drowned lady as I am that we are standing here. But what are we to do?”

“Wait until the opera ends, then I will tell you.”

On any other occasion I should have enjoyed the opera immensely, but it was impossible for me that night to pay any attention to the music. I could not keep my eyes off the man, so fearful was I that he might give us the slip, and counted the minutes, thinking the opera never would come to an end. At last to my relief the heroine died, and the green curtain was rung down.

“Now, then,” said Clarke, “keep an eye on that fellow’s movements; don’t let him give us the slip.”

I watched him making his way up the aisle, and when he reached the door Clarke and I were by his side. Shaking off the hackmen who clustered round him, he walked up the avenue at a brisk pace, we following him. At the — House he entered, and, going up to the desk, asked for the key of number 279. I had heard the number, and, turning to the register, saw that the occupant of number 279 was Mr. Henry St. John, New York City. Before he had reached the elevator, Clarke was by his side, and, touching him lightly on the arm, said, —

“Excuse me, Mr. St. John, I wish to have a few words private conversation with you. Shall I accompany you to your room?”

St. John lifted his eyebrows, and turned haughtily on his questioner.

“I think you must be mistaken, sir, in the person you are addressing. I don’t know you.”

And he moved toward the elevator.

His words and manner implied, “I don’t want to know you.”

“I beg your pardon,” answered Clarke very quietly, “I am not mistaken. I have something very important to tell you, and you will do well to give me a private interview.”

“Why must it be tonight? and why can’t I talk to you in the reading-room?”

“Because the business must be settled tonight, and the reading-room is too public.”

St. John again looked at his determined questioner, and Clarke stood the gaze without flinching.

“Follow me,” was St. John’s brief reply.

“This gentleman will go with us,” said Clarke, turning to me.

St. John did not condescend to answer, but entered the elevator, and we followed him. On the second floor he had a parlor and bedroom, and, having entered his apartments, and lit the gas, he asked in the most icy tones for Clarke to explain his business. He stood leaning on a table in the centre of the room as he asked this question. Clarke crossed the room, and, putting his hand in his pocket, drew out a photograph, and asked St John if he had ever seen it before. St. John slowly took it, and glanced at it, then an awful pallor came into his face, and he trembled all over like a leaf. He swayed backward and forward as if he were going to drop, then his face grew livid, and I thought the man would choke. Letting the photograph fall on the floor he sank into a sofa, and, covering his face with his hands, said, —

“My God, again does she appear!”

Clarke said nothing, but, picking up the photograph, touched St. John on the shoulder, and said, —

“My name is James Clarke; I am a metropolitan police detective. I arrest you in connection with the murder of the woman whose photograph you have just seen.”

At these words up started St. John, his eyes flashing, and looking, despite his agitation, handsomer than ever.

“Arrest me? What do you mean? Sit down and explain yourself.”

He spoke calmly and distinctly. Clarke drew up a chair to the table. Fixing his eye on St. John he continued, —

“Two years ago last May you and that lady were seen on the avenue together.”

“Who saw us?” asked St John wildly.

Without heeding the interruption, Clarke went on, —

“That was the last seen of either of you until some weeks later when the woman’s dead body was found floating in the Potomac. The doctors agreed that the woman was murdered before being put in the water. In view of all these circumstances I must arrest you. In the proper place you will have a chance to vindicate yourself. Come with me peacefully, and there will be no scandal. Resist, and I shall have to employ force.”

St. John paced up and down the room once or twice, then, halting in front of Clarke, said, —

“Listen to what I have to say. I am a member of the old and wealthy St. John family of New York; that I am what I profess to be can very easily be ascertained. The woman whose portrait you showed me was to have been my wife. I have a twin brother so much like me that no one can tell us apart. He fell in love with the girl, and determined to marry her, but, as the lady was a variety actress, such a marriage would have been a terrible indignity in the eyes of my aristocratic relatives. The engagement, therefore, was kept a profound secret, my *fiancée* retired from the stage, and an early day was set for our marriage. By some means or other, how I do not know, my brother found out my betrothed’s residence, and personating himself for me — that could easily be done without fear of detection — he married her and left New York without leaving a clew behind him. I was nearly distracted when I learned what had happened; but, gentlemen” (and St John’s voice shook with emotion), “all my life I have been made the victim of my brother’s misdeeds. From the day he left New York to the present I have not heard a word from him. I have finished my story, and I am willing to go with you. Spare me as much public notoriety as possible. I wish to go in my bedroom for a few minutes to get some papers, and then I will accompany you.”

Saying these words he turned, and entered his bedroom. I heard him unlocking his valise, then there was a brief period of quiet, and then I heard a dull, heavy thud, as if of a body falling to the ground. Rushing in, Clarke and I found St. John stretched on the floor lifeless, a tiny vial tightly clasped in his right hand. There was a heavy, sickly odor in the room that told me at once what death-dealing instrument had been used. Stooping down, I raised the dead man’s head, and, placing my hand over his heart, found that it had ceased to beat, and that life was quite extinct. Taking the vial out of his hand, I found it contained, as I had imagined, hydrocyanic acid, and knew that a doctor’s services would be of no avail. Clarke and I held a consultation, and, comprehending that St. John had sacrificed himself to save the family name, determined on our part to shield the facts from the public gaze. We notified his relatives of the sad affair, and I privately informed his cousin, who came on to Washington, of the real cause of his death. This gentleman told the coroner that there was a tendency to heart disease in the family, and that it was their urgent request that no *post mortem* be held. The coroner accordingly gave a certificate

of death from natural causes, and except Clarke, St. John's cousin, and myself, no one knew the real cause of death.

Years have passed since that tragic event happened, but I can never think of it without regarding it as one of the noblest sacrifices I have ever heard of.

Ballou's Monthly Magazine, January 1883