

The Strange Perfume

Lounging carelessly in the arm-chair, his eyes fixed on a lady beside him with an open letter in her hand, was a tall, fair-haired young man.

“What have you there, mother?” he said, throwing his arms around her in a caressing way. “That smile makes you positively young, I declare.”

Losing his father in India when he was a child, a small legacy from his godmother had, with a most severe economy, given George Roberts a liberal education, while his mother had her small pension alone to depend upon.

Long years had passed, her father was dead, and her only brother, who inherited the estate, had refused any overtures toward a reconciliation. Not even in her mildest day-dream had Mrs. Roberts hoped to behold her childhood’s home again.

No wonder, then, that her cheek flushed and her eye brightened over the letter in her hand, for it contained the invitation for herself and son to spend the Christmas week at Locksley Grange. Though expressed in cold and formal terms, it was courteous and the buried years of the past were not alluded to.

The young man took the letter, which she gave him without comment, and glancing through it to the signature—“Paul Edward Hallowes”—looked up at his mother.

“Your uncle, my son.”

A flush of indignant feeling passed over the pleasant face. Was this cold and haughty uncle, who had so long ignored their existence, to summon them to his presence with a wave of his hand? By hard study and perseverance George had won a place at the bar, and he was content to labor, trusting to time. But it was with an inward struggle. As he looked at the eager expectation on his mother’s face, and the thought of her lonely life, that he controlled his resentment.

“You would like to go, dear mother?” he said, pleasantly.

“Yes, my boy; it seems as if I could die happier if I saw the old place once more.”

“Then we shall go,” he said. “I will make my arrangements for a holiday, and we will leave town on Wednesday,” and with a kiss he left her.

The master of Locksley Grange, a tall, erect old man, of most imposing presence, with snowy hair and whiskers, and brilliant, piercing, deep-set black eyes, shaded by shaggy eye-brows—like fierce fires overhung with jagged snow crags—greeted his sister and her son with stately courtesy, although no light of love beamed from his eyes to the gentlewoman who had been his childhood’s play-fellow.

One sharp glance he shot at his nephew as he made some comment on the journey, and then bade a servant usher them to their apartments.

When the dinner bell sounded, George conducted his mother—looking so fair and gentle in her soft gray silk, still with the delicate flush on her cheek—into the state drawing-room, where they were duly presented to the rector of Locksley and his curate. Still they waited, and in a few moments a young girl entered the room, of such unusual beauty that George Roberts stopped short in the middle of a sentence addressed to the curate, and never completed it.

She might have been about seventeen, with a slight form, graceful as a deer, hair a pale gold, which deepened into shadows of tawny sheen under the mellow wax-lights, and soft brown eyes, shaded by curling golden lashes. A dark silk dress, without ornament, displayed and heightened the delicately tinted skin and perfect figure. She approached the group timidly, and George, glancing at his uncle, saw, to his astonishment, a scowl sweep over his face as his eye rested on the fair vision.

“Miss Kedar,” he said, carelessly, presenting the young girl to his sister, with a wave of his jeweled hand, “a penniless orphan whom I keep out of charity, as her mother was an old friend of mine. She made a love match,” he added with a sneer. “You can take her into dinner,” he said to his nephew, with another wave of his white hand, as he turned to his sister with formal politeness.

George felt his indignation stir, as he saw the deep flush rise on the young girl’s face, and then fade into a marble paleness. But she did not raise her eyes to see the sympathy expressed in his.

The dinner passed pleasantly. The rector was a fluent and graceful conversationalist, and the host excited young Roberts to bring forward his knowledge of men and things, in his manly, earnest way, by the display of his own versatile powers to draw him out.

The young man had almost forgotten the silent beauty by his side, until a glance from her soft brown eyes, lighted with appreciative feeling, met his, and revived the sympathy and wonder he had felt at his uncle’s cruel nonchalance in alluding to her dependent position.

When the ladies retired, and the political questions of the day came up, the young lawyer so startled the older men with his brilliant eloquence, with his fresh and racy opinions so powerfully put, that they felt themselves in the presence of a master-spirit, which would soar far upward when its wings were fledged.

Long did George Roberts sit by his flickering fire before he retired to rest, wondering what might be the tie between his uncle and the lovely girl—what the cause of the singular hatred evinced toward her in so many trifling things.

His uncle’s morning greeting was cordial and kindly, seeming to have lost that disagreeable air of patronage which had so grated on his manhood the day before.

After breakfast he accompanied him on a ride over the estate, to view its improvements, and as they went, the old man skillfully drew out the particulars of his nephew's life, his views and feelings, his plans and hopes.

In the afternoon George accompanied his uncle into a little office adjoining the library, and saw the tenants come in with their yearly rents, where the bags of silver and gold were deposited in an iron chest. In this were secured the most valuable papers and the family jewels. The little room was strongly protected with bars and bolts, as it contained other articles of value.

The next day a grand dinner ball was to be given, to which all the gentry of the county were bidden, and the lower hall was also to be enlivened with a dance for the tenants and servants.

Considerable was the excitement, therefore, on this sudden opening of its doors, and many a young belle prepared to enter its gray, time-honored walls, with a curiosity awakened by tales of a mother or aunt.

Virginia Kedar, simply dressed in a delicate robe of white muslin, with a wreath of scarlet berries on her silken hair, was the beauty of the whole assemblage, and many were the whispers as to her birth and patronage.

George Roberts had become more and more fascinated with her, and this evening completed his enthrallment. For the first time in his life he was in love. Yet, he could not but notice how his uncle scowled at him when he danced with her, and his mind was filled with a thousand perplexities concerning her.

He lay awake till he heard the great hall clock strike three, his heart too full of the blissful dreams which come but once in a lifetime, to wish for slumber. Happy visions flitted before his eyes, in which he and Miss Kedar played a prominent part.

Suddenly he heard a faint grating noise in the silence of the night, although he could not tell from what direction it came, and listening attentively as it continued he softly opened his door. It seemed louder, and he perceived that it came from the library. The chest and its valuable contents flashed before his mind, and, without pausing an instant, he stole down the stairs.

The noise had ceased by the time he reached the foot of the stair-case, but he hastened into the library as silently as possible. The door into the office was ajar, and a faint light perceptible. As George looked through the crack, he saw a dark figure bending over the chest, examining papers. A slight exclamation escaped the robber as he took up a packet of letters tied with a broad blue ribbon and thrust it into his breast.

Then he arose from his kneeling position, put a bag of gold in each pocket, and as the light from the dark-lantern in his hand flashed for a moment on his face, George saw a deep, red scar on his cheek, where the black mask had slipped on side. The young man sprang toward the robber, calculating on the suddenness of the attack to be able to knock him down, but tripping on an unseen foot-stool he fell headlong into the room, while the robber vaulted through the open window as lightly as a cat.

When George picked himself up, there was no sign of the thief, and while he hesitated a moment whether to give chase or not, the uncle, roused with the noise of his fall, entered the room. He shivered when George described the robber, and still more when the young man picked up a glove on the floor, a small gray glove, delicately, yet singularly perfumed. Grasping it in his hand, the old man groaned bitterly and paced the floor irresolutely for a time, while his nephew watched him in amazement. Presently he turned to the window and refastened it, shaking his head as he examined the bolts and saw them all unbroken. The thief had evidently had assistance from the inside of the mansion.

“Don’t say anything about it, George,” he said, in anxious tones. “I know the man; no common thief,” and another groan escaped his lips. “Now, go to bed. I’ll tell you more tomorrow.”

With his mind full of this new mystery, the young man fell asleep. When he had breakfasted a message came from his uncle in the library, and George hastened to obey.

A feverish flush burned on the old man’s cheek, and his manner was hurried and impatient, very unlike his usual haughty serenity. Motioning his nephew to a seat, he plunged into the subject on his mind without further reflection.

“Those papers taken last night, George, from the iron chest, were of incalculable value to me,” the old man said, vehemently. “Restore them to me, and you command anything I own. Renounce your profession for a time, devote your life to the search, if need be, and Locksley Grange shall be your reward. I will make my will this very day,” and he arose from his chair, regarding the young man with eager gaze.

George hesitated, overwhelmed with the idea. Ambition was strong within him, but life was before him, and the reward was great.

“But Miss Kedar?” he murmured.

“You love that girl?” said the old man with a sneer. “Oh, fate! fate!”

“Yes, Uncle Paul, I do love her,” said George, boldly. “Add her to your offer, and I will give myself up to do your will.”

A great struggle seemed raging in the old man’s breast, and he paced the floor rapidly.

“Young man, you are honorable,” he said, with a piercing glance at his nephew, “promise me, on your honor, that you will not seek to marry Virginia Kedar until you find those papers and restore them to me; if I am alive, or if not, burn them unread.”

“I promise,” the young man answered solemnly.

“Listen, then,” he said, with an air of relief; “the robber was a woman. All your legal skill and sharpness will be needed to trace her, but the perfume of that glove is the strongest clue. I will give you a written description to aid you, and you must start at once.”

When George Roberts left Locksley, it was as his uncle’s acknowledged heir, and, what was of infinitely more moment to him, the accepted lover of Virginia Kedar. With the little gray glove treasured carefully, he proceeded to London, secured an accomplished detective, and pursued his search. His mother was to remain at the Grange.

First, they tried to find a name for the singular scent, but no perfumer in London or Paris could explain it. Both cities were searched, and every possible or impossible clue taken up, as the days lengthened into weeks, and weeks into months.

When summer emptied the cities they sought the watering places—Baden-Baden, Hamburg and so on—but all seemed in vain.

One evening, as George sat in his bedroom, in one of the strange little German towns, pondering over a letter from his mother, which described his uncle’s failing health and growing irritability, and almost cursing his own folly in thus giving up everything to gratify an old man’s insane whim, he was roused from his despondent gloom by the entrance of a fresh little maiden with his clean linen. As she sorted out her snowy burden on the bed, a subtle, strange odor saluted his senses.

“Good heavens! the perfume—the glove!” Striving to conceal his excitement he approached the girl, as if to examine her work, and perceived a small parcel lying one side, from which the odor came. He did not speak German; how to obtain a clue from it? With a sudden movement he managed to overturn a table covered with books and papers, and while the girl, with great good nature, assisted in replacing them, he had dexterously rolled the parcel under the draperies of the bed.

She went away without missing it, and George instantly summoned his ally to consult over this unlooked-for good fortune. When she came back in a few hours in search of I, the detective soon ascertained that the laces belonged to a sick lady named Madame Bernastine.

The clue was rapidly followed up. [The detective] formed an acquaintance with the invalid’s maid, who was English, it seemed; found from her sufficient proof of her mistress’ identity with the woman they sought, and in a few weeks’ time, during which Madame Bernastine failed rapidly, gained access to her private desk, and secured the package of letters, still tied with the blue ribbon. Next day the maid found herself heiress to all her mistress’s effects, for the adventuress lay dead, and there was no one to claim her goods.

George flew back to Locksley Grange, to find his uncle dying. The old man, roused from his apathy when he saw the letters, bade his nephew burn them before his eyes, and with his last remaining strength drew a sealed paper from under his pillow, placed it in his nephew’s hand, and fell asleep, never to awaken.

George opened the paper. “That woman was my wife—an artful fiend. Virginia Kedar Hallows is my lawful daughter. I hated her mother, and I hate her.”

Accompanying this was a marriage and birth certificate. That was all.

The Detroit Free Press, March 9, 1872

Chicago Evening Post, May 17, 1872

The Weekly Argus [Port Townsend, WA], July 25, 1872

Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly, September 1881

The version published in *Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly* (September 1881) is slightly longer, with a few additional lines and paragraphs, but is substantially the same.