

## *The Last of the Gang*

by Paul Blume

The wind blew a perfect tempest carrying with it heavy drifts of snow that rendered it very difficult for pedestrians to pursue their way along the streets. As one blast, more fierce than the others, shook the house to its very foundation, Luke Brainard walked to the window and gazed out on the night.

‘Twas only a few moments he looked on the storm, and with a weary sigh he drew the curtain closely together and sat down at his writing-table, with his eyes fixed upon the glowing fire that roared in the grate

Luke Brainard was a man of fashion, a gentleman, dandy, if you will. His age was about four-and-fifty, but he was so well preserved that he was generally taken to be much younger than he really was. His glossy brown hair and beard were without a single streak of gray, and no crows’ feet marked his handsome florid face. He was habited in an elegant cashmere dressing-gown, and his faultless white shirt was thrown open at the throat, displaying a neck, short and bull-like, but white as a dainty belle’s. His small hands were adorned by a single diamond, and his feet were encased in yellow Turkish slippers.

Luke Brainard was counted handsome even by men, and no one was more popular among his fellows. His exquisite taste made him a leading authority at his club, and many a dandy would have considered himself blessed for even one of Brainard’s familiar nods in public.

No one could form a conjecture of his worldly possessions. He was always moderately supplied with money, and played so cautiously that his losses were never very serious.

His most intimate-associates, had they seen him upon the evening we have introduced him to the reader, would have supposed he was a ruined man.

As he sat looking into the fire, there came a quick pull at the door bell, and Brainard aroused himself from his reverie and began walking his chamber, ever and anon glancing toward the door. Presently there came a step upon the stairs and then a knock.

“Ah!” he exclaimed, “so you are here, De Marley,” as a short, burly figure entered the room and extended his hand.

“It’s a confounded bad night to be abroad,” replied the other, ‘and were I not leaving the city tomorrow to spend the holidays with my relatives, I should scarcely have ventured here.’”

Brainard smiled in a peculiar manner. “I am glad you have come,” he said, for I shall be well on my way from the city before daylight.”

De Marley started and look at him with some surprise.

“Do you mean that you are going out of town on a night like this?” he asked.

“Yes, why not?” returned Brainard.

“Because,” replied De Marley, “there is a fearful storm raging, and from your costume I should scarcely have thought so. Besides, it is now past eleven, and in a few minutes all the trains for the night will have gone.”

“I will go, notwithstanding,” replied Brainard. “But come, let us settle our business; I suppose that is what brings you.”

“Well, yes,” answered De Marley, “I shall not see you at the club for some weeks to come.”

“Very likely,” returned Brainard, emphasizing his words with so peculiar a distinctness that De Marley said:

“I never before remember hearing you speak in the precise and deliberate way you do tonight. I don’t like the way it sounds. Your voice must be out of tune.”

Brainard laughed, but it was forced and hollow, and sitting down at his table, he drew a check for five thousand dollars and handed it to De Marley.

“If it is not convenient,” said De Marley, “let the matter stand till I return. I’m confoundedly short just now, but I can get along, I think.”

Brainard’s face flushed as, with a dignified wave of his hand, he declined the proffered offer, though he was signing away the last dollar he had on earth.

The night previous luck had been against Luke Brainard, and for the first time since he had been a member of the club he played heavier than was his want.

But it was a desperate strait in which Luke Brainard was struggling, and fortune, which had hitherto always come to his assistance when he was about to sink, now deserted him, and he lost even to the uttermost dollar. Though counted rich, his possessions never at any time exceeded from ten to fifteen thousand dollars, but he managed his affairs so prudently that it was scarcely a matter of surprise that his wealth should have been over estimated.

When De Marley had received the check and had gone, Brainard went to his dressing table and opened a long mahogany box containing a pair of dueling pistols. He took one of them up and examined it. He appeared engaged in deep thought. Finally he replaced it in the case as he muttered:

“Better do it quietly.”

He then reached out his hand and caught the bell rope. When the servant came to answer his call, he said:

“Call me early tomorrow morning.”

Then Luke Brainard, the elegant man of the world, the pet of his friends, the favorite of the ladies, the man whom many a fool set up as his pattern, took a small phial and held it up to the gas light, and gazed upon its pale green color as we suppose a child might regard a pretty toy.— Placing it upon the table, he sat down to write. With a steady hand he filled a page and then signed his name. Let us see the subject of his thoughts. They ran as follows:

“‘Man should not live as long as he could, but as long as he should,’ so wrote the ancient. I have outlived my usefulness, and am going hence. The motive which impels me to do this act is the business of no one on earth. Did I not fear that some fool, with a mistaken charity, might pronounce me insane, I should not trouble myself to leave this scrawl. But, doubtless, some one will insist that I am now laboring under a temporary aberration of mind. To such I say, you are mistaken. I have never consulted the world much upon acts of propriety, and, therefore, shall not begin now. If society wishes to know if I have been happy. I reply, as much so as men generally are. Have I been unfortunate? Well, on the whole I hardly think I have. If these explanations answer the public I am satisfied. I have nothing more to add.”

When he had written the final sentence, he put the vial to his lips and drained the last drop therein. Fifteen minutes later and the spirit of Luke Brainard went out into as black a night and as fierce a storm as ever smote the earth.

The fire had burned out in the grate when the servant went to call Luke Brainard. Receiving no reply he tried the door, and found it open. Brainard was sitting at the table, the pen still between his stiff, cold fingers. The servant cautiously approached to observe if he was sleeping, when he darted backward with a wild cry of terror. Well might he do so, for in death Luke Brainard was no longer handsome, the glaring eyeballs were turned upward, the mouth was wrenched with pain and there was a thin line of frozen blood and froth between the blue eyes.

The world made public property of Luke Brainard’s fame, but his wishes in one particular were respected; none called him a madman.

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Ten years later and I was traveling in the West, and one night put up at a country tavern, where I unexpectedly met a noted detective of the New York Police Department. After the usual greetings I inquired what brought him out in that region.

“Ask me that question tomorrow and I will answer you,” he said.

We sat up quite late that night, drinking juleps and talking over matters connected with New York. From talk upon thieves and murderers, we got upon suicides. At length my friend began fumbling among some old papers in a large pocket-book.

“Let me see if I can find one of your old acquaintances,” he remarked.

“One of mine?”

“Yes, of course; one that used to be the paragon of the nice men and pretty ladies. Oh, here it is. Now look at this;” he handing me a photograph. “Did you ever happen to know that handsome fellow?”

“Why, that’s the photograph of Luke Brainard, who belonged to the — Club. What on earth are you doing with that?”

“Why Brainard gave it to me.”

“Gave it to you?”

“Yes, gave it to me, a detective.”

“Is it not strange?”

“Yes, very singular,” I replied, “for I should have supposed you were one of the last men he would have selected for such a gift. Now, since I come to remember, I heard him once say that he never had but a single picture taken in his life.”

“He told the truth, no doubt,” replied my friend; “I do believe this is the only picture of him to be found on earth. He had good reason to refuse to have his face taken.”

“Good reason!” I ejaculated. “Why should an honorable and popular man like Luke Brainard fear to have his features seen?”

“Well, good-night,” said my friend. “If I have good luck tomorrow (and I think I shall) I will answer your question. I’m sleepy.”

I did not see my friend, the detective, till late in the afternoon of the following day.

“Are you ready to reply to my question?” I asked with a laugh.

“Indeed I am. Here, take a good cigar and let us go out under yonder horse chestnut tree, and sit down on the grass like we used to do in boyhood. There, that will do,” he said, as he cleared away the chips that some whittler had left behind him.

“Now you wish to know why an honorable and popular man like Luke Brainard Esq., should fear to have his features committed to paper. Well the answer to that is because he is a felon.

Brainard and myself belonged to the same club, and I must confess I was very partial to him, and he always treated me with an affectionate regard. The reply of the detective brought the blood to my face.

“Stop,” I cried: “don’t defame the dead, who can’t come back to refute your base calumny. How dare you utter such words as I have heard?”

“Listen,” he said, lowering his voice almost to a whisper, and laying his hand upon my shoulder. “No counterfeiter was ever more useful to our department than Luke Brainard. But the secret was between us and himself. He was born of good family, but he went wrong in youth. His people got hold of him partially reclaimed him. They never, however, wholly eradicated the evil out of his nature. Though he never was married, he has a son almost as old as you are, and it was only this morning I succeeded in arresting him. Luke Brainard, from time to time, sacrificed all his old confederates, one by one, giving us such information as enabled us to apprehend them. But he would never betray his son.

This job we have had to manage ourselves, and it has taken years to do it. The fellow is the living image of his father, and has pretty much the same grit his sire had. I’m going to take him on the early evening train. Suppose you come with me to the prison when I go to receive him.”

“Very well,” I replied, “I will do so.”

At the time appointed I walked to the city prison in company with my [friend]. At the door we met a stout, red-faced official, who, laughing, said to my friend:

“Your charge won’t give you much care if you decide to carry him on.

“What’s up?” he asked.

He flung open the door, as he spoke, and with a wave of his hand, replied:

“That’ll answer the question.”

There upon the cold stone floor lay the dead body of the son of Luke Brainard. He looked as if he was slumbering, his face seemed so calm. By his side lay a bottle which had contained morphine.

The detective turned away with an oath while I stayed to gaze upon the face of the dead man. Death produces some change of feature, but so little had it affected the countenance of the body I was viewing that I had no difficulty in tracing the likeness of Luke Brainard. I found my friend the detective waiting for me on the pavement.

“Well, what do you think?” he asked.

“I was thinking of the coincidence of their deaths,” I replied.

“Bah!” returned the detective, “it was in the blood; he wouldn’t have been a son of Luke Brainard if he had been afraid to die.”

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