

An Unexplained Mystery

The following narrative was prepared originally—not for publication, but as a report to be laid before the police. The facts of the case having, however, entirely baffled detection, and the fate of the mysterious lady still being unknown, it has been thought best to give the story to the public in this form, in the hope that it may meet the eye of some one who shall at last be able to throw some light upon the matter.

STATEMENT OF ARTHUR LOVELL.

Five summers ago, when the civil war was raging at its height, and communication between North and South was difficult and uncertain, I left the city to spend the hot months at a hotel on Staten Island. My business was very absorbing, and I could there have the benefit of country air, and yet be in town every day. The house where I took up my abode was filled with a gay set of New Yorkers, of whom I saw very little, the daylight hours being passed in the city, and evenings spent in either visiting my friends or in solitary meditation over a pipe.

Thus some two weeks had glided away, when one night I went out to dine in town, and so reached my summer quarters at an unusually late hour. The front of the house was quite deserted; I heard sounds of music and dancing from the drawing-room, and turned aside into a small parlor where I generally found quiet. There, beside the table, reading by the shaded light, sat a lady whom I had never seen.

At my entrance she raised her head from her book and looked at me. That one glance haunts me yet. In that second of time a whole new world seemed to open before me, and I, who had never felt any interest in a woman, was from that instant fascinated by this one.

She was not beautiful, nor was she very young. The black silk dress and lace draperies gave an air of complete maturity to a rather slender figure, and the face was deeply marked by lines of care and sorrow, which showed that early youth had fled; yet, while the softness of young beauty had gone, there was a character and earnestness in those features more attractive than any rosy girl's smooth cheeks could ever be; and the large dark eyes that met mine so steadily had a world of thought and feeling in their liquid depths.

I took off my hat, of course, at presence of the lady, and then was turning to leave the room, when the evening paper I had in my hand dropped near her. As I stooped to pick it up, she said, hesitatingly:

“I beg your pardon, sir; but is that the latest edition?”

“Yes,” I replied, at once offering it to her. “Would you like to look at it?”

“Thank you. I am so anxious for news now.”

Her voice was low and well-bred, her accent unmistakably Southern. She took the paper eagerly, her pale face flushing, as she turned hurriedly to the war news. I drew near the table, and picked up a book, but in a moment she turned to me.

“May I take this away a few moments? I will bring it back directly.”

“Certainly; but pray do not trouble yourself to return it. I do not care for it at all; it is entirely at your service.”

“Thank you.” And in a moment she had left the room, and I was alone.

The book she had been reading lay on the table. It was a copy of Schiller’s plays, and on the flyleaf was written: “Virginia Lee. Jamestown, Aug. 10, 1855.”

I was still looking at the name and date, when Mrs. Bertram, the landlady, entered the room. I could not help asking a few questions.

“Mrs. Bertram, I have just seen a new boarder—a handsome woman, with dark eyes. Who is she?”

“You mean Mrs. Meredith, I suppose,” replied Mrs. Bertram; “she was reading here just now. But she is not a new boarder; she has been here some time.”

“I never saw her before.”

“No, I dare say; she lives almost entirely in her own rooms; but the gas in her parlor was out of order, and she came here.”

“Southern, of course?”

“Yes,” and Mrs. Bertram looked mysterious. “A violent rebel, I fancy, though she says very little.”

“A widow?”

“Yes, I presume so; she came here by herself, and has had no visitors.”

“This is her book, I presume, though the name is not Meredith?”

Mrs. Bertram glanced at the name, and looked uneasy.

“That is out-and-out Southern,” she said, “and no mistake. However, I suppose it is all right.”

She took the volume, and I walked off to my room, thinking even then of the strange lady more than I had thought of any woman for years.

A week passed after this, during which I never saw Mrs. Meredith. Then, one night when I came up on a late boat, as I passed through the crowd on the upper deck, I caught sight of a figure which at once recalled her to my memory, and I stopped abruptly to verify my conjecture.

The lady had her back to me, and was talking earnestly to a gentleman. His uniform indicated him to be a Union officer, and as I presently passed them I heard her low, earnest voice pleading with him to do something for her. I could not guess what; I only heard a few words:

“You will do it, colonel, won’t you? Oh, promise me you will!” in such a low, thrilling tone as I thought I could never have resisted.

There was no mistaking her; as I went slowly past, I saw again by the pale moonlight the beautiful, earnest face, though the voice alone would have identified her, as it could have belonged to no other woman in the world.

She did not see me at all, and I stood back a little way in the shadow, watching her. She seemed to have hard work to gain her point, whatever it was, with the officer. Once or twice he shook his head, and then she bent nearer and nearer to him in her eagerness, till the lace of her veil lay on his shoulder, and I felt bitterly jealous, and indignant that he should refuse her anything. He was a man of about thirty, with rather a handsome but heavy face, that for a long time was stolidly set against her. But at last she seemed to gain upon him; his features lit up to more of fire; he looked at her with a new light in his eyes; then he leaned forward, and whispered to her.

She drew back with a shudder, growing very pale; then her lips curled with a strange smile, and she held out her hand as she spoke.

The small white hand trembled so that I could see the flash of a great diamond that she wore as it glittered in the moonbeams; but at that moment my attention was attracted from her for a second. A man who stood near me uttered an exclamation, and started forward.

I turned to look at him. He was shabbily dressed, and had a lowering, evil face. His gaze was fixed, as mine had been, on the white hand and the sparkling ring. I glanced again at Mrs. Meredith. The officer had given her a paper, and she was putting it away in a small steel-ornamented bag she carried, a strange smile of triumph on her lips. Her companion looked anxious and puzzled, but there was little time for more words, for at this moment the boat stopped at the last landing, and Mrs. Meredith arose.

“No, you cannot come with me,” I heard her say. “Indeed, colonel, it would never do; no one must ever see me with you after this.”

“No, no, of course not,” he replied, with an apprehensive glance around him. “But you won’t forget your promise?”

“Surely not,” she answered, rather coldly. “I have never yet broken my word—I will not now! Good-night.”

He held out his hand, but she affected not to see it, and hurried off. Then I saw that the rough-looking man was very close to her, and, with a sudden apprehension of danger, I followed, keeping as near her as I could.

The hotel stood about a quarter of a mile from the landing, up a lonely lane. Mrs. Meredith, after she left the boat, vainly tried to get a carriage. Drawing her cloak around her, she set off resolutely on her solitary walk. I followed, resolved, without obtruding myself upon her, to be her protector.

She walked on swiftly until she reached the lonely lane, and then I quickened my steps, for, as she passed out from the shadow of a tree which stood at the corner, I saw the man who had noticed her on the boat steal out and follow her closely.

She walked so fast that she had reached the loneliest part of the way before I overtook her. The man creeping after her was so absorbed in the chase that he never thought of looking behind him, and now, when we came under the shadow again, he put his hand in his pocket cautiously, and, by the pale light which the full moon shed even there, I saw him draw out a pistol. Then I spoke, suddenly and sharply:

“Mrs. Meredith!”

The man turned with a start. I saw his face, pale and lowering, as his sullen eyes glared into mine; then he passed me swiftly, going away down the lane. Mrs. Meredith paused, and looked at me with somewhat haughty inquiry.

“Forgive me,” I said, “for my seeming presumption; but you were followed by a very evil-looking man.”

“Followed!” and her face grew white. “Where is he? How do you know?”

“The man has gone now; when I spoke, he turned back. You can just see him yonder under the trees. Now he is in the moonlight. Do you see him?”

“Yes, yes,” she said; “but I cannot tell what he looks like—was he a gentleman?”

“No; a dark-haired, evil-faced man, in very common clothes.”

“Was he—do you think he could have been—a detective policeman?” she asked, very anxiously.

“No—oh, no!” I said, in much surprise. “He was more like a thief.”

She drew a sigh of relief.

“Most probably,” she said. “Then I am quite safe now, with your escort.” And a bright, fascinating smile rippled her lips as she took my arm.

“Yes; I think it was that splendid diamond you wear which attracted him,” I said.

“My poor ring! It has endangered my life before now,” she replied, indifferently. “But they’ll not get it this time, thanks to you. I am so very grateful for what you have done for me.”

To this I made some suitable reply, earnestly expressing my happiness at having rendered her any service; and then we walked on, talking of the odd occurrence in all its bearings. As we approached the house, Mrs. Meredith said:

“You were surprised, perhaps, at my fearing that my pursuer was a policeman; but we Southerners have a good deal to bear from your good Government;” and there was a shade of bitterness in her tone. “I should not like to be shut up in your Bastille yonder,” pointing to where we could see, over the silver waters of the bay, the dark walls of Fort Lafayette. “But I will not quarrel with you about anything,” she said, with a smile. “I know something of you through Mrs. Bertram, who has told me a little about nearly every one in the house, and I shall be happy to see you—not this evening, for I shall be very busy, but some other time, when you are at leisure.”

I thanked her, with doubtless very evident fervor, for she looked earnestly at me, as she said:

“You have been very kind to me on both the occasions when we have met. I need a friend here—will you be one, Mr. Lovell?”

What could I do but clasp the hand she held out to me, and protest my devotion with all the earnestness of a young enthusiast of four-and-twenty?

I did not wait long to avail myself of her permission to call; the next evening I sent my card to her room, and in a few moments after was in her private parlor. It was a rather small apartment on the first floor, the piazza running across the window. On this balcony, with this fascinating woman, I passed the happiest hours of that summer.

Evening after evening I went there, and was received always cordially, at every interview my infatuation deepening and strengthening. Mrs. Meredith was a most brilliant companion, conversing on all subjects well and comprehensively, showing a rare scope of intellect, with a wide range of reading. She had travelled, too, and evidently been accustomed to the best society everywhere. Yet now she lived in strict retirement, and over her past life she guarded constantly a jealous silence. She never mentioned parents or husband or children. She made no allusion to her girlhood, wifehood, or widowhood. She never even told me where her home had been, and I, fearful of offending, asked no questions. I think she appreciated this reserve on my part, for she said to me one night, at parting:

“Do you know, I think you are the truest and most delicate friend I ever had, and I am going to prove my regard in two ways.”

I colored with pleasure at her praise, and of course expressed myself happy in her confidence, and felt curious as to how she would reward me.

“I am going first to drop all mere formal titles, and call you Arthur. You know I am so much older than you.”

“I do not recognize that reason,” I said. “I should like you to call me Arthur; but, then, may I not call you Virginia?”

She started and frowned.

“How did you know that was my name?” she asked.

“I saw it in your book that first night, when I loaned you the paper.”

“Careless, careless,” she said, half to herself. “I remember I left my book in the parlor. Then you have another claim on my friendship, since you know my name; but I cannot let you call me by it—that would hardly do; you are a mere boy, compared to me.”

“I am nearly twenty-five,” I said, stoutly.

She laughed.

“And I am a great deal older than that. No, I cannot allow you to call me anything but Mrs. Meredith at present; and I won’t call you Arthur, if you don’t like it.”

“Oh, but I do, very, very much; and now, what is the other proof of your friendship?”

“I will let you come down in the eight o’clock boat with me to-morrow night, if you will.”

“I shall be so glad, you know.”

“Thank you. I must go to town on business, and it will be late before I can leave. I do not like to return alone, after what happened that night.”

“No; you ought not.”

“Then, you will take charge of me?”

“Surely. Where shall I meet you?”

“At the ferry.”

“Why not up-town?”

“No, no! At the ferry. It will not be quite dark then. I would rather meet you there.”

“Your will is my law,” I replied; and I was very happy when she gave me her hand at parting and said, “Good-night, Arthur.”

It will be readily understood that in this month of my acquaintance with Mrs. Meredith I had really seen too little of her to know much of her habits or occupations. As I was absent all day, I had no idea how she passed the hours of sunshine. That she was in the city often I inferred from some casual remarks. Who she visited there—how she occupied herself, I know not. That she was thoroughly Southern in her feelings she did not try to conceal, though she always avoided the subject of politics with me; and on her out-goings and in-comings preserved the same careful silence with which she guarded the mystery of her past life. Yet, I have written my story badly if I have failed to make apparent how entirely I was fascinated by this magnificent woman, of whom I yet knew absolutely nothing.

The next night I was at the ferry some moments before the boat started, but I had to wait until they were just about to draw away the plank before Mrs. Meredith hastened to meet me. Then, as my eager eyes caught the first glimpse of her figure, I was sure that a man in an officer's dress parted from her. I was bitterly jealous, and as I drew her hand under my arm, I uttered some boyish words of reproach.

“I see why you would not permit me to meet you up-town—you had some one with you whom you liked better!”

“Why, Arthur,” she said, looking at me in amazement, “are you angry with me?”

The tenderness of her tone completely upset me. I drew her away to a seat on the side of the boat, where the darkness shrouded us, and, in quick, passionate words, told her that I loved her, and entreated her to be my wife.

She listened with averted face and in silence.

When at last I paused for a reply, she spoke very gently:

“Arthur, all this is nonsense. I am ten years older than you. The idea is preposterous.”

“No, it is not, if you only love me. What do I care for your age?”

“It is an insuperable obstacle.”

“No, no! that is not it! but you do not care for me!”

“I care for you very much,” she said, in a low tone; “but this is impossible.”

“Is there no hope for the future?”

“None, unless—unless—”

“Unless what?” I demanded. “I will lay down my life for you!”

“Will you do more than that?” she asked, suddenly. “Will you leave all for me?”

“All what?”

“Your friends, your business, your home! I must go abroad at once!”

“And I may go with you?” I asked, breathlessly.

“If you will.”

At that moment I thought of nothing but the passion that possessed me.

“I will go anywhere with you!” I cried; “my love! my love!”

I put out my hand to take hers; but at that moment a man came slowly past us. I looked up at him with a shudder—it was the same evil-eyed man who had followed Mrs. Meredith up the lane! She did not see him; her face was drooping, and he had disappeared before I could attract her attention. When I spoke, however, she became violently agitated.

“That same man, you say! Where? Where? Come, let us find him! I must see him immediately!”

She started up, and I followed her. We searched the boat from end to end, but I saw him no more. Yet Mrs. Meredith was so much distressed by this, that it was not until we were safe in her own parlor that I could bring her back to the subject next my heart.

We had driven from the boat to the house, and, now that all danger seemed past, I tried to reassure her.

“No, no!” she said. “I shall never be safe till I am out of the country! I must go at once—at once!”

“Not without me, though.”

“And you are really willing, Arthur, to marry me, and so place your whole life in my power?”

She looked at me earnestly, holding my hands in hers as she spoke; and I, looking into those beautiful eyes, would have sworn my soul away to win a smile.

“Yes,” I cried. “I am alone, with no very near relatives to control me. I have a little property of my own. In a week I can have all arranged to go with you.”

“And you will not regret the sacrifice you make for me—a woman of whom you know so little?”

“Never! never!” I cried; “if you will love me!”

She listened patiently to my raptures, and was very gentle with me that evening; and before we parted our plans were fully arranged. She must leave the hotel the next day, she said, and I was not to ask to see her until the Saturday following, as she would be at a friend's house, where I had better not come. Then she would meet me in the grove beyond the hotel, and I should escort her to the city, where we would be married—sailing for Europe on the following Wednesday.

No misgiving crossed my mind when I left her that night. The look of her starry eyes, the touch of her soft hand, thrilled me so that I could think of nothing but the intoxicating future opening before me.

For the next three days I was as a man in a dream. I went on with my preparations for departure, however—arranging my business to leave it with my partner—and all this time I was more wildly happy than I had ever been in my life.

Saturday came at last, a beautiful July day, and I went to my tryst in the grove as I would to the gates of Paradise.

It was not far from the house—a knot of trees crowning a hill. I walked on to it, noting as so many added delights the songs of the birds, the scent of flowers, the beautiful quiet of a midsummer morning. The place was somewhat lonely, and, as I walked under the shadow, the silent air was cut suddenly by a sharp cry—a woman's voice!

I dashed on—a cold horror already curdling my blood. A few steps, and I was in the heart of the grove. All was still. The heat seemed to stifle me.

“Virginia!” I called. “Virginia!”

No reply; but there was a faint rustle near some bushes.

I sprang forward, a sense of horror suffocating me. I caught a glimpse of a white dress on the ground, and in a moment was beside it.

Merciful God! How can I write even now what I saw? She lay there, the woman I loved, pale, cold, dead! her great eyes open, staring up at the unpitying heavens; her dress disordered, as if some rude hand had torn away the jewels which had adorned it; her white hands, ringless now, falling rigid and earth-stained beside her!

All this I saw in one glance which stamped the horror on my brain forever. Then, before I could utter a cry, or could stoop to touch her, I saw the evil-faced man come out from behind a bush. I felt a great pain, as of a deadly blow, and lost all consciousness.

When I came to myself I was in my old room at the hotel, weak and faint, as from a long illness. A hired nurse was with me, who told me I had been ill two weeks; that I was supposed to have had a sunstroke, as I was found on the road near the house, unconscious; that I had had brain-fever, and was not to talk.

I said nothing then, but when I was a little stronger, and Mrs. Bertram was in the room, I asked her if the murderer of Mrs. Meredith had been caught.

She glanced at the nurse with a smile.

“Dear me, sir! that was only the fancy you had when you were ill. Mrs. Meredith was not murdered at all!”

“Not murdered!” I cried; “but I saw her lying in the grove yonder, dead and bloody, and it was her murderer who dealt the blow that prostrated me!”

“Oh, no, sir! I think not.” The good lady answered as one might speak to a sick child. “You have been out of your head, and you fancied all that. Mrs. Meredith is in Europe.”

This was all I ever could learn of the matter. I went to the grove as soon as I was able to walk. The grass was green on the spot where I had seen that beautiful form. The trees waved, the sky smiled; but nature was mute on the subject of the tragedy.

I had never heard the name of any of Mrs. Meredith’s friends. Indeed, I have even doubted if that were her real name. I believe that she was murdered solely for the sake of the valuable papers she possessed, or for her jewels. No one, thus far, has been able to throw any light on her fate. Even the police have been disposed to regard my story as the ravings of delirium—and to this day Mrs. Bertram asserts that the mysterious Southerner sailed for Europe on that very Saturday.

Frank Leslie’s Pleasant Hours, February 1872

The original is accompanied by a single large illustration with the caption, “An Unexplained Mystery—’Before I could utter a cry, or could stoop to touch her, I saw the evil-faced man come out from behind a bush. I felt a great pain, as of a deadly blow, and lost all consciousness.’”