

Alfred Martin's Peril

“It is a foul and bloody murder, and may God punish the one that did the deed! But may there not be some life remaining? May it not be in my power to rob the grave. It is a dangerous undertaking, and if I am found here, I shall most certainly be accused of the crime. Blood upon my hands and clothes, and I have not touched the corpse! Ah! I see how it came. The bushes are stained with it. The body was dragged to this lonely spot. Lonely! Who would ever think of coming here unless he had a foul purpose, save, it might be, a geologist like myself, whom the simple people in this part of the country would call mad. Yes it would go hard with me, especially as I am a stranger, and though poorly clad, as becomes my present occupation, have a considerable sum of money upon my person.”

He drew back a few steps from the corpse upon which he had come suddenly and unexpectedly, and looked around. Without noticing his path, he had journeyed to the bottom of a deep ravine before his progress was arrested. High hills rose upon either side, covered with a heavy growth of trees and tangled underbrush. A little stream found its way with great difficulty through the rocks at the bottom, and its waters were never gilded by a single ray of sunlight. Even in the brightest day it was gloomy twilight there; and a more dismal place would have been difficult to find—the very spot for dark deeds, for a murder's hiding! And there, before him, stopping the path lay a blood-stained human body, as if to finish the picture and give gory evidence of its evil character.

His first thoughts were to pass on. What had he to do with the crime of another? Why should he mix himself with that in which he had not the most remote business? His clear head and logical mind foresaw all the difficulties that would arise should he be discovered and charged with the commission of the deed, and the fearful net-work of circumstantial evidence that would surround him; yet he was a man of the most determined firmness as well as having a tender heart, and not for the sake of escaping trouble, or even danger, would he suffer a chance to relieve suffering, or save life to pass unembraced. So he drew nearer, and bending away the bushes, looked scrutinizingly upon the victim of some fiend's cupidity or revenge.

The corpse was that of a girl who must have been under twenty years, and the face was one of more than common beauty. The oval of the cheeks was perfect, the nose straight, the mouth small, and the lips, now parted by agony, were full and arched. The eyes, wide open and glassy, were blue as the depths of the ocean, and curtained by long lashes a shade darker than her glossy brown hair. The figure was tall and delicately proportioned, the feet small and exquisitely arched, the hands white and slender, denoting good birth and freedom from manual labor. The clothing, now stained, was of fine material; and the discoloration of the neck, ears, fingers and wrists—the piece torn from the bosom of the dress, and the pockets turned outward—told that robbery as well as murder had been committed.

At once deeply interested, the stranger knelt down, brushed back the tangled tresses, gazed sadly upon the sweet pallid face, and examined both pulse and heart for symptoms of life, hoping against hope that a spark at least might remain. But his intellectual and unusually sunny face clouded, and he shook his head in doubt. The marks upon the base of the skull, caused apparently by heavy blows from a sharp stone, seemed sufficient to have produced death alone; but, in

addition to them, blood was slowly oozing from, and congealing upon, several wounds, in one of which a knife was sticking. His profession had taught him skill as well as coolness, and with extreme tenderness and delicacy, he made a still closer examination, and began preparations to stanch the blood and dress the wounds.

“With this knife,” he said, giving utterance to his thoughts as he drew out the weapon, “I could even thus kill all my enemies, make myself rich and I—”

The sentence was never finished. Before it could be, a dozen men, who had been watching and creeping near, sprang out of the bushes, and pinioned him beyond the power of resistance. Taken beside the corpse, with the blood-dripping knife in his hand, what could he say in defense? The situation he had foreseen had come upon him, and he stood convicted, in their eyes at least, a murderer. To appeal to their reason he saw at a glance would be useless; they were not of the class that would look deeper than the surface. His defense must be made at another time and place; and in truth, he was thinking more of the corpse of the murdered girl than of his own desperate situation, and, drawing himself up proudly, he asked that she might be cared for.

“Whatever may be your purpose with me,” he said, “at least see if there is not life remaining. Take your hand off, and let me see if my skill can be of any avail. I am a surgeon.”

Scowling brows and clenched fists were the only answer he received. They paid not the slightest attention to his words, except it might be to grasp him even more firmly than before, and hurry him before a neighboring justice to be examined and exhibited as a monster! It was even a more unpleasant situation than he had anticipated, and the chances were desperately against him; but he retained his coolness, and prepared to make the best possible defense.

The evidence was given with the utmost bitterness—honestly given, perhaps, but without the slightest leaning toward the side of mercy, and with the morbid desire on the part of the majority to see a man hanged, for such a thing had never happened in that neighborhood. And what could he say to rebut the sworn statements of a dozen witnesses? What were his assertions against the evidence of their own eyes and his bloody hands and clothes.

But he had the satisfaction, if, indeed, it could be called by that name to learn who the supposed victim of his murderous knife was—to learn that her name was Ethel Loring—that she was comparatively a stranger upon a visit to an old uncle who lived near the scene of the tragedy—that she was an orphan, and rich in her own right—that she was known to wear costly jewels, and carry with her a considerable sum of money—all of which was missing—and that she had gone out to take a walk alone, and was found as described. These facts, together with his having been detected bending over the body with a knife in his hand, the out-of-the-way place, the provocation for the deed in a pecuniary point of view, the almost certainty of remaining undiscovered, that he was poorly dressed, a stranger, had been seen lurking in out-of-the-way places for several days, and that in his pockets was found about the same sum of money, and of the same description as that known to have been in the possession of the murdered girl, were dwelt upon by the prosecuting attorney with remarkable force, and the prisoner saw that it was next to useless to attempt a defense.

To all questions he replied in a simple and truthful manner, stating that his name was Alfred Martin, his age twenty-five; that he was by profession a surgeon, unmarried, possessed of some means; that a love of geology had led him thither; and that those who had accused him of loitering in out-of-the-way places would have seen that he was innocently studying the formation of the earth, if they had given proper attention to the matter. As to his being the murderer of the girl, he denied it in the most emphatic manner, and explained how he come to be bending over the body with the bloody knife in his hands.

“You will deny next,” sneered the attorney, “that you threatened to kill all your enemies in the same manner.”

“I believe I did use some thoughtless words to the effect that I could, with such a weapon, kill all my enemies, and make myself rich, but none such as you would put them into my mouth.

“I heard him distinctly,” volunteered a strong, rough-looking man, who was said to have been among the first, if not the first, to discover the murder, who had guided others there, and had been the most willing and strenuous in his testimony against him.

Martin turned his gaze upon, and noticed him more closely than he had done before; caught his eye, and thought that he shrank back. It might have been mere fancy, but he became more and more convinced that the fellow had some object in getting him convicted, and tried to remember if he had ever been associated with—ever met him before, and given him any cause of enmity. If such was the case, it had entirely slipped from memory, and his own position gave him little time for thought, as he was asked to account for the money that was taken from him being the same in amount and of the same character as that of the murdered girl’s.

“It is a case that might happen a thousand times, was the reply; “but permit me to ask if she is indeed dead?”

“You will soon see,” growled the stiff-necked justice,—“see more than you want to.”

“If dead I have no wish to look upon her again. The horrible sight I have had is fully sufficient, and I have seen enough of death not to be curious in such matters.”

“No doubt of it! Murder and robbery are your trade.”

The old uncle of the murdered girl stepped to the side of the justice, and they had a short whispered conversation but evidently an important one. The purport of it was soon made known.

“Alfred Martin,” continued the officer of the law, “as you choose to call yourself, though no one here is fool enough to believe that to be your correct name, you deny all participation in the foul deed that has been done?”

“I do.”

“And you are willing to prove it by any means within your power?”

“I am.”

“Officers, guard him safely, and remove him to the next room. We will soon see his guilt clearly proved.”

Without the most remote idea of what was going to take place, the prisoner permitted himself to be led into another apartment, and saw to his surprise and horror, the corpse of the girl stretched out upon the table, still as bloody and ghastly as when he first discovered her in the gloomy ravine. It was a sight that would at any time have caused him to shudder; now it almost unmanned him for an instant, especially as the dress had been cut away so as to expose a wound in the fair white flesh. His natural emotion was at once taken as evidence of guilt, and he heard whispered comments to that effect. The “I told you so!” of the man who had before volunteered his testimony, particularly attracted his attention; and, from that instant, he watched him as closely as possible without being detected, and summoning his courage, he turned to the pompous justice, and demanded what was intended by such unusual proceeding.

“It is the death test!” was the solemn response.

“You will have to explain more fully; I do not understand.”

“We believe that the corpse of a murdered person has power to distinguish between the innocent and guilty. Place one hand upon that wound, raise the other to Heaven, and assert your innocence—if you dare! If you are indeed without guilt, all will be well. If not the blood will flow again.”

Another time, Martin would have laughed outright at the stupid superstition of which he now remembered to have read. Yet, there was something solemn in thus calling upon the dead to give evidence for or against the living, and he would willingly have been spared the ordeal, for the most simple accident might cause a drop or two of blood to exude from the unclosed lips of the wound, and then his fate would be sealed indeed.

“If guiltless, why do you shrink?” asked the man of the law. “It is only the murderer that need fear.”

He could hesitate no longer without convicting himself in their eyes: and, stepping to the side of the corpse, he laid his right hand upon the wound, and called God to witness his entire innocence. Then he stepped back so that all could see that no blood had followed.

“God has attested your guiltlessness,” said the uncle of the poor girl. “But, see, the blood is beginning to flow, and the guilty man must be near. Let each in turn do as this stranger has done.”

In the opening of the wound, and the oozing of blood, Martin saw far other things than did the afflicted old man; but he wisely held his peace, and managed to place his back against the door

so that no one could go out, and watched each as they went through the death test. But there were no more crimson drops bubbling forth as a sign of guilt; and, as the justice declared that all had gone through the ordeal, a sigh of intense relief burst from many lips.

“Not all,” replied Martin. “There is one yet remaining,” pointing to the one who had made himself so officious. “That man has kept in the background.”

“John Kirkpatrick, is this true?”

“No; it is a lie!” was the answer.

“It is true,” repeated Martin, firmly. “I have kept him under my eye all the time, and I swear that he has not been near the table.”

“I have, you all saw me.”

But, upon reflection, no one had seen him, and he was forced forward. Then an entire change was visible. His flushed face grew pale as ashes, and his brutish lip trembled. He looked wildly for a chance for escape—saw there were none—and, putting on an air of bravado, exclaimed, with an oath, “Well, I can do it again.”

With the words, he had raised his hand—and extending it—had nearly touched the corpse—when he shrank back with a fearful groan. His eyes had been the first to see that the blood was flowing freely again from the wound—not one alone, but all!

A strong man at all times, he was rendered doubly so now by desperation; and in his efforts to get away, his coat was torn to shreds, and the jewelry and money of which the girl had been robbed, fell to the floor, and raving and cursing, he was carried away to prison.

During this exciting scene Martin had remained unnoticed. When the justice and the uncle of the girl thought of him again, they found him with his hand upon her head, and a smile playing upon his lips.

“What is it?” they both asked in one breath.

“She is not dead. Show me where I can place her upon her bed, and summon some women. She is not dead; only stunned.”

And he lifted her in his strong arms and carried her to another apartment.

It was weeks before Ethel Loring was sufficiently recovered to appear in court. Then her evidence was conclusive. She instantly recognized the prisoner Kirkpatrick; and the simple manner in which she told the story of assault, robbery, and attempted murder, added much to its force. Without leaving the box, the jury found him “Guilty,” and he was sentenced to death.

The trial over, the uncle of the girl called Martin aside, and asked the amount of his charge for his professional services.

“No matter I will repay it—I will give you anything you demand.”

“Here, then, is my charge,” he replied, taking the hand of the blushing girl. “I came here to study geology, but never anticipated such a rare specimen.”

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