

The Fatal Concealment

A Thrilling Tale

Some years after I commenced practice—but the precise date of which I shall, for obvious reasons, avoid mentioning—I had a friend at whose house I was a pretty constant visitor. He had a wife who was the magnet that drew me there. She was beautiful, but I shall not describe her. She was more than beautiful—she was fascinating—she was captivating. Her presence was to me like the intoxication of opium. I was only happy when under its influence; and yet, after every indulgence in the fatal pleasure, I sank into the deepest despondency. In my own justification I must say, that I never, in word or look, betrayed my feelings, though I had some reason to suspect they were reciprocated; for, while in my company, she was always gay, brilliant, and witty; yet, as I learned from others, she was often sad and melancholy. Powerful—most powerful was the temptation to make an unreserved disclosure of my heart, but I resisted it. That I had the firmness to do so, has been for years my only consolation.

One morning I sat alone in my chamber. My clerk was absent. A gentle knock was just audible at the outer door. I shouted ‘Come in!’ in no very amiable humor, for I was indulging in a delicious reverie upon the subject of the lady of my heart, and the presence of an ordinary mortal was hateful. The door opened, and Mrs. —— entered. I do not know exactly what I did; but it seemed to me a long time before I had the power to rise and welcome her, while she stood there with a timid blush upon her face, and the glorious smile upon her lips which made me feel it would be too great a happiness to die for her.

‘I don’t wonder you are surprised to see me here,’ she began, with a provoking little laugh; ‘but is your astonishment really too great to allow you to say, ‘How do you do?’

The spell was broken. I started up and took her hand. I fear I pressed it more warmly, and held it longer, than was absolutely necessary.

‘Perhaps your surprise will be increased,’ she continued, ‘when I inform you that I come upon business.’

I muttered something about not being so ambitious as to hope that she would visit me for any other motive. She took no notice of what I said, but I perceived that her face turned deathly pale, and that her hand trembled as she placed before me a bundle of papers.

‘You will see by these,’ she said, in a low hurried voice, ‘that some property was left to me by my uncle, and by my grandfather, but so strictly settled that even I can touch nothing but the interest. Now, my husband wants of a large sum of money at this moment, and I wish to examine the affair well, and see whether, by the twisting of the law, I can place a part of my capital at his

disposal. Unintentionally I have done him a great wrong,' she added, in a tone so low no ears less alive to [jealousy] than mine could have caught the meaning; 'and poor as this reparation is, it is all I can make, and I must do it if possible.'

I pretended to study the papers before me, but the light danced and mingled; and if, by a great effort, I forced my eyes to distinguish a word, it conveyed not the slightest meaning to my whirling brain. Every drop of blood in my body seemed imbued with a separate consciousness, and to be tingling and rushing to the side next to her, whose presence within a short distance from me was the only thing of which I had a distinct perception. I hung my head to hide from her the emotion of which I was thoroughly ashamed.

It may well be believed that I was in no condition to give a professional opinion; but I got over the difficulty by telling her I must have time to study the case, and promised to let her know the result.

'You are a tiresome creature,' she said with a little coquettish air. 'I [really] expected that for once in your life, and for a friend too, you might have got rid of the law's delays, and give me your opinion in half an hour; so far, at least, as to tell me whether there is a probability of my being able to do what I desire. But I see you are just like the rest of the lawyers – time! Time! I suppose now, you will keep about it till I am dead; and then it will go to my husband in the course of the law.'

'It may not require more than half an hour to ascertain so much, when I can direct my thoughts to it for that space of time, I replied; and I know that the words rattled like shot out of my mouth. 'But would you be so unreasonable as to require an artist to draw a straight line while he was under a fit of delirium tremens?'

'You are in incomprehensible person,' she replied, rather coldly; 'so leave you to your legal and lawful studies. But if you are going to have an attack of the delirium tremens, perhaps I had better send in the doctor. Shall I?'

'Well, I don't anticipate an attack this morning,' I answered, with a forced laugh; 'so I will not give you the trouble. The fact is, I was violently agitated a short time since, and my mind has not quite recovered its equilibrium.'

We talked a few minutes longer—she, quizzing me in her light, playful manner—and I delighting to be so teased, standing stupid and dumb, scarcely able to say a word, though very anxious to prolong the delightful moments by keeping up the war of *badinage*. At length she went to the door, and I was about to escort her down the stairs, when we heard some one speaking below.

'Good God!' she exclaimed, clinging wildly to my arm; that's my husband's voice. If he finds me here I am ruined.'

‘Don’t be alarmed,’ I replied, endeavoring to reassure her; ‘you came here on business, and such business too! —He could love you all the more for it.’

‘You don’t know about this so well as I do,’ she said, shuddering convulsively, ‘He is jealous—exceedingly of you; and oh! I fear not without some cause. Hide me somewhere, for mercy’s sake!’

I did not know how it happened; but my arm was around her, and I half carried her across the room to a large book closet.

‘Can you stay here?’ I asked hastily, ‘I will leave the door ajar for air.’

‘No! Shut it—lock it—take away the key, or I shall not feel safe. There is plenty of air!’ And she sprang into the case.

For one moment her eyes met mine, and I thought they beamed with deep, impassioned love. The next, I had locked the door upon my treasure, thrown the papers she had brought into a drawer, and was apparently busy, pen in hand, when *my friend* entered. He commenced in a roundabout way, to question me upon certain points of the law respecting marriage settlements, &c; and, after a tedious amount of circumlocution, he gave me to understand that all this regarded a desired transfer of some property of his wife’s into his own hands. He had come, in fact, upon the same errand as that generous creature! He also had a copy of her [relatives’] wills, and these I was compelled to examine closely, for he was desperately pertinacious, and would not be put off. I was angry at the thought of what his poor wife must be suffering, and I felt that I could have kicked her husband out of doors for keeping her there. At last, he made a move as if to go. I started up, and stood ready to show him out.

‘So,’ said he, tying up his papers with provoking deliberation, ‘nothing but my wife’s death, you say, can put me in possession of this money. I want it very much, but nobody will suspect me of desiring her death for the sake of having it a little sooner.’

He laughed at his own poor jest, and I made a sort of hyena chorus to it, that sounded strange and hysterical, even to my own ears. He went at last, but stopped again on the stairs, and detained me there, talking, for full five minutes longer. I felt by sympathy all the pangs of suffocation. My throat seemed swollen—my forehead bursting. Great God! Will he never be gone! Will he stand here gossiping about the weather and the generalities of the law, while his lovely wife who came to sacrifice her individual interests for his sake, dies a terrible and lingering death! He is gone! I rush back to my room. A step behind me makes me turn round. It is my clerk—curses on him! I ground my teeth in unavailing rage. I could have stabbed him—shot him—beaten out his brains—hurled him headlong down the stairs. But any violence would have compromised *her*. In a few minutes my brain was clear again.

‘Watson,’ I cried, ‘Mr. —— has just left. He is gone up Fleet street, I think; run after him, and request him to leave those papers with me. Say to him I would like to examine them more at leisure. Run, quickly, and you’ll overtake him.’

Watson disappeared. I turned the key of the outer door, and sprang towards the closet. As I unlocked it, I remembered the look she had given me when I shut it; and I wondered, with a beating heart whether the same expression would greet my enraptured gaze when I opened it. There she stood, with her eyes firmly fixed on mine.

‘You are safe, dearest!’ I murmured.

She did not rebuke me for calling her so; and emboldened by her silence, I took her hand to lead her from her narrow prison. She moved forwards, and fell into my arms a *corpse!*

I cannot well recall what followed. I only know that I tried every means for her restoration to life; but alas! Without success. Of one thing I was firmly convinced—she had not died from suffocation. I had once seen the body of a man who was killed by the falling in of the mouth of a pit. I recollected his purple and swollen face, and his lax, warm limbs. *She* was pale, rigid, cold. The tumult of her own emotions must have killed her the moment the door was closed upon her. By some means I kept my secret from the knowledge of Watson and every one else. All that night I was trying to recover her. Then I formed the project of shutting her up in the closet, locking up the chambers, and going abroad for twenty years. But that idea was rejected as quickly as formed; for it would be hardly possible that the presence of a dead body in the house should not be discovered before that time. Next, I thought of setting fire to the place, burning all my books and papers, and making a funeral pile of them; and thus ruining myself to save the secret. But that thought, too, was dismissed. It might cause loss of life and property to many innocent people, and would be a bungling proceeding after all; as, if the fire was discovered early, policemen, firemen, mob, all would break in, and finding her body there, all would be lost—for it was more to save her reputation than my life, that I was striving and plotting.

In the meantime, I was prey to the most painful anxiety. I was sure that by that time she must have been missed and sought for. Perhaps she had been seen to enter my chambers. Every step that I heard, I feared might be that of a policeman. In the morning, a stranger called on business. This, of course, was nothing extraordinary; but when he left, I felt he was a detective officer, and had come as a spy. I thrust a few clothes into a carpet-bag, intending to escape to France. I caught up a box of matches, to set the place on fire. I grasped a razor, and looked eagerly on its keen edge as the surest and swiftest way of ending my misery. But then, all these would leave *her* to the jests of the world, and my own sufferings were nothing in comparison. At this distance of time, I can look back impartially and coolly upon that dreadful day; and I can solemnly declare, that I would have rather have been hanged for murdering her, than to have allowed a breath to sully her fair fame.

I had just laid down the razor, when a hurried step crossed the ante-room. It was her husband’s.

Now, I thought, all is lost. She was seen to enter here, and he has come to claim her.

‘My dear ——,’ he began, in a nervous, unsettled way, ‘you remember the business that I came about, yesterday?’

‘Perfectly.’

‘And do you remember the words I used, as I was going? I mean, in answer to what you said about my not being able to touch this money till after the death of my wife?’

‘Yes, I remember them distinctly.’

‘My wife has disappeared since yesterday morning,’ he continued, turning even paler than before; ‘and if anything serious should have happened, you know, and you should repeat those expressions, they might be laid hold of, and I don’t know what would be the consequence. I might be suspected of having murdered her.’

Poor fellow! If I had not known the truth, I [would] have suspected it myself, from his excessive terror and anxiety. He wiped the perspiration from his face, and sank into a chair. The sight of a person more frightened than myself reassured me. I was calmer than I had been since the preceding morning.

‘Where did she go? How was she dressed?’ I inquired, anxious to know all that I could on the subject.

‘I don’t know. She told me she was going out shopping and visiting; but no one saw her leave the house, and none of the servants know exactly how she was dressed. When I went home to dinner, the first thing I heard was that she had not returned.’

‘What have you done? Have you sent to the police and to the hospitals?’

‘Yes, and to every friend and tradesman where she was at all likely to call.’

‘You may depend on it,’ I replied, very impressively, ‘that I will not repeat what you said yesterday. You are right in supposing that it might tell against you very much if she should be found dead under suspicious circumstances.’

He talked a little longer, and then went to renew the search for his wife. How I preserved my self possession during this interview I do not now; so far from being really calm, I could have gnawed the flesh off my bones in my agony.

That night, when the doors were fastened, and I was alone—except for the company of the dead—I shut myself up in the closet for two hours, to ascertain whether she died from want of air, for I distrusted my own knowledge of the appearance of suffocated persons. The place was well supplied with air from several large crevices. My first idea was correct—she had died from some other cause.

When I emerged from the closet, I found that the night was entirely dark, it was raining in torrents, and the thunder and wind roared a terrific chorus, passed by the sullen booming of the river, then at high tide, and already swollen by the rain. I sat there in the dark upon the floor, holding the cold, stiff hand of the dead within my own. I thought dreamily how often it had welcomed me with its soft pressure, while eyes had beamed brightly into dimples of delight. Now that hand that used to be so plump, so full of warmth and life, was rigid and cold—those eyes were glazed and ghostly lips were clammy and hard. Tears came to my relief. I wept as grown men seldom weep, and with that heart-easing gush came a new idea of escape for her and me. I was ready to believe at that moment that her spirit rested upon mine, and inspired the thought—for it burst upon me suddenly, with a conviction that if executed at the instant it would be crowned with success. How could I otherwise have had the temerity to snatch her up in my arms, carry her down stairs at the risk of being encountered by some of the other inhabitants of the house; bear her through the courts, and, by a way that I knew, into the garden.

The river was running strong and deep against the wall. I pressed one kiss upon her cold forehead, and threw her into the stream. Gladly would I have gone with her, and held her in my heart till death; but the impulse was still on me, and without delay I hastened back. No one saw me, and the beating rain effaced my footprints.

A few days after, I saw by the papers that her body had been found far down the river.

Two years later her husband married, again. He is stout and ruddy, and laughs as heartily as ever.

I shall die a bachelor. I am lean and pale, and bowed and grey-haired, and the sound of my own laugh is strange to me.

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