

The Vital Point

by Frank H. Angier

I HAD not seen my old friend John Moreton for a long time. He had married, as I had heard, a young wife, many years his junior, but I was in Europe at the time, and was, consequently, not invited to the wedding, and on my return I learned that he had purchased a villa near Boston, and removed thither with his bride. I had begun to think a good deal about him, and to wonder if he had become so absorbed in his new delight as to forget me, his bosom bachelor friend of forty years' standing, when I was surprised and pleased, one June day, to see him walk into my office on Wall Street.

He was the same honest, cheery John as of old, but there was a tinge of sadness in his habitually good-humored face.

"John!" I exclaimed, jumping up, and seizing him by both hands, "my dear old fellow! so you have remembered me at last!"

"I hadn't forgotten you, Joe," he said, taking the seat I proffered him; "but you see, when an old bachelor like me gets married, it rather upsets him, and he is a good while in getting around to his old ways again."

"You have found a young wife, they tell me," I said.

"She is twenty," he replied, "and I am fifty. People had a good deal to say about the discrepancy in age, and, to tell the truth, I moved to New England to get rid of my neighbors. I know I am old enough to be her father, but she is the dearest, truest, and best wife in the world, and she loves me; and I guess if we are satisfied the rest of the world will have to be."

"I am dying to see her," I replied, offering him my cigar-case; "but I suppose I shall have to wait until I am invited."

"That's precisely what I came to New York for," said John. "I want to take you back with me to Wellesley. We all need cheering up down there, and your visit will do us good. I have just sustained a bereavement, Joe. It has been a great shock to me."

His eyes moistened, and his voice trembled. He lit his cigar, and smoked in silence for a while, even after I had asked an explanation. As he did not seem to hear my first question, I asked again,—

"Who is it, John?"

"My mother," he replied.

"Was it not very sudden? I know that she was well along in years, but I had not heard that she was ill."

“She was not,” he replied. “She died, as we suppose, of fright.”

“Of fright?” I exclaimed.

“Yes. My mother removed with us to Wellesley, and occupied a room in my house. She was, as you know, a woman of over seventy-five years, but unusually well, erect and vigorous for her age. On the night of her death I was absent in Portland, on business. It was the first time since our marriage that I had passed a night away from my wife. She was almost inconsolable at the thought of my going, but, as it was to be only for a night, consented, and slept that night with my mother, transferring to my mother’s room her jewels, including a valuable diamond necklace which I had given her as a wedding-gift.”

He paused for a moment, and puffed vigorously at his cigar before continuing. When he proceeded his voice wavered, and he seemed much agitated.

“In the morning,” he continued, “my wife awoke with a sensation of heaviness in her head, and the air of the room was strongly impregnated with the odor of chloroform. On putting out her hand my poor girl touched the dead body of my mother, lying cold and rigid at her side. She shrieked in terror, and leaped out of bed. On the floor lay an empty bottle, and a sponge. The door of the chamber had been burst open. My wife’s diamond necklace and jewels were missing.”

“Heavens!” I exclaimed; “have you no [clue] to the perpetrators?”

“None whatever,” he replied. “The servants slept in a remote part of the house. The outer door, at the foot of the stairs, leading into the garden, was found unlocked. Besides the servants, the only occupants of the house that night were my mother and my wife. My wife’s cousin, Mr. Maddock, who has been visiting us lately, was with me in Portland. If he had not been my poor mother might have had at least one protector.”

“Have you made any effort,” I asked, “to trace the burglars?”

“I had some detectives from Boston out there,” replied Moreton, “but they could make nothing of it. I also consented to a *post mortem* examination of my mother’s body by our local physicians, Doctors Saville and Olney. They found no marks of violence, and every organ in perfect health; nothing to prevent the continuance of life for many years. In their opinion the vial found upon the floor, while it might have contained sufficient chloroform to have induced insensibility, could not possibly have contained enough to have caused death. Poor mother! Doubtless the drug did not operate upon a woman of her years as upon my wife, and, while Nelly was sleeping heavily at her side, my mother was awakened by the noise made by the ruffians, and died of terror.”

“Doubtless you are right,” I said; “but the whole affair is most mysterious. The villains must have known of the exact whereabouts of the jewels, and that the women were alone.”

“That is the real mystery,” replied my friend. “The servants are not to be for an instant suspected. They are all females, except the coachman, who sleeps in the barn. All of them are trusty people, who have been employed by my mother and myself for years.

“You are your mother’s only heir,” I suggested, after a moment’s silence.

“I am,” he replied. “I am, through my mother’s death, rich. Her property was vastly greater than I supposed. It amounted to nearly a quarter of a million.”

“Is it possible?” I exclaimed.

“You now see,” he continued, “why I want you to go home with me. We are in a very melancholy state down there. Poor Nelly is in a terribly nervous condition over the affair. If it wasn’t for Jack Maddock, I hardly know what I would do with her. He amuses her, and endeavors to distract her mind from the horrible occurrence as much as possible. You are a lawyer, and can advise me about several matters connected with my mother’s estate. I have given up the Boston police as a bad job, and have secured the services of a very celebrated English detective,—a Sergeant Polhemus, — who is going down with me tonight. Don’t refuse me, Joe. Pack your valise, and meet me on the Fall-River boat at five o’clock. Will you do it?”

“I will,” I exclaimed. “Of course I will. I have been dying to come for three months past.”

True to my word, I appeared at five at the place appointed. Moreton introduced me to Mr. Polhemus,— Sergeant Polhemus, of Scotland Yard, — who came on board as the last bell was ringing. Polyphemus would have been a more appropriate name; for the sergeant had but one eye, which he rolled about in a very comprehensive and alarming manner. He was a short man, with sandy beard and hair, and was slightly pockmarked. Altogether he was not prepossessing, and in conversation was the very essence of taciturnity.

Our trip to Boston was very uneventful. We arrived there at seven the next morning, drove to the Albany depot, and were at Wellesley before nine. It was a cloudless day, and the fragrance of June roses was in the air as we entered the grounds of Moreton’s villa, and walked up the winding path toward the house. On the porch stood two persons. One of these was Mr. Jack Maddock, the other was Moreton’s wife.

It is a difficult thing to convey to others one’s first impression of a woman. I can only say that, as I first saw her that morning, half screened by the climbing vines which covered the porch, and with the sunlight filtering down upon her through the leaves, Mrs. Moreton formed a most essential part of a very beautiful picture. She was dressed in deepest black, without ornament of any description except the wedding ring upon the third finger of her left hand. Her hair was the yellowest of yellow, turned into spun gold in the sunlight, and her complexion was of marvelous clearness and softness. As we first caught sight of her, her arm was raised to twine into place some wayward tendril of the vine above her, and thus the beautiful contour and exquisite grace of her lithe young figure was displayed. I did not wonder at John Moreton’s infatuation, even at the age of fifty.

“Nelly!” he exclaimed, springing forward as her eye met his.

In another moment he had her in his arms, and her dark-blue eyes brightened with apparent happiness as she kissed him again and again. Mr. Jack Maddock looking on silently and cynically.

To this young man, even before I had been introduced to him, I took an immediate, unreasoning, and unconquerable aversion. More intimate acquaintance did not dispel this feeling, but rather increased its intensity. He was a young man of perhaps twenty-eight, but his *blasé* air, and the unmistakable marks of dissipation in his otherwise handsome face, made him look at least ten years older.

“You have been gone so long, John!” said Mrs. Moreton, still clinging to him.

“I shall never go away again without you, Nelly,” he replied, kissing her. “I have brought back with me my old friend, Joe Clayton, as I proposed, you know, and here is Mr. Sergeant Polhemus,— a very celebrated English detective. I was most fortunate in meeting the sergeant. He came over to attend to a forgery case, I believe, and having a little spare time after completing his own business, consented to come down here with me to look into our own matter. He was recommended to me by an English friend in New York, and you may be sure, dear, that if anybody can find your diamonds, he will do it.”

Mrs. Moreton shuddered, and turned her dark eyes upon the detective.

“It was a dreadful thing,” she said. “I do not like to speak, or even think, of it.”

Sergeant Polhemus smiled, and rolled his eye, but made no reply, and John led the way into the house.

Dinner was served at two, and during the interval the sergeant disappeared. When the bell was rung I saw him coming from the barn, and surmised that he had been cultivating the acquaintance of the coachman. Dinner over, Mr. Polhemus requested a brief private conversation with Mrs. Moreton, and she, somewhat reluctantly, I thought, ushered him into the library, while John, Jack Maddock, and I adjourned with our cigars to the piazza.

An hour passed, and Mrs. Moreton did not issue from the library. I could see, long before the end of that time, that Moreton was becoming uneasy. He looked at his watch, and lit a fresh cigar, smoked it out, and lit another, while Maddock talked of the latest turf news, and of the coming July regatta. The sun crept slowly down toward the west, and the drowsy summer afternoon waned away, but the sergeant and Mrs. Moreton still remained closeted together. Even Maddock began to fidget, and paced nervously up and down the piazza, biting his cigar.

“What the devil can they be talking about all this time?” exclaimed John, at last. “I told him all the particulars of the affair, on the boat last night. Poor Nelly can tell him nothing more.”

The servants, as we could see through the dining-room windows, were beginning to lay the table for tea; the level bars of sunset were slanting across the fields; still Mrs. Moreton and the sergeant did not appear. At last the library door was flung suddenly open, and Mrs. Moreton entered the hall. She came immediately to where we were sitting. She was very pale, and evidently greatly agitated. John took her tenderly in his arms.

“Why, Nelly!” he exclaimed, “what is the matter?”

“Nothing,” she replied; “only don’t leave me alone with that man again. He has done nothing but ask me questions. Some of them I couldn’t answer, and he seemed to think I was trying to deceive him. He couldn’t have been more — more — no, not insulting, but rude — if I had been a burglar myself. He is a dreadful man. I never want to see him again.”

“My poor girl,” said John, patting the yellow hair, “I will speak to him about this. Where is he now?”

“Up-stairs examining the room where — where mother died. O John, send him away, — send him away!”

“Certainly I will, if you wish it,” replied Moreton; “but, then, suppose he can find your diamonds!”

“I don’t want my diamonds,” she cried, “if that man must live here. But if he must stay, let him keep out of my sight.”

“I will,” said John. “I will speak to him now.”

He entered the house, leaving Maddock and me on the piazza. His wife followed him, but, as she crossed the threshold, her beautiful, limpid blue eyes were turned for an instant toward us, and I saw, or fancied I saw, a quick, instantaneous flash of intelligence come into them as they rested upon Maddock. It was like the reflection from an electric spark, — so transitory, so unsubstantial. When she had gone, I laid away its impression in the inner recesses of my mind, among ephemeral dreams, and unreal fancies. Subsequent events only brought it again to my mind, and gave it any significance.

During the next few days I did not see much of Sergeant Polhemus. Whether Moreton had really requested him to avoid meeting his wife, or whether the sergeant was busy in other quarters, I did not know.

I met him sometimes in unfrequented roads early in the morning, when I took my daily walks before breakfast. On such occasions he always appeared to be in a hurry, and his eye would roll, as he nodded to me in passing, but he never stopped, and seemed to wish to avoid being questioned. He was frequently absent at meal-times, and I suspected that this was a device of his own for obtaining his meals subsequently in the kitchen with the servants, with all of whom he seemed to be on terms of great good-fellowship. At all events the sergeant was left to himself, and allowed to work in his own way.

Mrs. Moreton evinced the greatest aversion to him, and her feelings in this respect, like most of her other fancies, was fully shared by her cousin, Mr. Jack Maddock. This gentleman took little pains to conceal his admiration for her, and my heart was very heavy, for my friend's sake, when I saw that Maddock's regard for her was, to a certain extent, reciprocated. In fact, so evident was this to me, that I was more than once on the point of advising John to tumble his wife's cousin out of the window, baggage and all. As for John, he was blind to everything but his wife's sweetness and loveliness, and I could not bear to arouse his suspicions.

One morning, after breakfast, the sergeant requested a few moments' private conversation with Moreton and myself.

"Is it about the burglary?" asked John.

"Yes," replied Sergeant Polhemus.

"Then we can all hear it," said John. "We are all friends here, and there need be no secrets."

The detective coughed deprecatingly behind his hand.

"Mrs. Moreton is so nervous on this subject," he said, "that I think she had better not be present."

"On the contrary," observed Mrs. Moreton, "I would like to be present, if I may. The ordeal can scarcely be worse than the one which I was subjected to the other day. The diamonds, you will remember, were mine."

"You see, sergeant," said John. "My wife prefers to remain."

"I cannot consent," said Sergeant Polhemus, rolling his eye toward Mrs. Moreton, "to speak upon this subject before Mrs. Moreton or Mr. Maddock. I have no objection to Mr. Clayton, for he is, as I understand, your legal adviser, but what I have to say is for your, and his, ears alone."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed John. "Stay, Jack,— don't go; I know, sergeant, that that's very professional, and all that, but this lady is my wife, and she has lost her diamonds. Of course she is as anxious as I am to know what has become of them. The gentleman, Mr. Maddock, is my wife's cousin. I will answer for his discretion. So proceed."

"If you will not give me the private interview that I request," said the detective, "I must decline to proceed any further in this business. I have the gravest reasons, sir, for refusing to comply with your request."

Again there flashed across my mind the semi-recognition of an instantaneous telegraphing between Moreton's wife and Maddock. Again it might have been only my fancy. John looked wonderingly at the sergeant for a moment, and then turned abruptly into the library. Polhemus and I followed him.

“I suppose I must humor him,” John called out to his wife and Maddock; “but I’ll tell you all about it after we come back. Now, sir,” he continued, locking the door, and turning to the sergeant, “what is it? Have you found who committed the burglary?”

The detective drew forth his handkerchief, and placed it over the door-knob, to cover the keyhole, before answering.

Then he replied, in a low voice, —

“There has not been any burglary.”

Moreton sank into a chair, and gazed at the sergeant in stupefied amazement.

“What!” he exclaimed, when he regained his voice, “no burglary? Wasn’t the chamber door burst into splinters? Aren’t the jewels gone? Wasn’t my poor mother frightened to death? Wasn’t the hall-door found unlocked? Wasn’t” —

The sergeant stopped him with a wave of the hand.

“All these things may be true,” he said. “For the sake of argument, we will admit that they are. Nevertheless, there was no burglary.”

“Wasn’t the chamber broken into?” exclaimed Moreton, angrily.

“No, sir.”

“Do you take me for a fool, sir?” exclaimed John, turning red in the face, and rising hastily.

“Not at all, sir,” replied the imperturbable sergeant. “To the unprofessional eye the chamber certainly does look as though it had been broken into. But it was not. It was broken out of.”

“Ha! The robber, then, was concealed in the room when my wife and mother entered it, you believe?”

“No, sir,” replied the detective. “A robber would not have burst through the door, when he could have simply turned the key, and walked out. There was no robber in the case.”

Moreton looked for a moment into the detective’s single revolving eye, and sank back again in the chair.

“What are you driving at?” he asked, wiping his forehead with his handkerchief. “Don’t make a mystery where there is none. Have you found who took the diamonds, and what became of them?”

“I believe that I have,” said Sergeant Polhemus; “but motives of delicacy restrain me from pursuing my inquiries further without your permission. That is why I requested to speak to you in private.”

“Motives of delicacy!” exclaimed Moreton. “Hang your delicacy! If you have discovered anything, let us know what it is.”

“I have arrived at the conclusion,” said the sergeant, coughing apologetically, “that Mrs. Moreton has stolen her own diamonds.”

Moreton sprang to his feet with such vehemence that the sergeant, in evident alarm, stepped backward a foot or two.

“This is most insulting,” he exclaimed. “Stolen her own diamonds! You are an idiot, sir. Were they not her own already? What motive did she have, pray?”

The sergeant shrugged his shoulders.

“I cannot judge of her motives,” he said, “without the further inquiries I have suggested. The only explanation which I have to offer at present is that she stole her diamonds in order to give them to Mr. Jack Maddock.”

“You insulting scoundrel!” cried Moreton, springing upon the luckless officer, and seizing him by the throat. “Do you dare to say that to me in my own house? Why, you — you infernal villain!”

He backed the sergeant against the wall, and shook him. For a moment it looked as if matters were about to go hard with Mr. Polhemus, for Moreton was a powerful man, and the sergeant a small one. I interfered to separate the struggling men, and succeeded. The sergeant did not seem at all disconcerted, but re-arranged his necktie, and smiled.

“I can hardly blame you, sir,” he said. “You are her husband. I have my convictions, and have done my duty.”

“Give me your bill,” panted Moreton, “and leave the house at once. If this is an example of English detective work, I’ll have no more of it.”

I stood by in silence while he wrote a check to the sergeant’s order. How could I say the word that would persuade him to allow Mr. Polhemus to continue his investigation? I loved John, and I could not do it.

The sergeant left Wellesley that morning, but he had left behind him, in the mind of at least one of his hearers, a leaven that would go on working, even in his absence. He had given me a starting point, and, for John’s sake, I resolved from that hour to keep a vigilant eye upon Mrs. Moreton and our friend Maddock.

We found them together in the drawing-room when we emerged from the library, and both their faces brightened when John told of the sergeant's dismissal. Mr. Maddock remarked in his cynical way that all detectives were either swindlers or humbugs; and Mrs. Moreton took both her husband's hands in hers, and thanked him as a "dear, good old boy, for sending that horrid, disagreeable man away." It was strange, I thought, nevertheless, that neither of them inquired the cause of the sergeant's discharge. Was it because they did not dare?

Moreton's excitement in the morning caused a reaction in the afternoon, and, after dinner, he complained of feeling tired and drowsy. About three o'clock he came into the drawing-room, and threw himself on the sofa. I sat at the window, reading, and Mrs. Moreton near the table with her sewing. It was not long before her husband's loud and regular breathing proclaimed him to be fast asleep. Mr. Jack Maddock was, for a wonder, absent. Where he had gone, I did not know or care. It was pleasant to have him away, and pleasanter still to be able, whenever I glanced up slyly from my book, to rest my eyes upon Mrs. Moreton's beautiful head, and long, dark lashes, bending over her work.

I had finished my book, and stepped across the hall into the library to procure another volume. I was absent perhaps five minutes. When I returned Mrs. Moreton still sat at the table, sewing; but I observed that she had, during my absence, thrown over her husband a silk quilt.

"I was afraid my poor boy would take cold," she said, with a smile.

I resumed my reading, and Mrs. Moreton her work. John's loud breathing had ceased, and he lay very still. He was evidently sleeping easily, and very soundly. The afternoon grew on. Mr. Maddock did not return, and John did not awake. After a while it became too dark for either reading or sewing. Mrs. Moreton laid down her needle, and went softly across the room to where her husband lay.

"It is not usual for him to sleep so long," she said. "I will go and give directions for tea. If he is not awake then, I shall shake him."

She left the room, and I sat looking out from the window in the gathering twilight. An hour passed; the tea-bell rang. I went to the sofa, and shook my old friend by the shoulder. It had a strange feeling, I thought, as I touched it. In some alarm, I threw back the coverlet quickly, and passed my hand across his upturned face. It was cold as ice. John Moreton had been dead at least three hours.

With a loud cry I raised the body in my arms. As I did so, a piece of fine wire, perhaps six inches in length, fell into my hand. Subsequent events caused me to remember this trivial circumstance: at the time of its occurrence I paid no heed to it, but cast the object carelessly upon the carpet.

I shall not dwell upon the events that took place at Wellesley during the few days immediately following my dear old friend's sudden death. There was, as in the case of his mother, a *post mortem* examination by the doctors, but the organs were found in an entirely healthy condition, and, although his decease was certified as resulting from apoplexy, I know that in the minds of both physicians the true cause was far from being satisfactorily explained.

Grief like that of Mrs. Moreton I never saw exhibited by human being, and my heart was filled with pity for her as I beheld her clinging wildly to her husband's coffin as we bore it away to its final resting-place. For days afterward I did not see her. Maddock still haunted the house, and I, too, remained, for the purpose of settling Moreton's affairs.

After a week's seclusion Mrs. Moreton emerged from her chamber, to the great relief, apparently, of Mr. Maddock. From that hour there was a total change in the demeanor of both. Maddock became overbearing and insolent, and assumed the lofty air of master of the house. Mrs. Moreton threw her reserve and caution to the winds, and took no pains to conceal her infatuation for her wretch of a cousin. My suspicions, called into life by Sergeant Polhemus, and quieted by her apparent grief at her husband's death, were aroused into new activity. I resolved, first, to give leave of absence to Mr. Jack Maddock, and, second, to procure the recall of the detective, if he could be found.

She received my proposition that Maddock should take his immediate departure, with the utmost scorn.

"Mr. Clayton," she said, drawing herself up, with flashing eyes, "you forget yourself, and your position. You are in this house upon my sufferance. Mr. Maddock is my guest. I desire him to remain. I am mistress here."

"You are mistaken," I replied. "You are not mistress here. Neither this house, nor anything that is in it, belongs to you. You are penniless, and dependent upon me for the payment of a moderate stated income out of your husband's estate."

There came into the beautiful eyes a look of the most intense alarm. The pupils dilated; her red lips blanched and quivered. Her discomposure was but momentary, however. In another instant she had regained her scornful calmness.

"From whom did you obtain your information?" she asked quietly.

"From your husband's will, now in my possession. Respect for your grief and seclusion, Mrs. Moreton, has prevented me from making you sooner acquainted with its contents. You are provided with an income sufficient for your support until you marry again. The property is devised to John Moreton's children, should any be born to him. Otherwise, it is given to various charitable institutions. I am appointed sole executor and trustee."

She leaned heavily upon the table at her side, and put her hand weakly to her temple. For that moment I pitied her more than I had ever done before, — so young, so beautiful, so evidently wretched. She paused for several moments, looking into my eyes as a caged tiger sometimes looks into the eyes of its tormentor.

"Mrs. Moreton," I said, "I am sorry for you, but I had no hand in this."

"You say you have the will in your possession?" she asked, in a voice that sounded strangely hard.

“It is among the papers relating to the estate,” I replied. “I intended to show it to you today, and to file it in the probate court tomorrow. I will get it.”

“No, no,” she said, “not now. I want time to think. Promise me that you will not file it for a day or two. Mr. Maddock shall leave this afternoon.”

I gave the promise, and left her, still standing by the table, resting wearily against it, with her eyes cast down, and her white hands clasped tight together.

With my book, I went out on the piazza. The afternoon was much like the one when John and Maddock and I had sat in the same place, awaiting the conclusion of Mrs. Moreton’s interview with Sergeant Polhemus. John’s easy-chair still stood there, inviting repose between its cushioned arms. The day was hot and sultry; the bees droned idly in the clover, and the summer clouds drifted lazily across the blue. I thought of the poor woman whom I had left in the drawing-room, so bowed down with grief, so young, and penniless. What if I had misjudged her? What if the detective had been wrong in his suspicions?

Thinking of these things I found no amusement in my book, and soon, overcome by the drowsy influence of the heat and stillness, I slept.

How long I slept I do not know. An excruciating, stinging pain in the back of my neck awoke me suddenly, and I sprang up with a loud cry. Mrs. Moreton stood by my side, with her hand upon my shoulder.

“You have been dreaming,” she said. “Mr. Maddock is about taking his leave. I thought you might like to see him before he goes.”

Maddock stood near the steps, with his valise and traveling shawl. I put my hand to my neck. A minute particle of blood came off upon my finger.

I observed coldly that I wished Mr. Maddock a safe journey, and then rushed off to my room to get something with which to alleviate my burning pain.

Wrenching off my collar and vest, there fell to the floor a fine, pointed wire, precisely similar to the one which I had previously found upon my friend’s body. In an instant that forgotten circumstance came back to my mind, and with it an overwhelming crowd of conjectures and emotions. I picked it up, and examined it closely, forgetting entirely, in my excitement, the pain that I was suffering. It was a woman’s hair-pin, straightened out, of the fine, delicate, sharp-pointed kind known as “invisible.”

On my return to the drawing-room, I found Doctor Saville making a semi-professional call upon Mrs. Moreton.

“Would it be possible,” I asked him, with point-blank directness, “to cause death by inserting a fine steel wire at the back of the neck?”

I looked at Mrs. Moreton as I asked the portentous question. She grew, not white, but absolutely livid, and gazed at me with quickened breath and parted lips.

The doctor smiled, and waved his hand toward Mrs. Moreton.

“That is a question,” he said, “that you should ask my patient here. She is a surgeon’s daughter.”

“I did not know that,” I replied, “or I would have done so. I have been reading a novel in which a woman, in her ambition to become possessed of an estate, and incited by an unprincipled wretch whom she loves, kills in that manner, successively, her husband’s mother and her husband. I only wished to know if the story is probable.”

“It is certainly possible,” replied the doctor, “though it would require a skillful hand to find the vital point. A fine wire or needle passed into the back of the neck in such a manner as to divide the *medulla oblongata*, would cause death.”

“Would death in such a case be instantaneous?”

“Yes, or nearly so.”

I saw the woman’s quivering form before me, cowed, abject and terror-stricken. Yet I felt no pity, and pursued my inquiries with relentless pertinacity.

“Would such a wound be apt to escape the attention of the examiners upon a *post mortem* examination?”

“It might. Inquiries as to the cause of death are not generally directed to that portion of the human frame, unless some suspicion exists to especially call the attention there.”

“Could instantaneous death in that manner be caused by such an instrument as this?” I asked, taking from my pocket the straightened hair-pin, and holding it up.

Mrs. Moreton looked at it in motionless terror. The doctor took it in his hand, and smiled.

“It certainly could,” he said. “In skilled hands this might become a most formidable and deadly weapon.”

“Thank you,” I replied.

The unsuspecting doctor took his leave at last, after an hour that must have been an eternity of torture to his wretched patient. When he had gone, I turned the key, and confronted her. She sank at my feet in a trembling heap, and buried her white face in her hands.

“Mercy! mercy!” she cried.

I looked down upon her with no feeling of compassion, but with no desire to add unnecessarily to her misery. It was not for me to judge her.

“Mrs. Moreton,” I said, “you murdered my poor friend, your husband.”

She made no answer, but her lips moved, and formed the word, —

“Yes.”

“You killed his mother.”

“Yes.”

“You have attempted, in order to obtain possession of and destroy your husband’s will, to murder me, and you have failed.”

“Yes.”

“Mrs. Moreton, I do not intend to seek your punishment, or to pursue you for my own revenge. Your crimes will bring their own retribution. You are free to leave this house as soon as you desire. The sum of money allowed you for your maintenance under your husband’s will shall be regularly paid to you or your agent. I do not forget that you are still the woman whom my poor friend loved. Do you hear me, Mrs Moreton? you are quite free.”

I turned away, and opened the door. She arose from her knees, and groped for it weakly, as though she could not see. Then she fell forward suddenly, and senseless, across the threshold.

The servants told me, next morning, that Mrs. Moreton could not be found. I knew well that I should never see her again. Her stipend under the will has never been called for, and its annual accumulation now amounts to a considerable sum. Mr. Jack Maddock probably deserted her on learning of the conditions of the will, as I heard of him afterward in Texas, and learned that he had been killed in a miserable bar-room brawl. The wretched woman who ran so terrible a gantlet for his sake, was left to expiate her own crime and his, alone. God pity her!

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