

Mrs. Lane's Story
by Mary Grace Halpine

“Yes, ma’am, I’ve followed the business of nursing nigh on to thirty years. I’ve been in scores of wealthy families, and enough behind the scenes to know that it aint all gold that glitters, and them aint always the happiest that have the most money, not by considerable.

“A great many curious circumstances have come to my knowledge. There’s what occurred in the Cheney family, if it was all written out from beginning to end, and printed, it would make such a story as one doesn’t often read. Of course, you heard of it? ’Twas in all the daily papers, though it was in the way that most on ’em print what they call news, and which is gener’ly new enough to the folks they write about. In this case, ’bout half on’t was true, and the rest guessed at, or manufactured for the occasion.

“No, I don’t mind telling just how it was; though I gener’ly intend to keep a pretty close mouth in regard to what I see and hear in the families I do for. But now that the major is dead, and his daughter married and gone to live at Philadelpy, it can’t do no harm to any one.

“I’ve known the Cheneys, off and on, for a good many years. The major was a pleasant, good-natured man that everybody liked. He thought the world of his wife, who was a real lady, if there ever was one. I nursed her when Miss Mabel was born, who was, by all odds, the prettiest baby I ever saw. Mrs. Cheney was poorly, and I stayed with her nigh on to six weeks, and I got so attached to both mother and child, especially the latter, that it was hard parting. After this Mrs. Cheney often had poor spells, and I was there consider’ble—most of the time, in fact, when I wasn’t partic’larly engaged elsewheres; so that it seemed very much like home to me.

“But this was before the major’s wife died, which happened when Miss Mabel was about ’leven years old. It never seemed the same place to me after that. There being no one to take charge, Major Cheney hired a widow woman, by the name Slocum, as housekeeper. Then the change was greater still. Mrs. Slocum was a sly, artful creature, who, from the time she first set foot into the house, did her prettiest to maker herself indispensable to Major Cheney’s comfort, and who gradually obtained a strong influence over his mind. She was called good-looking by them who like that style of beauty, having bold black eyes, red cheeks, and a full face and form; but it was always the strangest thing to me that a man who had had such a sweet, lady-like wife could be infatuated with her to the extent of making her his second choice. But these things can’t be accounted for. I only know that they rode to a neighboring town one morning and were married, and that from that day the house was not the same place, or Major Cheney the same man that he was before. Of course, it created a good deal of talk and gossip. No one called on the bride, nor did she seem to care to have any one do so. Those who went to see the major, on business or from curiosity, said that they never could get a glimpse of him unless she was present, too. She acted as if she was jealous of all her husband’s old friends and acquaintances, and after a time nobody went there at all that wasn’t obleeged to go.

“Miss Mabel was about fifteen when her pa married Mrs. Slocum. She was away to school at the time. If she had been at home I sometimes think it wouldn’t have happened. She was just getting to be a young lady, and as pretty a one as you’d wish to see; and it must have been a great

mortification to her to have such a woman take her mother's place in the home that was no longer any home to her. I make no doubt but what she showed how she felt pretty plainly; but she had the sweetest disposition in the world, and I never believed the stories that her step-mother told about her ill-temper and bad conduct. The poor girl must have had a hard time of it. She told me afterwards that her step-mother did all she could to set her pa against her, and to make him think the worst possible of everything she said and did. But I knew nothing about this then.

"I never knew that there was any trouble to speak of until I heard she had run away from home, and married Harry Neil; and that her father had cast her off, and would have nothing more to do with her. I always thought that it was more to get away from her wretched home than any special love she had for Harry, though he was a well-disposed young fellow, making her a kind husband enough. He died in less than two years, leaving her with one child and no means whatever.

"Everybody thought that there'd be a reconciliation then, but the major was as stubborn as ever, refusing to see his daughter, or to reply to any of her letters. This was so contrary to his natural disposition, which was very yielding, that it was puzzling to most folks.

"Major Cheney was along in years when he married his first wife; he was now past sixty, having aged a good deal during the last few months. I used to see him riding past in the old family carriage, his wife sitting bolt upright beside him, and I never see any one so changed. Then I heard that he was confined to his room, and, finally, to his bed.

"Not long after, Mrs. Cheney sent to know if I wouldn't come and take care of him, and I went. I hadn't set foot in the house since the major's second marriage, and I never expected to again. Mrs. Cheney came down to see me, very showily dressed in a plaid silk of red and green, with diamonds glittering in her ears and on her fingers.

"'I'm glad to see you, Mrs. Lane,' says she. 'I was afraid you couldn't come. My poor husband is failing fast.' Here she raised her handkerchief to her eyes, though I couldn't see the least mite of any tears in 'em. 'He's liable to drop away any time,' she continued; 'and people are so uncharitable that I wouldn't be alone with him on no account. I want some one to be here that can say that he had the best of nursing and every attention. You shall be well paid, and have a handsome present besides.'

"I followed Mrs. Cheney through the wide hall up the broad stairs that led to her husband's room, who lay in a sort of stupor. After telling me about the medicine, how often to give it, and to be sure and call her if there was any change in him, she went away.

"It was a beautiful room, and as I looked around I thought of the pale, sad-eyed woman who was living in a wretched tenement-house down town, but whose rightful place was here.

"In the course of the forenoon, Mrs. Cheney returned with young Dr. Wright; a good enough doctor, so far as book-knowledge goes, but with little experience. He seemed puzzled by the symptoms of his patient, making an entire change in the medicine. When he left, Mrs. Cheney followed him into the hall, and the door being ajar, I heard her say:

“What do you think of him, Doctor?”

“He can’t live a great while as he is now,” I heard Dr. Wright say. ‘His symptoms are peculiar. I should feel better if you would let me consult with some older physician.’

“I couldn’t hear exactly what Mrs. Cheney said in reply, but it was clear that she didn’t think it was at all necessary.

“The new medicine seemed to have a favorable effect upon my patient, so that I counted on having a pretty quiet night. Mrs. Cheney was in, the fore part of the evening, and offered to sit up with her husband a portion of the night, but I said it wasn’t necessary, and she went away. ’Bout ’leven, my patient being quietly sleeping, I lay down in the alcove that was divided by curtains from the rest of the room.

“I don’t know how long I slept, but I awoke with the feeling that there was some one in the room. The curtains of the alcove were drawn back, and on lifting my head, I saw in a mirror on the opposite wall Mrs. Cheney standing by her husband’s bed. She had the vial of medicine in her hand that the doctor had left in the morning. Twice I saw her hold it up to the light, and then pour out some of its contents. Then she filled it as full as it was before from the vial that she took from her pocket. After carefully replacing it on the stand I saw her turn her head towards the alcove and listen. I had just time to lay my head back upon the pillow when she came and stood by the bed. Being satisfied that I was asleep she went softly out of the room.

“I never was so confounded in my life. I didn’t know what to think. But I was determined that my patient should take no more of that medicine. Among the bottles in the buffet was a queer-shaped, three-cornered one that was nearly empty. It had on it ‘elixir,’ together with some foreign words that I couldn’t make out. I poured the medicine into this, putting it back in one corner of the shelf. Then I filled the vial with some wine bitters that I had brought for my own use, and which was just like the doctor’s medicine in color.

“I didn’t see much of Mrs. Cheney the next day until about dusk. Then she came in and sat with me a little while. She complained about not feeling very well, and said, on leaving, that she should retire early. About nine o’clock one of the servants came to the door, saying that there was a woman down stairs who said that she had come from my sister with some things for me.

“It’s my niece, Mary Ann; tell her to come right up,’ says I.

“So in walks a woman with a basket on her arm, and so muffled up in a big cloak in vail that until she spoke I never once mistrusted that it was poor Mabel Neil.

“Don’t be angry with me,’ she sobbed. ‘I was in to your sister’s just as she was going to send Mary Ann with this basket, and I begged her to let me bring it. I hoped it would give me a chance to see poor father.’

“Of course I wasn’t angry. How could I be? I felt more like crying, too, she looked so pale and sorrowful. I didn’t send her away, either. I said she could stay all night if she wanted to. Only she must be sure and go before her step-mother was up, who I knew would be mad enough if she found it out.

“Major Cheney appeared glad to see his daughter, though he was too weak to talk much. But in a few minutes he looked troubled.

“‘*She* won’t like it,’ he said, pointing to the door.

“I quieted him by saying that the door was locked, and that no one would be in again tonight. Presently he fell asleep, with his daughter’s hand in his, and a peaceful look upon his face.

“Glad enough to have a chance to sleep, I went into the alcove and left them together. I must have slept very soundly, for I didn’t wake until broad daylight, and then by a heavy knocking at the door. Motioning Mrs. Neil to step into the alcove, I opened it just a crack. There stood Katy, Mrs. Cheney’s maid, her face as white as a sheet.

“‘Come into the mistress’ room quick!’ she cried. ‘A dreadful thing has happened—Mrs. Cheney is dead!’

“Followed by Mrs. Neil, who had no longer any occasion to fear, I went into the room where the dead woman lay, who must have died the fore part of the night, for she was quite cold. The first thing I saw, as I glanced at the stand beside the bed, was the three-cornered bottle, nearly empty.

“Then I remembered her going to the buffet the night before, though I didn’t think nothing of it at the time. You see, it was just between daylight and dark, and I was very busy with my patient.

“I can’t describe my thoughts and feelings at this discovery, and which I had sense enough to keep to myself. I told Mrs. Neil all that I knew and suspected, and we both agreed to say nothing about it. A vial was found in the pocket of Mrs. Cheney’s dress, containing the same deadly poison that was in the bottle and goblet on the stand, and most people thought that she committed suicide. The coroner’s verdict was, ‘that the deceased came to her death by taking poison, whether by accident or design they were unable to say.’

“Major Cheney did not know of his wife’s death until several weeks after it occurred, and never how she died. He recovered, but was never very strong again. Mrs. Neil stayed with her father so long as he lived. The old man got to be very fond of his grandson, dividing his property equally between them when he died.”

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