

Maria Vassar

I had parted from my cousin Charles lightly and merrily, as people part who expect to meet again in a few days. If I had thought of him at all, it was as one who had been enjoying himself while I plodded on in the dull city counting house, when there came to me one morning, a telegram from Riversdale, where he had been stopping. I had no idea, as I leisurely seated myself to open the message, that there was anything more serious within than a request that I would send him his dressing-case, which he had left behind him, than I had that any impossible thing could happen.

Since then a telegram has always given me a thrill of horror. You can fancy the shock the one I had just received gave me, as, with careless curiosity, I cast my eye over the paper to read these words:

CHICHESTER HOTEL RIVERSDALE.

Charles Beldee died last night. Come at once.

H. CHICHESTER.

Charlie had been my cousin and my very dear friend. Although not like each other in any way, we had been very intimate. We told each other our love affairs, our little adventures. We talked freely about other fellows, and about the girls we knew. Indeed, we were more frank than any but brothers usually are with each other. The night before we parted he had said to me, "I shall be married before the year is out," and he had let me look at a picture he wore against his heart. He was full of youth, and hope and beauty—dead! Oh, no, it could not be! The telegram was a cruel, practical joke, or some mistake had been made. Charlie might be ill, wounded perhaps; but he was not dead!

Quivering with horror, yet at every instant doubting that the message told the truth, I hastily crammed some linen into my portmanteau, and drove in a cab to catch the train. I had so far failed to realize the truth when I reached the station that I half expected to see Charlie waiting there for me; and when I was at the very door of the hotel at Riversdale, I said to myself that I was mad or in a dream, that in a moment more I should be mocked at for my easy credulity, or should awaken and find myself at home or in bed.

I was brought to a full sense of the awful truth in a moment when a stout gentleman, with a round rosy face, on which its present expression of anxiety and trouble looked utterly unnatural, advanced towards me, and said, in something of the tone in which people speak at a funeral, "Mr. Ross, I believe. My name is Chichester."

"You telegraphed to me," I gasped. "Is it—is it true?"

"I grieve to say that it is only too true, Mr. Ross," he answered. "Come into this room. There is a painful curiosity in the house about the event, and we must secure privacy."

I followed him, growing faint and dizzy as I went on, and fell, rather than sank into a chair which he had moved toward me. I looked at him, without being able to speak, and he, after a pause, broke the silence.

“It is a very horrible thing. The mystery is the most awful part. You know that your cousin was in excellent health when he left you. He was in good spirits, also. His intended wife is at the hotel with her parents. They spent the evening together. He seemed very happy. Do you know of any reason why he should commit suicide?”

“Why he should commit suicide?” I gasped.

The landlord answered: “It is either suicide or murder. He was found dead in his bed this morning, with a great wound over his heart. A knife was lying loosely in his right hand. His left was so tightly clenched, that the nails are buried in the flesh. Something seems to be clutched in it—what we cannot tell. Mr. Ross, I fear very much that it is murder—that in my house your cousin’s life has been taken by some enemy or robber. In my house! I can never forgive myself for sleeping so soundly that night—for feeling no presentiment of danger. Many a night, doubtful of my watchman, I have stolen out of my bed and gone in my slippers from door to door, anxious about gas, anxious about fire, fearful that the valuables that some of my guests bring with them might prove a temptation to burglars. My wife has often laughed at me for my nervousness. And that night I slept—that night when murder was being committed under my roof!”

The man’s trouble was so genuine, that in the midst of my sorrow I sympathized with him. I remember saying something of the sort before a cloud came over my eyes, and a sound, as of a roaring sea, came into my ears. After that I remember very little. I had been over-worked that summer and was not well; this frightful shock had quite prostrated me. When I began to comprehend what was going on about me again, the inquest was over, and my cousin’s body prepared for burial. They had found in his clenched left hand a slender bit of gold, about half an inch long, with a tiny diamond in its joint; and the verdict they had given was, “Murdered by some person or persons unknown.”

All that I could say was that my cousin had no enemies that I knew of. All that I could do was to kiss him upon his frozen brow and follow him to the grave. I did not even see his betrothed; but her mother told me she suffered terribly, and was on the verge of delirium. They took her home the day after the funeral, but I stayed. I had no choice but to stay. The weakness that had caused the swoon proved the forerunner of a serious illness; and I was but a troublesome guest at Chichester’s Hotel for many days.

As I recovered and found my way to the coffee-room, I was treated with much consideration, and, as an invalid, made many acquaintances, who would not have troubled their heads about me had I been well.

One guest, a beautiful lady, with great black eyes, and a voluptuous form, often paused before my sofa, to ask me with the most bewitching smile how I felt, or to leave beside me a flower she had gathered in the garden, or a book that might beguile a weary hour.

After a while we fell frequently into conversation. She was bright and full of pleasant repartee. She had, in her earliest youth, been an actress. Whether she got wearied of it, or did not succeed upon the stage she did not tell me. She was now twenty-eight, and her contact with the public

had effectually banished all reserve and restraint from her manner. We were friends at once. In three weeks I was her lover. My illness had procured me leave of absence. I prolonged it to the utmost possibility.

The cause that brought me to Chichester's Hotel was a terrible one, but it seemed to have brought me also the greatest joy of my life. All the women I had ever met before seemed tame and spiritless beside Maria Vassar. I wondered how I had lived before I knew her. And she? Surely she loved me. She neither refused my kisses nor drew her hand from mine, when I held it passionately against my heart. Has love need of many words when it has such speech as this?

My heart was often heavy, still I had not forgotten my cousin, and the dreadful details of his murder were constantly being rehearsed. The detectives were hard at work. The slender arrow of gold, with a diamond at its head, was their clue. It had in some way guided them. They felt sure of discovering the murderer.

I told my troubles to Maria Vassar. She strove to comfort me.

She listened patiently to all that the detectives had hinted at, but shook her head over it.

"They only want the money those poor parents will pay them," she said. "They have found no clue to the murderer's identity. They never will. It was a case of suicide. He had a quarrel with his sweetheart. Of course she will not own it now."

"But the ornament," I said—"the broken ornament?"

"Something of her's [sic] he treasured, I suppose," she said. "Oh, no one murdered your cousin, rest assured."

It was a strange experience altogether.

Once I said to her, "Maria, sometimes I am frightened. The murder of my best friend brought me to know you. We have talked of my love for you and of his death together. What does this forebode? Trouble and a tragic parting? Sometimes I think so."

I saw her turn pale, and it was my turn to console her. We parted that night with fond farewells and kisses. Before breakfast next morning the head detective called upon me. He wore a triumphant look, as of one who had succeeded beyond the fondest anticipations.

"We have found the murderer," he said. "That little arrow did it. We traced it and found who it belonged to, and that told the story. We arrested her last night. It will be a surprise to you when you see her."

"A woman?" I asked.

"Yes," he answered, "and a young one."

There was a chambermaid in the house, a black-eyed girl whom I had always distrusted. I was so sure of seeing her in the room to which they led me that I asked no more questions.

But when the door had been opened by the stout man in charge, I looked for her in vain. On a chair near the window sat a lady dressed in black silk. She turned her head. It was Maria Vassar.

I saw in her face that it was she who was the prisoner.

She arose and came toward me.

“Hush!” she said holding out her manacled hands. “You can do no good. If they think I did it they must try me. Only if I might have a word with you alone.”

Her smile, beaming upon the detectives won her wish. They glanced around the room, and saw that there was only one means of egress. They then strode outside the door, and closed it upon us.

“This is a horrible outrage!” I gasped. “What in heaven’s name does it mean?”

“Kiss me!” she said. “Kiss me as you did last night, on my cheek, on my brow, on my lips.”

I took her in my arms—I showered caresses upon her, and called her my poor insulted darling.

It was she who drew herself away.

“That is the last,” she said. “No one will ever kiss me again. My poor boy. I killed your cousin. He caught a pendant of my earring in his hand as I stabbed him. He gave it to me. They have traced the present to him, and bribed my maid to search my trunks. I loved him. I never loved any man but him. Why should I tell you any more? You can guess it all. And he had left me for that schoolgirl he meant to marry. I always carry a dagger about me; it is a fashion I learned in Italy. Going upstairs alone at night, I passed his door. It had blown open. I saw him lying upon a lounge, and he had her portrait in his hand, and pressed it to his mouth and kissed it, and I went mad, and flew into the room and stabbed him. You have the story. I don’t think you’ll try to hang me. Though, poor boy! I never should have married you; you were not rich enough.”

She stooped her head and kissed the hand that I had pressed against my breast to still its tumultuous beating, and then she lifted up her voice, and said, “I am ready.”

I never saw Maria Vassar again. She was condemned to death, but the sentence was commuted to imprisonment for life.

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