

Told by the Dead

WRITTEN FOR *THE NEW YORK CLIPPER*

by Mrs. E. Burke Collins

My name is Maurice Danton, and, at the time my story opens, I was valet to Monsieur St. Armand. Not a very exalted position, perhaps my aristocratic readers will decide, but a very lucrative one, however. For years I had no fault to find with my master; but at last one objection arose, and, as it is the fashion nowadays (an old fashion which descended from Adam) to blame everything that goes wrong in the world to the female sex, so, also, in this respect there was “a woman in the case.”

I had long deemed monsieur impregnable to the attacks of the fair sex. He lived carelessly, and like a prince. There was no need of his marrying for money, as he already possessed a fair estate; and as for love, bah!—he had had enough of that! So he argued ever when rallied by his gay friends as to his bachelor state; and as time flew by he came to be regarded as a confirmed celibate.

One night monsieur came home from his club looking very pale and troubled. I knew at once that something was wrong. I knew, too, that in his own good time he would tell me all about it. Judge, then, of my astonishment when I learned that, by foolish risks at the gaming-table, he had lost nearly the whole of his fortune, and now (following the fashion) contemplated taking a wife to repair that loss. In vain I plead with him to relinquish the design, which would plainly interfere with all my future. He announced his firm intention of marrying, and, having pointed out to me the impossibility of keeping up his present style of living, and even hinting at the necessity of dispensing with the services of a valet, I wisely concluded to say no more. Without a valet what would become of monsieur, and *what would become of me?* I submitted.

He began at once to pay court to the most amiable woman in France—the only child of a wealthy old Alsatian. My heart smote me when I saw my master’s choice. She was too pure and good for this sacrifice. But then *somebody* must be sacrificed, and it were better Valerie De Liancourt than I! She was fair—like an angel—a pure, blonde type of beauty so seldom found in France. Her face was perfectly colorless, her hair flaxen, her eyes were blue and timid. She was but a child in years and experience, and I trembled for her future.

The wooing was a speedy one. Monsieur’s affairs were too complicated to admit of delay; so he urged the marriage with lover-like ardor, which almost deceived *me*, and with great pomp and ceremony the wedding took place. After a short tour of the Continent they came to the chateau, which he had had prepared for their reception, just outside of Paris, and there settled down to wedded happiness. I do not think it lasted long.

One evening, while walking with his bride through the beautiful and extensive grounds about the chateau, he was approached by a servant, who with a puzzled expression on his face announced that a woman who had just arrived was inquiring for him, and wished to see him at once. I chanced to be looking at monsieur, and I was startled at the change in his countenance. His face

was white, fairly livid. He stammered some reply to the waiting servant, and then, with a scarcely audible excuse to madame, followed the man back to the house.

My curiosity was aroused. Here was a secret of some kind which had been concealed from me. I was piqued, angry; I determined to follow. With assumed carelessness I sauntered through the hall, where the new arrival was waiting, now face to face with my master. A slight figure, clad in gray, no color to brighten the sombre, nun-like garb, and with a gray veil drawn closely over her features. Stepping into a doorway near, I observed monsieur narrowly. He went straight up to the slender form, and spoke some words in a low, quick tone, which could not reach my ears, and glancing towards a small reception-room near by. My mind was made up. I left my lurking-place, and, stepping out upon the verandah, which ran across that side of the palace-like house, I approached the windows of the room indicated. Fortunately, one stood open. I sprang inside, closed the window, and hastily concealed myself behind a large cabinet which stood in a corner. I had not long to wait. Soon the door opened and monsieur entered, accompanied by the lady, her veil still covering her face from view. He closed the door carefully and handed her to her seat. "We will be safe from intrusion here, Leonie," he said in a low, nervous tone.

"It is well. Our business requires secrecy."

She laughed lightly. I had never heard so sweet a voice before—low, clear, well modulated, bell-like. With a quick, impulsive movement, as though she were suffocating, she tossed back the veil, and, peeping cautiously out from behind my screen, I saw her face for the first time. She was lovely—lovely beyond compare. The pale beauty of my mistress faded into insignificance beside this olive-skinned, red-lipped, dark-eyed siren.

"You have done an imprudent thing, Leonie," began monsieur, gazing down into the dangerous dark eyes. "You should have written, and I would have gone to you."

"I know it," she answered. "But you know how impetuous I am. O Paul! Paul!" she cried, clasping her hands and turning those glorious eyes upon his face, "is it not enough to drive me wild and make me do any mad act? To feel that we are separated forever; that between us lies a chasm which can never be bridged; that you are bound—indissolubly bound—to another—ah, mon Dieu!"

She bowed her head upon her clasped hands, and faint sobs escaped her. My master's face was rigid. I saw that he was in torment; I saw, also, that he loved this woman—this Leonie. He drew near, and laid his hand on her bowed head.

"My darling!"

At the words she raised her eyes.

"Do not despair, Leonie. You know that you alone possess my heart. Have I not suffered as well as you?"

He struck his clenched hand upon the marble table near him. I could see that the blow left a black mark upon the white flesh, but in his agony he felt it not. He went on slowly:

“But for the accursed luck that ruined me you would be my wife, and in her place, Leonie. Listen! you shall yet be mine. Do you hear me? I swear that you shall be my wife!”

She trembled and bowed her head; as though she could not bear the impetuosity of his gaze. But I felt in my heart that, for this assurance, these words, she had come to him. He knelt at her side, and, throwing both arms about her slender form, spoke a few words in a low tone, hurriedly and passionately. Her perfect face flushed, and then paled; she trembled a little; then she answered aloud:

“Very well. By whatever step you take I will abide!”

Drawing her to him, he pressed his lips to hers. She did not repulse him. Then, rising, he led her out of the room, out of the house, and away from the place by a private entrance. Half an hour later, when I sought monsieur to deliver a message, I found him in the garden at madame’s side, conversing in the most lover-like strain. Surely he had forgotten the existence of Mademoiselle Leonie!

The next day he received a letter which called him to Paris on urgent business—at least, so he stated, and so his patient victim believed. He would go alone, he said, and did not require my services. So I packed his clothes, he bade madame an affectionate farewell—it was their first parting—and was off by the next train. After his departure the house was very quiet, but I fancied a look of uneasiness in madame’s eyes. I knew not if her suspicions were aroused, but I determined to watch her faithfully and defend her to the last.

My master had been gone about a week, and it was nearly time to expect his return, when one morning Marie, madame’s maid, came to me with a perplexed face.

“Maurice,” she began hurriedly, “whatever is the matter with my mistress? I have not heard her bell this morning; and when I ventured to the door of her chamber I could hear no sound within. Mon Dieu! I fear that she is ill.”

A vague terror seized me. I followed the pretty French girl to the luxurious suite of apartments. Everything was still as the grave. Gathering courage, Marie stooped and called the name of her mistress through the keyhole. Still no reply. Now, thoroughly alarmed, I determined to risk possible rebuke for officiousness, and burst the lock of the chamber-door. It was easily accomplished.

What a sight was there! What a scene met our terrified eyes! A swinging lamp, still burning, threw a broad glare of light upon the awful picture—upon the rosewood bed, on which madame was lying, her long, fair hair, unbound, bung over the costly pillow; her eyes, wide open, staring; one hand hanging limp and lifeless beside her—and what is that? O Dieu! a stream of blood, dark-red, horrible, welling from her breast and falling on the velvet carpet, drip—drip—drip! To this day, when I close my eyes, this all comes back to me! With a wild shriek Marie fell upon the

floor in a dead swoon. The frightened servants flocked in, a physician was sent for, and consternation prevailed. An autopsy was held, and it was pronounced a case of self-destruction, the weapon used being a small dagger, inlaid with jewels, which had long been the property of madame.

In the meantime monsieur had been sent for, and until his arrival the physicians had ordered that the body should not be disturbed. It was then that I ventured on a bold act. I sent privately for an eminent detective, in whose secrecy I could rely, and when he arrived I confided to him all my suspicions, and the interview between monsieur and the woman which I had witnessed. The detective's face was very grave when I had finished. I led the way to madame's apartment. The doors and windows had been found securely fastened on the inside, and, after a thorough examination of the room, we were about to relinquish the search in despair when the detective made an important discovery. He found that, notwithstanding the locked doors and windows, communication with the bedroom was quite possible by means of an old-fashioned sliding panel near the head of the bed, and whose existence there would never have been suspected. But we kept our own counsel, and awaited further developments.

Well, monsieur arrived, heart-broken, wild with grief. It seemed an outrage to suspect that agonized mourner of any wrong. He bent over the beautiful body, and hid his face in the long, fair hair, and wept and moaned and sobbed in the very abandonment of woe until the bystanders wept in sympathy. In the meantime came madame's aged parents, bowed with sorrow and the awful blow that had fallen on them so suddenly. She had been their all, and the loss fell crushingly upon them.

At length the detective drew near the dead body, surrounded by the noblest and wealthiest in the land, for madame had been highly connected.

"It is my opinion," said he, slowly glancing around the room, "that this lady did not die by her own hand."

My eyes were on monsieur. I saw him start, and a frightful pallor overspread his face.

"What do you mean?" he cried.

"If monsieur will permit," answered the detective, bowing deferentially, "I will put my opinion to the test.

What could monsieur do but acquiesce? Nevertheless, I observed the shudder that passed over his handsome form, and the look of hatred that flashed from his dark eyes.

Just then a messenger whom the detective had dispatched returned, bearing with him a camera and photographing apparatus. Monsieur started, and one hand clutched at his heart convulsively.

"I have made a discovery," began the detective in his clear, firm tone, as he arranged the camera before the death-bed. "If monsieur will allow me," he added, laying his hand upon the sliding panel, and opening it before the astonished gaze of the beholders. "By that entrance did the

murderer gain admittance. It must necessarily have been someone acquainted with the internal arrangements of the house and the lady's room, or he would not have known of this secret entrance or the whereabouts of the dagger with which the dreadful crime was committed."

Monsieur reeled like a drunken man, and sank into an easy-chair. Nothing escaped the keen eye of the detective.

"Now," said he slowly and impressively, "I am going to prove my words. I am going to show you the face of the murderer."

It was a bold assertion. An awful silence reigned throughout the chamber of death. Monsieur sat like a marble statue. You could hear our hearts beat as we stood there. The detective had now prepared his photographing apparatus, and when all was ready he proceeded calmly and deliberately to photograph the eyes of the dead woman, wide open, staring as they were. At once everybody comprehended his design. He was about to demonstrate by actual experiment a scientific theory. Upon the retina of the eye would be impressed the last scene of the dead woman's life, and this, with the aid of powerful glasses, he purposed to photograph.

As long as I live I shall never forget that moment. The awe-stricken group—the ghastly face of the wretch in the arm-chair—the cool, impassive features of the officer, as his hands moved slowly in his work, upon which hung a human life. When the work was done and the proof prepared, the detective examined it closely. A deadly pallor overspread his countenance. He beckoned me aside. The dead eyes, revealing their awful secret, told this story. We could read it all, as though on a canvas, spread before our gaze. Science had wrought this miracle.

The murdered woman was lying on the bed. Over her stooped the form of a man, and in his hand the little dagger which he was in the act of plunging into her breast. It was the face of monsieur! I draw a curtain over what followed. The friends of madame would have torn him in pieces; but the detective interfered, and, taking him into custody, soon had him safe in prison. The woman Leonie was found soon after; but, as nothing could be proven against her, she was discharged. The trial took place, and, through the influence of the tell-tale photograph, monsieur was sentenced to be executed, and soon after he confessed his crime.

On the morning of the day upon which the execution was to take place, Leonie appeared at the prison and begged the privilege of a farewell interview. An hour was granted her, and, with a strange look of triumph upon her beautiful, haughty face, she entered the cell. At the expiration of the time the jailer opened the door and found them both dead, clasped in each other's arms. A few drops of prussic acid, which Leonie had procured, had brought them the death which they chose, since they could die together.

But little remains to be told. Monsieur and Madame De Liancourt soon followed their daughter to the grave, and the vast wealth was bequeathed to charitable purposes. I left France at once, and never returned.

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This story was accompanied by a single in-text illustration