Venetia Montague: A Romance of Clairvoyance

by James Wight

I.—THE MURDER AT THIS VILLA SOLFERINO.

A crime had been committed in a suburb of Boulogne, and the neighborhood was in commotion. A wealthy man who had occupied the Villa Solferino had been found dead in his bed at midnight. After repeated knocks at his door, Petrie, his valet, had become alarmed, and had run like wildfire to the Judge's house. The body lay on the bed dressed. The face was horribly contorted. The half-opened lips disclosed both rows of teeth, clenched by the last convulsion of agony. The eyes, which no pions hand had closed in time, stared death in the face with a horrid fright. A broad dagger, almost shaped like a bayonet, lay crimsoned with gore in the middle of the room. The blood had spurted upon the carpets, the hangings, the furniture, everywhere.

Petrie, the valet, who had called the Justice and raised the neighborhood, was silent. He seemed to have exhausted his strength and to have lapsed into a sort of stupor. At the inquest he had so far recovered as to be able to tell all he knew. It was not much. His master had been in his usual health that unfortunate day. The female servant had been called to Calais by a telegram announcing the sickness of her mother. He had therefore served his employer's supper at the usual hour—eight o'clock—after that he had gone downstairs and eaten a few shrimps, washing them down with a single glass of claret—he positively swore that he had only drunk one glass of claret—then, in a most unaccountable manner, he had dropped asleep, and had not awoke until the hall clock was striking twelve. Being minutely cross-examined, he declared that he had bought the shrimps from one of the Boulogne fishwives in the afternoon. She had come with her creel to the door. She wore sabots and the usual dress characteristic of the Boulogne fisherwomen. He hadn't noticed whether she was old or young; but he fancied she was rather stout than thin. She had very little to say. He asked if the shrimps were fresh. She said they were. He bought a pint for himself—his employer never tasted fish in any form. The shrimps were not fresh. They had a bitter taste, and he had consequently only eaten about a third of them; the rest he had thrown into the stove. He had never seen the dagger in his life until he saw it last night, when his kind master lay dead.

The police described the condition of the house and the doors and windows when they took possession. The sleeping-apartment of M. Clere was on the ground-floor, and it looked upon an ample fruit garden. The door was locked on the inside. The three windows were all closed, and two of them were fastened—the other, which adjoined a shady grassplot, was not latched. Nothing in the room was disturbed. M. Clere's gold watch—a valuable jeweled chronometer—was on his person, and was still going when the police arrived.

Furthermore, it was shown by the physician who had occasionally been called in to prescribe for M. Clere that the deceased had a good constitution and enjoyed good health, although he was physically deformed—one of his legs being shorter than the other, and his neck slightly twisted. Both the doctor and the valet testified that the deceased was a taciturn gentleman, and kept himself entirely aloof from the residents of the district. He was a man of wealth—a man apparently at peace with the world, while the world was evidently at peace with him.

The Judge inquired whether the doctor thought the circumstances were consistent with the theory of suicide. The doctor thought they were—the suicidal mania might have sprung up in a disordered brain in a single night. The idea of suicide was intensely repugnant to Petrie, the valet.

"He was not the man for that! His mind was too well balanced for that!" the man insisted.

The police had a theory of their own. They suspected Petrie of the murder of his master; but for what motive, beyond a mere tigerish thirst for blood, they were at a loss to explain. They pointed to the locked door and the open window. They cited the shrimps and the convenient sleep that followed their enjoyment.

The inquest was adjourned, and Petrie was taken to Boulogne harbor for the purpose of identifying the woman who had sold him the crustaceans. In this he signally failed, although every fish-vender in the place was passed in review before him. In a couple of days afterwards the maid-servant returned. The telegram had been a forgery. Her mother was in excellent health. All investigation failed to trace the person who had handed the dispatch into the telegraphic office at Calais. Meantime the case looked very suspicious, so far as Petrie was concerned. He was kept in solitary confinement, and ghostly voices assailed his ears at midnight, with the object of terrifying him into confession. On one occasion the police contrived a magic-lantern scene, in which the supposed crime was suddenly pictured on the wall of his cell. The poor wretch was plunged in a paroxysm of terror; but he never varied in his solemn protestation of innocence. Finally he was tried and condemned to be guillotined. When he received his sentence he made the same unvarying response:

"Messieurs, I am innocent!"

On the morning of the day on which Petrie's sentence was to have been carried into execution the prison authorities received a brief order from the Minister of Justice. The message was as follows:

"Postpone the execution of Petrie."

The ground for that postponement received its explanation in the fact that late the previous evening the Minister had received an important document from one of the detectives who had been detailed to scrutinize every nook and corner of the Solferino Villa—more for the purpose of trying to ascertain what disposition the deceased might have made of his property than for saving the condemned murderer's life. In a secret closet in the cellar the detective found the clearly written document, embodied in the two following chapters:

II.—A SHEEP IN WOLF'S CLOTHING.

"As I have never unbosomed myself to any human being, and have never had much sympathy with my fellow men, I think it may be well to put on paper the strange story of my experience. I am not, as many people have imagined, a Frenchman by birth. My father was a famous scene-painter, and all the happy recollections of my life are associated with my childhood in London.

My boyish days, perhaps, seem happier to me than they really were by contrast with all the after-years. I remember when my mother died, just before the pantomime was produced at Christmas. I remember —; but why recall those childish memories? I went to school, and, when I was twelve, I took to painting as naturally as a bird takes to its wings. My father was proud of me, and he used to show it in all sorts of peculiar ways.

"One day I fell clear from the paint-bridge, fifty feet; and, as I have been told, was picked up a mass of quivering flesh and broken bones. Weary, weary months passed before I could leave my bed. I was crippled for life; it was necessary for me to use crutches; I was practically ruined for a scene-painter. I went back to school, and I studied portrait-painting at leisure hours. I had been fond of the theatre, and, although I never went there now, I used to ask my father about the new plays and the new players. Then I would try to sketch the stage-scene in such a drama, according to my conception, supplying the figures and their pose. My father got hold of some of those improvisations, and they astonished him. One day he said to me:

" 'When did you see Mr. Redcliffe?'

" 'Mr. Redcliffe!' I said; 'whom do you mean? I don't know any person by the name of Redcliffe!'

" 'Yet you have drawn Redcliffe to the life, and Henrietta Sims as well; you must have been at the theatre and have seen them in that act!'

"I avowed that I never had. He smiled sadly. I think he fancied my head was a little touched.

"By-and-bye, I began to experience realistic daydreams. I used to see the action of a whole piece, to see the scenes and the stage-settings, to mark the costumes and countenances of the actors—all in pantomime. I could have drawn a panorama of everything. I questioned my father, and found that his description tallied, even to the minutest article of stage-property. Poor man, he was quite amused at what be termed my 'cunning' in stealing into the theatre and getting 'a peep.' This was his explanation. But I had not seen the play, nor the players, nor the new scenes, nor heard a single word of the play. It was purely spontaneous creation. At first I did not know whether to rejoice at or to deplore this new mysterious faculty. But all the time never ceased to wonder at it. Was this the poetic inspiration which enabled Homer to picture the battles of the Iliad; which enabled Dante to look at the horrors of the Inferno; which enabled Milton to depict the long Summer's-day fall of the Tempter? Was it this; or was it the exalting influence of my distorted spine upon my mental powers?

"My remarkable gift left me as suddenly as it came. No wakening vibration of the faculty returned. I had no more visions. My life became as prosy as a plowed field. I had opened a small studio in London. I was a portrait-painter on a very limited scale. At first my patrons were mothers who had baby-cherubs to paint. At last a lady visited my studio and took her first sitting. She had a remarkable face—not handsome, but kind and intellectual. I painted with eagerness—I seemed to understand the woman. I seemed to comprehend her nature—her instincts—her secret motives.

“When the portrait was finished she brought several people to see it, and what surprised me was the evident astonishment which so plainly was imprinted on their features as they gazed. That portrait brought me fame. The newspapers took it up, and lauded me to the skies. I couldn’t understand it. To tell the truth, I was greatly perplexed.

“I painted more portraits with ‘increasing power,’ as the critics expressed it. A writer in *The Times* said that I painted portraits as if I had ‘known every subject of my canvas from childhood’ and ‘had been permitted to look into their hearts.’

“This criticism disclosed me to myself. This was the whole matter in a nutshell. I had not previously remarked the new psychologic phase in my nature. While I was painting my next portrait—that of a man—I became conscious of the obtrusion on my mind of his thoughts, I knew all that he was thinking—all that he was fearing.

“ ‘Can it be possible that that cripple there can see that I am a scoundrel?’ he was asking himself.

“When that portrait was approaching completion the man said to me: ‘You are the devil in semi-human shape; you needn’t finish the picture; there is your money.’ I learned subsequently that he took the canvas away and burnt it.

“This terrible insight became wearying, harassing and annoying to me. To see, as it were, the curtain rise from a human soul; to behold all the littleness, the falsehoods, the egotism, the ambitions, the lies, the envy, the hatreds, the uncharitableness, became a terrible ordeal to the nerves. Some subjects I steadfastly refused to paint at any price. My father, who never understood me, used to scold and to prophecy that my arrogance would have its punishment. To escape importunities, as well as to give my nerves needed rest, I took up my residence in Paris. My fame had already preceded me. I had scarcely reached my apartments m the Hotel de l’Europe, when a carriage, containing one of the most famous and notorious actresses of the day, drove up to the door.

“Venetia Montague wanted an allegorical picture executed in which she was to be embodied. She was ambitious to be an Ariadne—not an Ariadne as Titians has painted her, pacing the solitary shore in heart-silence, while the sails of Athenian Theseus are fading in the distance, and with Bacchus and his drunken followers approaching from the desert. No; Mlle. Montague desired to be depicted rushing into the limpid waves, while the sailboat containing her lover was just eluding her grasp. Shall I confess that with such a face before me—with such eyes filled with divine sorcery looking into mine—I was delighted with the idea, and readily promised to essay it?

“I well remember the first sitting. ‘Sitting!’ did I say? It was a study from the nude! There was no prudery, no squeamishness, in this woman, who had carried Paris captive by her French Spy and her ‘Mazeppa.’ Shall I ever forget the dreamy sensualism, the Oriental languor, the dormant power, the leonine force of that living statue? She made arrangements for the studies in water, and I sketched while she posed or plunged in a swimming bath in the Seine. Thus the picture was painted and placed on exhibition. Just here let me note that in the case of Venetia Montague my unhappy gift of insight entirely failed me. I could watch the expression of her face and speculate

on its meaning. I could request her opinion with the real interest of ignorance; but I could never see within the arcana of her heart—the green curtain would not rise at my bidding. To me she possessed all the freshness, all the charm, of unraveled destiny.

"The picture was placed on exhibition and created a furor of excitement. Crowds stood in front of it every day. 'It is Venetia herself!' 'It is Venetia glorified!' 'It is not a picture; it is life!' people murmured in ecstasy.

"Sometimes I stole in among the crowd to watch the emotions inspired by the 'Ariadne.' It seemed to me curious how men stood and regarded it, as if they were compelled. I noticed one handsome young man in particular who seemed to tremble as he looked, and from whose cheeks the blood used to fade as he stood enchained before the canvas.

"One day Venetia called upon me. 'I want another picture,' she said in her laughing, imperious, gushing way; 'I want another classical subject; I don't care anything about the price; but I want two full-size figures this time; and I want them both to be portraits. There is no difficulty in obtaining one of them, for it is my own, and you know more of it than I do; but the other!—well, he might object. If he did—then I wouldn't care for the picture at all.'

" 'And your subject?' I asked.

" 'Diana watching Endymion asleep,' she replied; 'or, rather, I want to be depicted as descending floating down to kiss the lips of the beatified slumberer.'

" 'And your Endymion?'

" 'Well, he will be asleep on the flowery sward of the valley. His greyhound will be glancing jealously on Diana, as if aware of the intention of the goddess. His spear will be broken, and so forth.'

" 'And may I ask who your Endymion is?'

" 'It is Lionel Dewar—the man I adore.'

"I was conscious of no particular feeling towards this beautiful woman at that time. She exercised a strong influence upon me; and to this hour I am unable to define my feeling towards her. One thing is certain—she possessed a peculiar charm, inasmuch as her mental nature was a mystery to me.

"A few days after, she again called and informed me that Lionel Dewar utterly refused to pose as Endymion.

" 'We must contrive it in some other way,' she said. 'He is a tenor-singer at the opera: you can see him there. Or, perhaps, I can contrive to let you have a private look at his face. I shall have it arranged so that you can see him in my boudoir, while you are unperceived by him.'

“The idea was quite acceptable to me. I went to the opera and heard him sing, and I watched him in Mlle. Montague’s boudoir. Lionel Dewar was the young man I had noticed gazing at the ‘Ariadne.’

“As I sat and gazed at him from my ambush, he was toying with those smooth, round, opal-hued, glistening arms, and the soft velvet skin of the massive shoulders, like an automaton that dreamed. I had never been in love, and I wondered whether the concentrated vacuity of the man before me were the passion which Sappho had tried to sing—which Abelard and Heloise had felt.

“I told Venetia Montague that I could paint her lover just as perfectly as if he had posed to me for a month. She was delighted, and I proceeded with the picture, working rapidly and accurately. When it was approaching completion, Venetia said:

“ ‘How e[x]quisitely lovely he looks! Why, you have painted him like a demi-god! How beautiful his limbs are!’

“ ‘I saw him twice on the stage,’ I quietly said, ‘and took particular notice of his form.’

“ ‘Do you know,’ she said another day, when I was painting for dear life—‘do you know I think my Lionel is too effeminate on your canvas?’

“ ‘Endymion is always depicted with a finely rounded form,’ I replied.

“ ‘Granted; but then, you know, I want Lionel Dewar to be my Endymion.’

“ ‘That is Lionel Dewar,’ I persisted.

“This difference of opinion between my patron and myself led me to suggest that M. Dewar and a few friends should be accorded a private view of the painting in its present unvarnished state. Mlle. Montague readily agreed to this proposal. There were half a dozen actors, two or three *feuilletonists* and a painter among those who accepted her invitation.

“They stood before the canvas and contemplated it earnestly. ‘Surely that is a woman’s form,’ said one. ‘Some men are formed on the feminine model, and vice versa,’ another remarked. ‘That is pretty near the form and face and feet and hands of Lionel Dewar,’ said a fellow-singer. The feuilletonists said nothing at the time, but in a next morning’s paper was a gossipy announcement to the effect that Algernon Clere’s great picture that Diana and Hermaphroditus would shortly be on public exhibition.

“All unaware of this piece of gratuitous scurrility, I was adding the finishing touches to the picture when M. Dewar was announced. He had not attended the private view the previous day, and I was glad to see him, and I said so. I noticed that he was pale as death, and that he carried a riding-whip in his hand. He looked at the picture for a minute or so, and, suddenly facing round, struck me repeatedly over the lace with the whip, crying ‘Coward! Miscreant! Assassin!' while he rained on blows that literally blinded me. Before I could speak he was gone.

"Within an hour a friend of the frenzied man called and challenged me to a duel with the tenor I had rendered ridiculous. Somehow I couldn't understand it all. I simply said I accepted the challenge, and that the weapon, the time and the place were alike indifferent to me.

"It was in the early gray of an October morning, when an artist-friend and myself repaired to the appointed rendezvous, beyond the walls of Paris. The weapons were pistols; the distance ten paces. I felt perfectly indifferent about the result; but somehow I was impressed with a vague confidence that there would be no tragedy. Poor M. Dewar, on the contrary, was in a dreadful state of nervous demoralization. His face was ghastly. His lips quivered; his bands shook. He could scarcely walk to the position fortune had assigned him, with his back to the sun.

" 'Take a mouthful of brandy!' his second urged; 'your opponent is as cool as marble and as remorseless as the gravel.'

"He put the proffered flask to his lips. He couldn't swallow a drop. The seconds ascertained that we were in position, and handed our weapons. I proceeded to cock mine, and, looking at my opponent, awaited the word, without the remotest idea in the world of what I would do when the signal came.

" 'Are you ready, gentlemen?' There was a shriek—M. Dewar had fainted. The surgeon rushed to his assistance. I left my post and looked at the writhing man. Voices were heard in the distance. 'It is the police!' somebody suggested.

"It was not the police; it was Venetia Montague and an attendant, riding furiously and shrieking madly. As her foam-flecked horse was drawn up at the scene, the surgeon raised his band and said:

" 'Be calm, Mlle. Montague! No shot bas been fired; no shot will be fired, for it is my duty to inform Monsieur Clere, his second and yourself that Lionel Dewar is a woman!'

III.—A HAWK IN DOVE'S FEATHERS.

"It will probably surprise the reader into whose hands these pages shall fall to be informed that a few [weeks] after the *expose* described above I married Venetia Montague. Before adding another word to this narrative I must stop and correct that last sentence. I do not wish to be understood as saying that 'I married Venetia Montague,' but that Venetia Montague married me.

"It look her no trouble to get over her misplaced passion for 'Lionel Dewar,' or rather Alice Johnson. She metaphorically spurned her curiously constituted lover with her foot as she lay there fainting on the dueling ground, and accompanied me home to my studio. Arrived there, she stood looking at the picture, and sighed and said:

" 'It was a devilish pity; but you were right all along. You detected the woman beneath, didn't you?' Without waiting for any answer she continued in a kind of soliloquy: 'Diana and Hermaphroditus! that was a grand idea! That is an idea which Swinburne should weave into a

deathless poem. I wonder how a picture of Diana and a Cripple would look?' Turning to me, she said: 'I want you to paint your own figure instead of that Endymion.'

"I sympathized with the woman, and I did not answer except by a smile that I intended should be sympathetic.

" 'Won't you do as I wish,' she asked; 'or *would you prefer living the picture, instead of painting it?'*

" 'What do you mean, mademoiselle?' I asked.

"She put her massive arms around my neck. She gazed at me with her burning eyes. She kissed my lips, and next day she was my wife.

"Have you noticed that it is ever thus? The man of poetic tastes, whose imagination soars along the loftiness of the empyrean, marries a prosy, stocking-darning clod of a woman; the men who paint sylphs and angels fall in love with some freckled, beef-heeled *bonne*; the gorgeously developed queen of the stage joins her fate with a weazened little blight of humanity; the woman all soul weds a man all body. It was by the action of this law of the affinity of the contrarieties, I suppose, that led Venetia Montague to marry me.

"A week after our nuptials my father died. He had been an eminently successful man in the money-getting and money-saving world, and he left me independent. About the same time Venetia left the stage, and for a year or more I was the happiest mortal in existence. My wife made me believe she idolized me; and as I knew nothing of her inward self, except what she chose to tell me, I believed her—believed her implicitly.

"We lived in a fashionable quarter of Paris, and of course all the world pitied Venetia. A graceful, brilliant woman—a central light in every assemblage—the world-renowned Ariadne naturally monopolized all sympathy. Nobody thought of me, except with a shrinking, half-contemptuous pity. As a painter I had been wondered at. As the husband of Venetia Montague I was despised. I knew it—I felt it; but I was heedless of the consequences. I could estimate the people who frequented my *salons* at their true worth, while I was an enigma to them. Venetia and I lived a good deal aloof from each other; for the rich find no difficulty in living married and apart.

"One evening I said to her: 'Venetia, I see you have a new maid?' 'Yes,' she answered, glancing at me uneasily; 'what of that?' 'Nothing,' I replied, 'except that I dislike the sight of fresh faces.' I am only speaking within the limits of strict veracity when I state that I endeavored to avoid seeing this strange woman. She was a tall woman, as I had noticed at a distance, and there was a physical vigor in her movements that to me conveyed the impression of boldness. Before she had been a month in the house, Venetia's manner changed. She became kinder and more thoughtful to me. She would sit in the library beside me for an hour at a time. I could not help observing that her eyes wore a prouder, more triumphant look lately.

“ ‘I used to think you were a clairvoyant as well as a painter, once,’ she remarked to me one evening during one of those pleasant *tete-a-tetes*; ‘but I date say it was all fancy on my part.’

“ ‘All fancy—nothing more,’ I replied; and some impulse impelled me to add: ‘How do you like your new maid?’

“The question struck her like a thunderbolt. She started, she changed color, and then, by an effort, said:

“ ‘Oh, moderately well; why do you ask, pray?’

“Next day I purposely looked at the maid. The maid was completely illuminated to my gaze! The maid was a man! The maid was my wife’s paramour! And I saw in the black heart of that paramour that it was decreed I was to die.

“From that wretched hour my life became one of watching. I knew that the assassins were at work. I was intended to be the victim of a skillfully applied series of small doses of a deadly poison. Venetia was unremitting in her kindness, but the secrets of her bosom were darkness to me; I could only guess at them by the reflected soul-light of her fellow-conspirator.

“The new ‘maid,’ I perceived, was especially fond of my oldest claret. Bottle after bottle disappeared from the bin. Wine was the only beverage I permitted myself to taste in the house. For three months I dined outside. I saw that the assassins were foiled; but my wife was not unaware of my suspicions.

“ ‘It appears to me, Algernon, that you never take bite nor sup in the house,’ she remarked one day.

“ ‘I am trying Hungarian cooking,’ I carelessly remarked.

“Always making a practice of drawing the corks of my wine, I now began to examine the seal with a microscope. On one occasion I discovered the wisdom of the precaution. I saw that the cork had been tampered with. A careful inspection convinced me that it bad been carefully perforated, and the orifice closed with wax. I drew the cork from that bottle. I broke another bottle, and carefully transferred its cork to the suspected bottle, and I placed it in the bin.

“At midnight I was awakened with a dreadful din. The new maid was in the agonies of dissolution. She had drunk the whole of the bottle of poisoned wine. Venetia stood quivering and pale at the foot of the bed.

“ ‘*Ah! so he was caught in his own trap!’* I carelessly remarked as the poor wretch writhed in inexpressible torture.

“ ‘Curse you!’ she cried. ‘I will be avenged for this. Beware!’ and she shook a gleaming, dagger-like bayonet in her hand and fled from the room and from the house.

* * * *

It is five years since the death of the disguised paramour. I have moved for safety to this villa near Boulogne, but I have a premonition that my wife will execute vengeance on me some day with that weapon—that peculiar dagger—for I have [dreamt] of it over and over again."

There the manuscript ended, but it gave the detectives a clue they were not slow to follow. They succeeded in getting on the trail of the disguised woman, and one night were on the point of capturing her, when she escaped, but only to fall into one of the large drag-nets which the Seine fishermen set at night and draw in the morning.

In the corpse Petrie identified the woman who had sold him the shrimps, while the telegraph-operator of Calais felt morally certain that the drowned woman was the person who handed in the message for the servant of the Villa Solferino.

As M. Clere died intestate, the whole of his vast wealth would have become the property of his widow had Crime proved triumphant.

New York [NY] *Clipper*, 29 November 1879