METTA VICTORIA FULLER VICTOR

THE DEAD LETTER

MUSAICUM VINTAGE MYSTERIES

Metta Victoria Fuller Victor

The Dead Letter
(Musaicum Vintage Mysteries)

Published by
MUSAICUM
Books

- Advanced Digital Solutions & High-Quality eBook Formatting -

musaicumbooks@okpublishing.info

EAN 4064066382230

Table of Contents

PART I.

Table of Contents

CHAPTER I.
THE LETTER.

Table of Contents

I paused suddenly in my work. Over a year's experience in the Dead Letter office had given a mechanical rapidity to my movements in opening, noting and classifying the contents of the bundles before me; and, so far from there being any thing exciting to the curiosity, or interesting to the mind, in the employment, it was of the most monotonous character.

Young ladies whose love letters have gone astray, evil men whose plans have been confided in writing to their confederates, may feel but little apprehension of the prying eyes of the Department; nothing attracts it but objects of material value—sentiment is below par; it gives attention only to such tangible interests as are represented by bank-bills, gold-pieces, checks, jewelry, miniatures, et cetera. Occasionally a grave clerk smiles sardonically at the ridiculous character of some of the articles which come to light; sometimes, perhaps, looks thoughtfully at a withered rosebud, or bunch of pressed violets, a homely little pin-cushion, or a book-mark, wishing it had reached its proper destination. I can not answer for other employees, who may not have even this amount of heart and imagination to invest in the dull business of a Government office; but when I was in the Department I was guilty, at intervals, of such folly—yet I passed for the coldest, most cynical man of them all.

The letter which I held in my paralyzed fingers when they so abruptly ceased their dexterous movements, was contained in a closely-sealed envelope, yellowed by time, and directed in a peculiar hand to “John Owen, Peekskill, New York,” and the date on the stamp was “October 18th, 1857”—making the letter two years old. I know not what magnetism passed from it, putting me, as the spiritualists say, *en rapport* with it; I had not yet cut the lappet; and the only thing I could fix upon as the cause of my attraction was, that at the date indicated on the envelope, I had been a resident of Blankville, twenty miles from Peekskill—and something about that date!

Yet this was no excuse for my agitation; I was not of an inquisitive disposition; nor did “John Owen” belong to the circle of my acquaintance. I sat there with such a strange expression upon my face, that one of my fellows, remarking my mood, exclaimed jestingly:

“What is it, Redfield? A check for a hundred thousand?”

“I am sure I don’t know; I haven’t opened it,” I answered, at random; and with this I cut the wrapper, impelled by some strongly-defined, irresistible influence to read the time-stained sheet inclosed. It ran in this wise:

“Dear Sir—It’s too bad to disappoint you. Could not execute your order, as everybody concerned will discover. What a charming day!—good for taking a picture. That old friend I introduced you to won’t tell tales, and you had not better bother yourself to visit him. The next time you find yourself in his arms, don’t feel in his left-hand pocket for the broken tooth-pick which I lent him. He is welcome to it. If you’re at the place of payment, I shan’t be there, not having

fulfilled the order, and having given up my emigration project, much against my will; so, govern yourself accordingly. Sorry your prospects are so poor, and believe me, with the greatest possible esteem,

“Your disappointed Negotiator.”

To explain why this brief epistle, neither lucid nor interesting in itself, should affect me as it did, I must go back to the time at which it was written.

CHAPTER II.
EVENTS OF A NIGHT.

Table of Contents

It was late in the afternoon of a cloudy, windy autumn day, that I left the office of John Argyll, Esq., in his company, to take tea and spend the evening in his family. I was a law-student in the office, and was favored with more than ordinary kindness by him, on account of a friendship that had existed between him and my deceased father. When young men, they had started out in life together, in equal circumstances; one had died early, just as fortune began to smile; the other lived to continue in well-earned prosperity. Mr. Argyll had never ceased to take an interest in the orphan son of his friend. He had aided my mother in giving me a collegiate education, and had taken me into his office to complete my law studies. Although I did not board at his house, I was almost like a member of the family. There was always a place for me at his table, with liberty to come and go when I pleased. This being Saturday, I was expected to go home with him, and stay over Sunday if I liked.

We quickened our steps as a few large drops were sprinkled over us out of the darkening clouds.

“It will be a rainy night,” said Mr. Argyll.

“It may clear away yet,” I said, looking toward a rift in the west, through which the declining sun was pouring a silver stream. He shook his head doubtfully, and we hurried up the steps into the house, to escape the threatened drenching.

Entering the parlors, we found no one but James, a nephew of Mr. Argyll, a young man of about my own age, lounging upon a sofa.

“Where are the girls?”

“They haven’t descended from the heavenly regions yet, uncle.”

“Dressing themselves to death, I expect—it’s Saturday evening, I remember,” smiled the indulgent father, passing on into the library.

I sat down by the west window, and looked out at the coming storm. I did not like James Argyll much, nor he me; so that, as much as we were thrown together, our intercourse continued constrained. On this occasion, however, he seemed in excellent spirits, persisting in talking on all kinds of indifferent subjects despite of my brief replies. I was wondering when Eleanor would make her appearance.

At last she came. I heard her silk dress rustle down the stairs, and my eyes were upon her when she entered the room. She was dressed with unusual care, and her face wore a brilliant, expectant smile. The smile was for neither of us. Perhaps James thought of it; I am sure I did, with secret suffering—with a sharp pang which I was ashamed of, and fought inwardly to conquer.

She spoke pleasantly to both of us, but with a preoccupied air not flattering to our vanity. Too restless to sit, she paced up and down the length of the parlors, seeming to radiate light as she walked, like some superb jewel—so lustrous was her countenance and so fine her costume. Little smiles would sparkle about her lips, little

trills of song break forth, as if she were unconscious of observers. She had a right to be glad; she appeared to exult in her own beauty and happiness.

Presently she came to the window, and as she stood by my side, a burst of glory streamed through the fast-closing clouds, enveloping her in a golden atmosphere, tinting her black hair with purple, flushing her clear cheeks and the pearls about her throat. The fragrance of the rose she wore on her breast mingled with the light; for a moment I was thrilled and overpowered; but the dark-blue eyes were not looking on me—they were regarding the weather.

“How provoking that it should rain to-night,” she said, and as the slight cloud of vexation swept over her face, the blackness of night closed over the gleam of sunset, so suddenly that we could hardly discern each other.

“The rain will not keep Moreland away,” I answered.

“Of course not—but I don’t want him to get wet walking up from the depot; and Billy has put up the carriage in view of the storm.”

At that moment a wild gust of wind smote the house so that it shook, and the rain came down with a roar that was deafening. Eleanor rung for lights.

“Tell cook to be sure and have chocolate for supper—and cream for the peaches,” she said to the servant who came in to light the gas.

The girl smiled; she knew, in common with her mistress, who it was preferred chocolate and liked cream with peaches; the love of a woman, however sublime in some of its qualities, never fails in the tender domestic instincts

which delight in promoting the comfort and personal tastes of its object.

“We need not have troubled ourselves to wear our new dresses,” pouted Mary, the younger sister, who had followed Eleanor down stairs “there will be nobody here to-night.”

Both James and myself objected to being dubbed nobody. The willful young beauty said all the gay things she pleased, telling us she certainly should not have worn her blue silks, nor puffed her hair for us—

“—Nor for Henry Moreland either—he never looks at me after the first minute. Engaged people are so stupid! I wish he and Eleanor would make an end of it. If I’m ever going to be bridemaid, I want to be—”

“And a clear field afterward, Miss Molly,” jested her cousin. “Come! play that new polka for me.”

“You couldn’t hear it if I did. The rain is playing a polka this evening, and the wind is dancing to it.”

He laughed loudly—more loudly than the idle fancy warranted. “Let us see if we can not make more noise than the storm,” he said, going to the piano and thumping out the most thunderous piece that he could recall. I was not a musician, but it seemed to me there were more discords than the law of harmony allowed; and Mary put her hands over her ears, and ran away to the end of the room.

For the next half-hour the rain came down in wide sheets, flapping against the windows, as the wind blew it hither and thither. James continued at the piano, and Eleanor moved restlessly about, stealing glances, now and then, at her tiny watch.

All at once there occurred one of those pauses which precede the fresh outbreaking of a storm; as if startled by the sudden lull, James Argyll paused in his playing; just then the shrill whistle of the locomotive pierced the silence with more than usual power, as the evening train swept around the curve of the hill not a quarter of a mile away, and rushed on into the depot in the lower part of the village.

There is something unearthly in the scream of the “steam-eagle,” especially when heard at night. He seems like a sentient thing, with a will of his own, unbending and irresistible; and his cry is threatening and defiant. This night it rose upon the storm prolonged and doleful.

I know not how it sounded to the others, but to me, whose imagination was already wrought upon by the tempest and by the presence of the woman I hopelessly loved, it came with an effect perfectly overwhelming; it filled the air, even the perfumed, lighted air of the parlor, full of a dismal wail. It threatened—I know not what. It warned against some strange, unseen disaster. Then it sunk into a hopeless cry, so full of mortal anguish, that I involuntarily put my fingers to my ears. Perhaps James felt something of the same thing, for he started from the piano-stool, walked twice or thrice across the floor, then flung himself again upon the sofa, and for a long time sat with his eyes shaded, neither speaking nor stirring.

Eleanor, with maiden artifice, took up a book, and composed herself to pretend to read; she would not have her lover to know that she had been so restless while awaiting his coming. Only Mary fluttered about like a humming-bird, diving into the sweets of things, the music,

the flowers, whatever had honey in it; and teasing me in the intervals.

I have said that I loved Eleanor. I did, secretly, in silence and regret, against my judgment and will, and because I could not help it. I was quite certain that James loved her also, and I felt sorry for him; sympathy was taught me by my own sufferings, though I had never felt attracted toward his character. He seemed to me to be rather sullen in temper, as well as selfish; and then again I reproached myself for uncharitableness; it might have been his circumstances which rendered him morose—he was dependent upon his uncle—and his unhappiness which made him appear unamiable.

I loved, without a particle of hope. Eleanor was engaged to a young gentleman in every way worthy of her: of fine demeanor, high social position, and unblemished moral character. As much as her many admirers may have envied Henry Moreland, they could not dislike him. To see the young couple together was to feel that theirs would be one of those “matches made in heaven”—in age, character, worldly circumstances, beauty and cultivation, there was a rare correspondence.

Mr. Moreland was engaged with his father in a banking business in the city of New York. They owned a summer villa in Blankville, and it had been during his week of summer idleness here that he had made the acquaintance of Eleanor Argyll.

At this season of the year his business kept him in the city; but he was in the habit of coming out every Saturday afternoon and spending Sabbath at the house of Mr. Argyll,

the marriage which was to terminate a betrothal of nearly two years being now not very far away. On her nineteenth birthday, which came in December, Eleanor was to be married.

Another half-hour passed away and the expected guest did not arrive. He usually reached the house in fifteen minutes after the arrival of the train; I could see that his betrothed was playing nervously with her watch-chain, though she kept her eyes fixed upon her book.

“Come, let us have tea; I am hungry,” said Mr. Argyll, coming out of the library. “I had a long ride after dinner. No use waiting, Eleanor—he won’t be here to-night”—he pinched her cheek to express his sympathy for her disappointment—“a little shower didn’t use to keep beaux away when I was a boy.”

“A *little* rain, papa! I never heard such a torrent before; besides, it was not the storm, of course, for he would have already taken the cars before it commenced.”

“To be sure! to be sure! defend your sweetheart, Ella—that’s right! But it may have been raining down there half the day—the storm comes from that direction. James, are you asleep?”

“I’ll soon see,” cried Mary, pulling away the hand from her cousin’s face—“why, James, what is the matter?”

Her question caused us all to look at him; his face was of an ashy paleness; his eyes burning like coals of fire.

“Nothing is the matter! I’ve been half asleep,” he answered, laughing, and springing to his feet. “Molly, shall I have the honor?”—she took his offered arm, and we went in to tea.

The sight of the well-ordered table, at the head of which Eleanor presided, the silver, the lights, the odor of the chocolate overpowering the fainter fragrance of the tea, was enough to banish thoughts of the tempest raging without, saving just enough consciousness of it to enhance the enjoyment of the luxury within.

Even Eleanor could not be cold to the warmth and comfort of the hour; the tears, which at first she could hardly keep out of her proud blue eyes, went back to their sources; she made an effort to be gay, and succeeded in being very charming. I think she still hoped he had been delayed at the village; and that there would be a note for her at the post-office, explaining his absence.

For once, the usually kind, considerate girl was selfish. Severe as was the storm, she insisted upon sending a servant to the office; she could not be kept in suspense until Monday.

She would hardly believe his statement, upon his return, that the mail had been changed, and there was really no message whatever.

We went back to the parlor and passed a merry evening.

A touch of chagrin, a fear that we should suspect how deeply she was disappointed, caused Eleanor to appear in unusually high spirits. She sung whatever I asked of her; she played some delicious music; she parried the wit of others with keener and brighter repartee; the roses bloomed on her cheeks, the stars rose in her eyes. It was not an altogether happy excitement; I knew that pride and loneliness were at the bottom of it; but it made her brilliantly beautiful. I

wondered what Moreland would feel to see her so lovely—I almost regretted that he was not there.

James, too, was in an exultant mood.

It was late when we retired. I was in a state of mental activity which kept me awake for hours after. I never heard it rain as it did that night—the water seemed to come down in solid masses—and, occasionally, the wind shook the strong mansion as if it were a child. I could not sleep. There was something awful in the storm. If I had had a touch of superstition about me, I should have said that spirits were abroad.

A healthy man, of a somewhat vivid imagination, but without nervousness, unknowing bodily fear, I was still affected strangely. I shuddered in my soft bed; the wild shriek of the locomotive lingered in my ears; *something besides rain seemed beating at the windows*. Ah, my God! I knew afterward what it was. It was a human soul, disembodied, lingering about the place on earth most dear to it. The rest of the household slept well, so far as I could judge, by its silence and deep repose.

Toward morning I fell asleep; when I awoke the rain was over; the sun shone brightly; the ground was covered with gay autumn leaves shaken down by the wind and rain; the day promised well. I shook off the impressions of the darkness, dressed myself quickly, for the breakfast-bell rung, and descending, joined the family of my host at the table. In the midst of our cheerful repast, the door-bell rung. Eleanor started; the thought that her lover might have stayed at the hotel adjoining the depot on account of the rain, must have crossed her mind, for a rapid blush rose to

her cheeks, and she involuntarily put up a hand to the dark braids of her hair as if to give them a more graceful touch. The servant came in, saying that a man at the door wished to speak with Mr. Argyll and Mr. Redfield.

“He says it’s important, and can’t wait, sir.”

We arose and went out into the hall, closing the door of the breakfast-room behind us.

“I’m very sorry—I’ve got bad news—I hope you won’t”—stammered the messenger, a servant from the hotel.

“What is it?” demanded Mr. Argyll.

“The young gentleman that comes here—Moreland’s his name, I believe—was found dead on the road this morning.”

“Dead!”

“They want you to come down to the inquest. They’ve got him in a room of our house. They think it’s a fit—there’s no marks of any thing.”

The father and I looked at each other; the lips of both were quivering; we both thought of Eleanor.

“What shall I do?”

“I don’t know, Mr. Argyll. I haven’t had time to think.”

“I can not—I can not—”

“Nor I—not just yet. Sarah, tell the young ladies we have gone out a short time on business—and don’t you breathe what you have heard. Don’t let any one in until we return—don’t allow any one to see Miss Eleanor. Be prudent.”

Her frightened face did not promise much for her discretion.

Hastening to the hotel, already surrounded by many people, we found the distressing message too true. Upon a lounge, in a private sitting-room, lay the body of Henry

Moreland! The coroner and a couple of physicians had already arrived. It was their opinion that he had died from natural causes, as there was not the least evidence of violence to be seen. The face was as pleasant as in slumber; we could hardly believe him dead until we touched the icy forehead, about which the thick ringlets of brown hair clung, saturated with rain.

“What’s this?” exclaimed one, as we began to relieve the corpse of its wet garments, for the purpose of a further examination. It was a stab in the back. Not a drop of blood—only a small triangular hole in the cloak, through the other clothing, into the body. The investigation soon revealed the nature of the death-wound; it had been given by a fine, sharp dirk or stiletto. So firm and forcible had been the blow that it had pierced the lung and struck the rib with sufficient force to break the blade of the weapon, about three-quarters of an inch of the point of which was found in the wound. Death must have been instantaneous. The victim had fallen forward upon his face, bleeding inwardly, which accounted for no blood having been at first perceived; and as he had fallen, so he had lain through all the drenching storm of that miserable night. When discovered by the first passer-by, after daylight, he was lying on the path, by the side of the street, which led up in the direction of Mr. Argyll’s, his traveling-bag by his side, his face to the ground. The bag was not touched, neither the watch and money on his person, making it evident that robbery was not the object of the murderer.

A stab in the back, in the double darkness of night and storm! What enemy had Henry Moreland, to do this deed

upon him?

It is useless now to repeat all the varying conjectures rising in our minds, or which continued to engross the entire community for weeks thereafter. It became at once the favorite theory of many that young Moreland had perished by a stroke intended for some other person. In the mean time, the news swept through the village like a whirlwind, destroying the calmness of that Sabbath morning, tossing the minds of people more fearfully than the material tempest had tossed the frail leaves. Murder! and such a murder in such a place!—not twenty rods from the busiest haunts of men, on a peaceful street—sudden, sure, unprovoked! People looked behind them as they walked, hearing the assassin's step in every rustle of the breeze. Murder!—the far-away, frightful idea had suddenly assumed a real shape—it seemed to have stalked through the town, entering each dwelling, standing by every hearth-stone.

While the inquest was proceeding, Mr. Argyll and myself were thinking more of Eleanor than of her murdered lover.

"This is wretched business, Richard," said the father. "I am so unnerved I can do nothing. Will you telegraph to his parents for me?"

His parents—here was more misery. I had not thought of them. I wrote out the dreadful message which it ought to have melted the wires with pity to carry.

"And now you must go to Eleanor. She must not hear it from strangers; and I can not—Richard!—you will tell her, will you not? I will follow you home immediately; as soon as I have made arrangements to have poor Henry brought to our house when the inquest is over."

He wrung my hand, looking at me so beseechingly, that, loth as I was, I had no thought of refusing. I felt like one walking with frozen feet as I passed out of the chamber of horror into the peaceful sunlight, along the very path *he* had last trodden, and over the spot where he had fallen and had lain so many hours undiscovered, around which a crowd was pressing, disturbed, excited, but not noisy. The sandy soil had already filtered the rain, so as to be nearly dry; there was nothing to give a clue to the murderer’s footsteps, whither he went or whence he came—what impress they might have made in the hard, gravelly walk had been washed out by the storm. A few persons were searching carefully for the weapon which had been the instrument of death, and which had been broken in the wound, thinking it might have been cast away in the vicinity.

CHAPTER III.
THE FIGURE BENEATH THE TREES.

Table of Contents

As I came near the old Argyll mansion, it seemed to me never to have looked so fair before. The place was the embodiment of calm prosperity. Stately and spacious it rose from the lawn in the midst of great old oaks whose trunks must have hardened through a century of growth, and whose red leaves, slowly dropping, now flamed in the sunshine. Although the growing village had stretched up to and encircled the grounds, it had still the air of a country place, for the lawn was roomy and the gardens were extensive. The house was built of stone, in a massive yet graceful style; with such sunshiny windows and pleasant porticoes that it had nothing of a somber look.

It is strange what opposite emotions will group themselves in the soul at the same moment. The sight of those lordly trees called up the exquisite picture of Tennyson's "Talking Oak":

"Oh, muffle round thy knees with fern,
And shadow Sumner-chace!
Long may thy topmost branch discern
The roofs of Sumner-place!"

I wondered if Henry had not repeated them, as he walked with Eleanor amid the golden light and flickering shadows beneath the branches of these trees. I recalled how I once, in my madness, before I knew that she was betrothed to another, had apostrophized the monarch of them all, in the passionate words of Walter. Now, looking at this ancient

tree, I perceived with my eyes, though hardly with my mind, that it had some fresh excoriations upon the bark. If I thought any thing at all about it, I thought it the work of the storm, for numerous branches had been torn from the trees throughout the grove, and the ground was carpeted with fresh-fallen leaves.

Passing up the walk, I caught a glimpse of Eleanor at an upper window, and heard her singing a hymn, softly to herself, as she moved about her chamber. I stopped as if struck a blow. How could I force myself to drop the pall over this glorious morning? Alas! of all the homes in that village, perhaps this was the only one on which the shadow had not yet fallen—this, over which it was to settle, to be lifted nevermore.

Of all the hearts as yet unstartled by the tragic event was that most certain to be withered—that young heart, this moment so full of love and bliss, caroling hymns out of the fullness of its gratitude to God for its own delicious happiness.

Oh, I must—I must! I went in at an open window, from a portico into the library. James was there, dressed for church, his prayer-book and handkerchief on the table, and he looking over the last evening's paper. The sight of him gave me a slight relief; his uncle and myself had forgotten him in the midst of our distress. It was bad enough to have to tell any one such news, but any delay in meeting Eleanor was eagerly welcomed. He looked at me inquiringly—my manner was enough to denote that something had gone wrong.

"What is it, Richard?"

"Horrible—most horrible!"

“For heaven’s sake, *what* is the matter?”

“Moreland has been murdered.”

“Moreland! What? Where? Whom do they suspect?”

“And her father wishes me to tell Eleanor. You are her cousin, James; will you not be the fittest person?” the hope crossing me that he would undertake the delivery of the message.

“*I!*” he exclaimed, leaning against the case of books beside him. “I! oh, no, not I. I’d be the last person! I’d look well telling her about it, wouldn’t I?” and he half laughed, though trembling from head to foot.

If I thought his manner strange, I did not wonder at it—the dreadful nature of the shock had unnerved all of us.

“Where is Mary?” I asked; “we had better tell her first, and have her present. Indeed, I wish—”

I had turned toward the door, which opened into the hall, to search for the younger sister, as I spoke; the words died on my lips. Eleanor was standing there. She had been coming in to get a book, and had evidently heard what had passed. She was as white as the morning dress she wore.

“Where is he?” Her voice sounded almost natural.

“At the Eagle Hotel,” I answered, without reflection, glad that she showed such self-command, and, since she did, glad also that the terrible communication was over.

She turned and ran through the hall, down the avenue toward the gate. In her thin slippers, her hair uncovered, fleet as a vision of the wind, she fled. I sprung after her. It would not do to allow her to shock herself with that sudden, awful sight. As she rushed out upon the street I caught her by the arm.

“Let me go! I must go to him! Don’t you see, he will need me?”

She made an effort to break away, looking down the street with strained eyes. Poor child! as if, he being dead, she could do him any good! Her stunned heart had as yet gone no further than that if Henry was hurt, was murdered, he would need her by his side. She must go to him and comfort him in his calamity. It was yet to teach her that this world and the things of this world—even she, herself, were no more to him.

“Come back, Eleanor; they will bring him to you before long.”

I had to lift her in my arms and carry her back to the house.

In the hall we met Mary, who had heard the story from James, and who burst into tears and sobs as she saw her sister.

“They are keeping me away from him,” said Eleanor, pitifully, looking at her. I felt her form relax in my arms, saw that she had fainted; James and I carried her to a sofa, while Mary ran distractedly for the housekeeper.

There was noisy wailing now in the mansion; the servants all admired and liked the young gentleman to whom their mistress was to be married; and, as usual, they gave full scope to their powers of expressing terror and sympathy. In the midst of cries and tears, the insensible girl was conveyed to her chamber.

James and myself paced the long halls and porticoes, waiting to hear tidings of her recovery. After a time the housekeeper came down, informing us that Miss Argyll had

come to her senses; leastwise, enough to open her eyes and look about; but she wouldn’t speak, and she looked dreadful.

Just then Mr. Argyll came in. After being informed of what had occurred, he went up to his daughter’s room. With uttermost tenderness he gave her the details of the murder, as they were known; his eyes overrunning with tears to see that not a drop of moisture softened her fixed, unnatural look.

Friends came in and went out with no notice from her.

“I wish they would all leave me but you, Mary,” she said, after a time. “Father, you will let me know when—”

“Yes—yes.” He kissed her, and she was left with her sister for a watcher.

Hours passed. Some of us went into the dining-room and drank of the strong tea which the housekeeper had prepared, for we felt weak and unnerved. The parents were expected in the evening train, there being but one train running on Sunday. The shadow deepened over the house from hour to hour.

It was late in the afternoon before the body could be removed from the hotel where the coroner’s inquest was held. I asked James to go with me and attend upon its conveyance to Mr. Argyll’s. He declined, upon the plea of being too much unstrung to go out.

As the sad procession reached the garden in front of the mansion with its burden, I observed, in the midst of several who had gathered about, a woman, whose face, even in that time of preoccupation, arrested my attention. It was that of a girl, young and handsome, though now thin and deadly

pale, with a wild look in her black eyes, which were fixed upon the shrouded burden with more than awe and curiosity.

I know not yet why I remarked her so particularly; why her strange face made such an impression on me. Once she started toward us, and then shrunk back again. By her dress and general appearance she might have been a shop-girl. I had never seen her before.

“That girl,” said a gentleman by my side, “acts queerly. And, come to think, she was on the train from New York yesterday afternoon. Not the one poor Moreland came in; the one before. I was on board myself, and noticed her particularly, as she sat facing me. She seemed to have some trouble on her mind.”

I seldom forget faces; and I never forgot hers.

“I will trace her out,” was my mental resolve.

We passed on into the house, and deposited our charge in the back parlor. I thought of Eleanor, as she had walked this room just twenty-four hours ago, a brilliant vision of love and triumphant beauty. Ay! twenty-four hours ago this clay before me was as resplendent with life, as eager, as glowing with the hope of the soul within it! Now, all the hours of time would never restore the tenant to his tenement. Who had dared to take upon himself the responsibility of unlawfully and with violence, ejecting this human soul from its house?

I shuddered as I asked myself the question. Somewhere must be lurking a guilty creature, with a heart on fire from the flames of hell, with which it had put itself in contact.

Then my heart stood still within me—all but the family had been banished from the apartment—her father was leading in Eleanor. With a slow step, clinging to his arm, she entered; but as her eyes fixed themselves upon the rigid outlines lying there beneath the funeral pall, she sprung forward, casting herself upon her lover's corpse. Before, she had been silent; now began a murmur of woe so heart-rending that we who listened wished ourselves deaf before our ears had heard tones and sentences which could never be forgotten. It would be useless for me, a man, with a man's language and thoughts, to attempt to repeat what this broken-hearted woman said to her dead lover.

It was not her words so much as it was her pathetic tones.

She talked to him as if he were alive and could hear her. She was resolved to make him hear and feel her love through the dark death which was between them.

"Ah, Henry," she said, in a low, caressing tone, pressing back the curls from his forehead with her hand, "your hair is wet still. To think that you should lie out there all night—all night—on the ground, in the rain, and I not know of it! I, to be sleeping in my warm bed—actually sleeping, and you lying out in the storm, dead. That is the strangest thing! that makes me wonder—to think I *could*! Tell me that you forgive me for that, darling—for sleeping, you know, when you were out there. I was thinking of you when I took the rose out of my dress at night. I dreamed of you all night, but if I had known where you were, I would have gone out barefooted, I would have stayed by you and kept the rain from your face, from your dear, dear hair that I like so much

and hardly ever dare to touch. It was cruel of me to sleep so. Would you guess, I was vexed at you last evening because you didn’t come? It was that made me so gay—not because I was happy. Vexed at you for not coming, when you could not come because you were dead!” and she laughed.

As that soft, dreadful laughter thrilled through the room, with a groan Mr. Argyll arose and went out; he could bear no more. Disturbed with a fear that her reason was shaken, I spoke with Mary, and we two tried to lift her up, and persuade her out of the room.

“Oh, don’t try to get me away from him again,” she pleaded, with a quivering smile, which made us sick. “Don’t be troubled, Henry. I’m *not* going—I’m *not*! They are going to put my hand in yours and bury me with you. It’s so curious I should have been playing the piano and wearing my new dress, and never guessing it! that you were so near me—dead—murdered!”

The kisses; the light, gentle touches of his hands and forehead, as if she might hurt him with the caresses which she could not withhold; the intent look which continually watched him as if expecting an answer; the miserable smile upon her white face—these were things which haunted those who saw them through many a future slumber.

“You will not say you forgive me for singing last night. You don’t say a word to me—because you are dead—that’s it—because you are dead—murdered!”

The echo of her own last word recalled her wandering reason.

“My God! murdered!” she exclaimed, suddenly rising to her full hight, with an awful air; “who do you suppose did it?”

Her cousin was standing near; her eyes fell upon him as she asked the question. The look, the manner, were too much for his already overwrought sensibility; he shrunk away, caught my arm, and sunk down, insensible. I did not wonder. We all of us felt as if we could endure no more.

Going to the family physician, who waited in another apartment, I begged of him to use some influence to withdraw Miss Argyll from the room, and quiet her feelings and memory, before her brain yielded to the strain upon it. After giving us some directions what to do with James, he went and talked with her, with so much wisdom and tact, that the danger to her reason seemed passing; persuading her also into taking the powder which he himself administered; but no argument could induce her to leave the mute, unanswering clay.

The arrival of the relatives was the last scene in the tragedy of that day. Unable to bear more of it, I went out in the darkness and walked upon the lawn. My head was hot; the cool air felt grateful to me; I leaned long upon the trunk of an oak, whose dark shadow shut out the starlight from about me; thought was busy with recent events. Who was the murderer? The question revolved in my brain, coming uppermost every other moment, as certainly as the turning of a wheel brings a certain point again and again to the top. My training, as a student of the law, helped my mind to fix upon every slightest circumstance which might hold a suspicion.

“Could that woman?”—but no, the hand of a woman could scarcely have given that sure and powerful blow. It looked like the work of a *practiced* hand—or, if not, at least it had been deliberately given, with malice aforethought. The assassin had premeditated the deed; had watched his victim and awaited the hour. Thus far, there was absolutely no clue whatever to the guilty party; bold as was the act, committed in the early evening, in the haunts of a busy community, it had been most fatally successful; and the doer had vanished as completely as if the earth had opened and swallowed him up. No one, as yet, could form any plausible conjecture, even as to the *motive*.

In the name of Eleanor Argyll—in the name of her whom I loved, whose happiness I had that day seen in ruins, I vowed to use every endeavor to discover and bring to punishment the murderer. I know not why this purpose took such firm hold of me. The conviction of the guilty would not restore the life which had been taken; the bloom to a heart prematurely withered; it would afford no consolation to the bereaved. Yet, if to discover, had been to call back Henry Moreland to the world from which he had been so ruthlessly dismissed, I could hardly have been more determined in the pursuit. In action only could I feel relief from the oppression which weighed upon me. It could not give life to the dead—but the voice of Justice called aloud, never to permit this deed to sink into oblivion, until she had executed the divine vengeance of the law upon the doer.

As I stood there in silence and darkness, pondering the matter, I heard a light rustle of the dry leaves upon the ground, and felt, rather than saw, a figure pass me. I might