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## THE LAST LETTER.

BY MICHAEL LYNN.

Who knows when the last letter comes,  
How tender and touching a sorrow  
May hang o'er the commonplace words  
The postman shall bring with the morrow.

A little white fluttering fold,  
It tells out its touching story;  
Nor whispers, 'neath ripples of speech,  
Its place in the door-way of glory.

We read it, musing with a smile,  
Then toss it by its undraining  
That, rescued, we'll see it again  
With glances through bitter rain streaming.

Its chance words of tenderness then,  
Like gold from the mine shall be sifted;  
The speech of our ev'ry day life  
Into grandeur and greatness be lifted.

All harshness shall fold itself down,  
As the calyx shrinks under the flower,  
All bloomishes vanish and fade,  
In the loving regrets of that hour.

The last little blossom dropped out  
From the hand on the budding of the river,  
Shall tell from its petals adrift,  
Sweet stories of love from the giver.

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## THE DEAD WITNESS; OR, LILLIAN'S PERIL.

BY MRS. LEPROHON.

### CHAPTER XIX.

A SOMNAMBULIST VISITS THE EAST VAULT.

Clad in a long white night-robe that swept the floor around her, her eyes staring in vacancy, with a strange, unnatural lustre and fixedness in their gaze, was Mrs. Stukely. Along the corridor she advanced, a lantern in one hand, a bunch of keys in the other.

The first thrill of alarm over, Margaret at once divined the truth, that the housekeeper was in an somnambule state. She had never heard before that the woman was subject to such a peculiarity, but then it might only have developed itself of late. Where was she bent? What was the object of her nocturnal mission—for mission she evidently had? Well, what did it matter to Margaret? Never was character more devoid than hers was of idle curiosity, and she saw the woman pass her door with slow-measured step and wide-opened eyes, without even a thought of turning spy on her unconscious actions.

Suddenly and distinctly, as if a voice had whispered it in her ear, came the inspiration: Follow her! You may discover thus some clue to Lillian's fate.

With that hope in view, what would she not have braved? Lightly, noiselessly as a shadow she passed into the passage and followed in the wake of the strange, silent figure before her.

Her first feeling of vague wonder gave place to a sentiment of deeper interest as the sleeper turned in the direction of the east wing and unlocked the door that led into it with one of the keys she carried. Like lightning flashed then across Margaret's recollection her sister's avowed determination of exploring this mysterious part of Tremaine Court. Mrs. Stukely was, perhaps, about visiting the hidden treasures, the secret stores, of whose existence Lillian had seemed so certain; yet, what would that knowledge avail Margaret, unless it afforded some clue to the whereabouts of her sister?

An eerie journey to the girl was that nocturnal exploration of the long uninhabited, long closed-up east wing. From the time of her mother's death, dust and mildew had settled down on it unchecked, and since then no footsteps, to Margaret's knowledge, had trod its deserted floors. Now, in the lonely midnight, she was following, she knew not whither, a woman who, terrible as she was in her present unnatural, strange sleep, would prove doubly formidable in her waking moments.

At that moment an opening in the flooring, where some boards had fallen through, caught Margaret's eye, and she involuntarily sprang forward to pull back her companion from the gulf, but ere she had time to reach her, Mrs. Stukely had passed the dangerous spot in safety, her unconscious steps actually skirting the yawning abyss.

Great as was the danger the somnambulist had just escaped, Margaret felt that she herself had been protected from one equally imminent. Had that cruel, unscrupulous woman been suddenly restored to consciousness and found her secret movements followed and observed, would she have hesitated at taking her sudden revenge, perhaps hurling her undesired companion into the very opening her own steps had just so narrowly escaped?

Margaret felt that she must be more careful, and she kept farther in shadow, and trod with far greater precaution than before. Down, down they went. Yes, they must be about visiting the vault of which Lillian had spoken, built to receive gold which had never been placed in it, unless, indeed, old Davy's tale regarding the brass-bound chest were true. The dust, the damp, the close, choking air fell with stifling effect on Margaret's delicate lungs, and a cough, which her utmost efforts could not suppress, woke the echoing whispers of the wide, low cellars. What a moment of breathless terror that was to the girl, but the rigid figure in white still moved on, the sound had not disturbed or aroused it.



ALONG THE CORRIDOR SHE ADVANCED, A LANTERN IN ONE HAND, A BUNCH OF KEYS IN THE OTHER.

The key was now applied to the lock, the ponderous door swung back, and Mrs. Stukely, pausing on the threshold, held up the lantern as if to examine the interior by its dim rays. Softly Margaret crept up behind her and darted a searching gaze within. Her glance fell first on the dark chest, then on a slight figure lying on a pallet, and from the long golden hair, sweeping like a precious mantle the floor and bed, and the half glimpse of the pale, perfect profile, she knew that Lillian, whether in death or life, was before her.

Well it was for Margaret Tremaine that she had been brought up in a school which necessitated rigid self-control. Well was it for her that she had acquired the valuable gift of checking or restraining impulses, and governing them by prudence; or, in that supreme moment she might, by thoughtless act or cry, have aroused that terrible sleeper, and sealed her own and her sister's fate.

She felt that alone, unaided, she could do nothing towards rescuing that beloved sufferer. She must return for help, and resist the passionate, almost irresistible feeling that prompted her to spring forward and clasp the motionless form to her heart.

"Dead at last!" ejaculated the housekeeper, in a hollow tone. "Well, she must lie there. This is my last visit to the east vault, and ere three days I must be miles away from it and Tremaine Court."

Margaret shrank back into the shadow of one of the massive stone pillars that supported the roof of the cellar, as the woman, after locking the door, slowly proceeded to retrace her steps. Quivering with agitation, faint, trembling, Margaret followed, revolving all the while the best means of bringing her sister safe and speedy aid. Once they had left the east wing the girl paused, allowing Mrs. Stukely to ascend to the upper rooms alone, and hastened to the kitchen. There, snatching up the cloak, which by this time was nearly dry, she threw it over her shoulders, and unbolting the door, stole noiselessly forth. She made her way without difficulty to the stables, intending to send the man off at once on horse-back to Atherton Park with an urgent and significant message demanding Colonel Atherton's immediate presence at Tremaine Court.

Arrived at the stable door she entered, and called again and again in a clear, audible tone, though without evoking any answer. Perhaps disgusted with the limited nature of Mrs. Stukely's hospitality; or, desirous of procuring

effective assistance for repairing the carriage, he had walked back on foot to the Park. Now she wished that she were able, like some girls, to take one of the horses quietly from the stable, mount it, and ride off at full speed to Atherton Park. There was no alternative for her but to walk, and as she thought of the long distance to be traversed, the sharp pain that attacked hips and back at the least physical fatigue, her heart sank within her.

The effort though would be gallantly made even if she sank under it. She dared not re-enter the house to procure hat or veil, so drawing her cloak closer around her she set forth on her way, thanking God fervently for the faint moonlight that enabled her to avoid the treacherous holes and miry puddles that so thickly beset her path. Ah, not far had she walked when her breath began to come quick and short, her speed to slacken, and the dew of fatigue and physical pain to bend her forehead. Still, she resolutely kept on her way, but her strength was rapidly falling, and from her heart went up an agonized cry that the God in whose fatherly love she so fully trusted would come to her help.

A moment after, as if in direct answer to her petition, a cart came rumbling up the road, that of a farmer from the neighborhood, anxious to be first in Bromley market with his vegetable stores.

"For the love of God give me place beside you?" pleaded Miss Tremaine. "My message is one of life and death!"

The man looked down on that slight female figure, standing there alone and bare-headed in the chill night air, on that deserted road, and he answered with a shrug of his shoulders: "Well, lass, if wife or daughter were with me, maybe they wouldn't let me say yos; but as I'm alone, I'll do neither of us harm to give you a lift, for you seem sorely in trouble."

Scarcely heeding the humiliating suspicion so plainly expressed in the words just pronounced, Margaret, with the farmer's help, got into the vehicle, and then, turning her pale, agitated face towards him, urged: "Drive as quickly as you can to Atherton Park, and you will be well repaid."

Something in her voice and manner convinced the man that his companion was a gentlewoman; besides the very name of Atherton was in itself a passport to respect; so nodding his head in token of compliance, he whipped up his horse, casting to the winds his ambitious design of being first at market that morning.

No soul was stirring about the establishment when Margaret reached her destination and alighted at the front entrance, after placing in her companion's hand a reward whose generous amount filled him with mingled surprise and astonishment. A hurried and reiterated summons at length brought the sleepy porter to the door, but the aggrieved scowl on his face changed to a look of bewilderment when his glance rested on Margaret.

"Miss Tremaine!" he gasped.

"Yes, our carriage met with an accident; but please run up and tell Colonel Atherton I wish to see him as speedily as possible. Quick, John, my message is one of overwhelming importance."

Whist the porter, with as much speed as the dearest companion with his dignity and physical size, fulfilled his mission, Margaret hastened to her room to procure a hat and veil, and a moment after she had re-descended to the hall Colonel Atherton made his appearance. With an eager, anxious look on his dark face, he seized her two hands, and drawing her into the embrasure of a window, breathlessly said: "Margaret, you have important news! I seek it in your face!"

"Yes, I have found her."

"My God! Where?"

"In the vault under the uninhabited wing of Tremaine Court; but hurry, for I do not know whether my darling Lillian be living or dead."

### CHAPTER XX. FOILED AT EVERY POINT.

Without losing valuable time in exclamations, or summoning servants, he hurried to the stables, harnessed the swiftest horse they contained to the light dog-cart he often used, and then saying, "Quick, Margaret!" caught her up lightly and placed her on the seat. Springing in, he gathered the reins, and they set off at a pace that, under other circumstances, would have called forth frightened remonstrances from his companion. Now, however, she seemed insensible to fear, and as they tore along the uneven road she rapidly recounted her terrible adventure of the previous night.

Colonel Atherton's passionate indignation was almost beyond control, whilst the harrowing fear paralyzing him led he should arrive too late to save that young life that already he secretly yearned to entwine for ever with his own, was almost maddening in its intensity.

After Margaret had finished her tale, silence fell on them both, and the clatter of the horse's hoofs and roll of wheels alone broke the stillness. Soon the time-stained facade and pointed eaves of Tremaine Court came in view, sharply outlined against the brightening sky of early morning, and Atherton urged on his horse to fresh exertions, till bathed in foam and quivering in every limb, he reined it up before the building, the neglected, forlorn condition of which looked more hopelessly repellent than ever.

"Come in by the kitchen," whispered Margaret as he lifted her out. "We may otherwise have to wait a considerable time before our summons meet with an answer."

All was still and silent within. The ashes of the preceding night's fire still smouldered on the kitchen hearth.

"Bring me straight, Margaret, to that woman's room," said the Colonel in low, quick tones.

Silently the girl led the way, up staircase and through room and corridor, till they stopped before the apartment occupied by the housekeeper, at the door of which Atherton knocked loudly and impatiently. Its owner, who had risen at her usual early hour, totally unconscious of her nocturnal wanderings, threw back the door, and, ready dressed, confronted her visitors with an angry, enquiring look.

The habits of keen observation and quick decision acquired by Colonel Atherton during his protracted service abroad, reverted to him in one quick glance, which he darted into the interior of the apartment, a bundle of keys answering to the description given by Margaret of those with which the housekeeper had unlocked the doors of the east wing the night previous. Feeling it was not a time to listen to scruples of delicacy, he abruptly pushed past Mrs. Stukely and snatched them up from the table where they lay.

"Now, woman," he said, seizing her arm with an iron grasp, "lead us at once to the vault where Lillian Tremaine is confined, or you will be given over immediately to the hands of justice. I hold the keys, and the way is already known, for you were followed during your somnambule rambles last night."

The puzzle that had worried Mrs. Stukely since her awakening that morning as to how the keys of the east wing, which she always put away with such care, came to be lying on the table beside her bed, was solved at last, and in a manner calculated to justify the wildest and most alarming fancies that had beset her.

A glance at that stern dark face that confronted her whispered resistance would prove of little avail, besides a sudden inspiration, vaguely promising hope and escape, had presented itself to her keen, scheming brain, and she imperiously retorted: "Remove your rough soldier's grasp off me and I will do what you ask, not so much to serve your purposes as to answer my own."

Taking a lantern from a closet in the room, she swept past them, and, without further word or remonstrance, entered on the way she had threaded the night previous, when followed by the trembling Margaret. Supporting the latter with the tender care of a brother, Colonel Atherton followed behind, and the dangerous gleam in his eyes told it would be an ill-judged thing on Mrs. Stukely's part to seek in any manner to deceive him. However, she had no such intention, and without pause or hesitation, she led them straight to the vault, now the centre of so many aching fears and trembling hopes.

Margaret entered first, and with a courage rare in one of her frail health and organization, advanced at once to the slight figure that lay prostrate and motionless on its low pallet.

"Lillian, my darling," she whispered, bending down and kissing the pale, cold lips that moaned forth no response to her anguished appeal.

"O, Colonel Atherton," and she turned to him with a look of piteous supplication; "she does not seem to hear or see me. Do you try? I seem here all at once of hope or courage."

As tender to his strength as Margaret was in her weakness, he gently raised that motionless head with its long veil of silken hair, but suddenly he laid it down again, and, with a brief, passionate exclamation, sprang towards the door of the vault. Never had his military keenness and promptitude, already alluded to, stood Neville Atherton in such good stead before, for Mrs. Stukely, acting on the evil suggestion that had presented itself in the first moments of her interview with her present companions, had darted out of the vault and was in the act of closing and locking it when detected by the Colonel.

Had she but succeeded in her object, the remaining history of the lives of those within would have been equally brief and mournful, for already in thought she had resolved on immediate flight, leaving her victims to their fate, which would have been death from starvation, for days, weeks, would probably have elapsed before they would have been discovered in that strange hiding place, if, indeed, they should ever have been traced there.

It needed all Colonel Atherton's strength to force back that nearly-closed door, but he at length succeeded, and clatching the woman by the throat, he pulled the keys from her grasp, and hurried her from him with a force that sent her reeling heavily against the stone wall of the cellar, feeling, as he did so, that there were circumstances in which murder might almost seem meritorious.

Putting the keys securely in his breast, and drawing forth at the same time a small flask, he fruitlessly endeavoured to introduce a few drops of the strong stimulant it contained between Lillian's tightly-closed teeth. Seeing his efforts proved unsuccessful, he caught up her unconscious form in his arms, saying: "Margaret, take the lantern and lead the way up stairs. We will have more chance of restoring her to life there than in this stifling vault."