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THE MYSTERY OF THE BLOODY HAND.

AN ORIGINAL STORY. (From the Universe.)

CHAPTER I.—DOROTHY TO ELEANOR.

Dearest Eleanor—You have so often reminded me how rapidly the most startling facts pass from the memory of man, and I have so often thereupon promised to write down a full account of that mysterious affair in which I was providentially called upon to bear so important a part, it is with shame I reflect that the warning has been unheeded and the promise unfulfilled. Do not, dear friend, accuse my affection, but my engrossing duties and occupations, for this neglect, and believe that I now take advantage of my first quiet evening for many months to fulfil your wish. Betty has just brought me a cup of tea, and I have told the girl to be within call; for once a heroine is not always a heroine, dear Nell. I am full of childish terrors, and I assure you it is with small mental efforts that I bring myself to recall the terrible events of the year 1813.

Oddly enough, it was on the first day of this year that I made the acquaintance of Mr. Geo. Manners. Oh, Eleanor, think of my position at that time. Our father and mother dead; under the care of our only brother, who, as you know, dear Nell, was at one time feared to be a complete idiot, and had, poor boy, only so much sense as to make him sane in the eyes of the law. You know the fatal obstinacy with which he pursued an idea once instilled, the occasional fits of rage that were not less than insanity. Knowing all this, my dear, imagine what I must have suffered when angrily recalled home. I was forbidden to think of Mr. Manners again. In vain I asked for reasons. They led none, and yet a thousand to give me. When I think of the miserable stories that were raked up against him—the misconstruction of everything he did, or said, or left undone—my own impotent indignation, and my poor brother's senseless rage, and the insulting way in which I was watched, and taunted, and tortured;—oh, Nell! it is agony to write, I did the only thing left to me—I gave him up and prayed for peace. I do not say that I was right; I say that I did the best I could in a state of things, that threatened to deprive me of reason.

My submission did not produce an amount of harmony in the house in any way proportionate to the price I paid for it. Harriet was obliged to keep the slanders of my lover constantly in view, to quiet the self-reproach which I think she must sometimes have experienced. As to Edmund, my obedience had somewhat satisfied him, and made way for another subject of interest which was then engrossing his mind.

A man in his estate renting a farm close to us, who was a Quaker, and very 'strict' in his religious profession, had been for a long time grossly cheating him, relying, no doubt, on my poor brother's deficient intellect. But minds that are intellectually and in reason deficient, are often endowed with a large share of cunning and caution, especially in monetary affairs. Edmund guessed, watched, and discovered; but when the proof was in his hands, his proceedings were characteristically peculiar. He did not discharge the man, and have done with it; he retained him in his place, but seemed to take a delight in—say—insane delight in exposing him to the religious circle in which he had been a star, and from which he was ignominiously expelled; and in heaping every possible annoyance upon him that the circumstances admitted. My dear, I think I should have preferred his wrath upon myself, to being the witness of my brother's miserable exultation over the wretched man, Parker. His chief gratification lay in the thought that, exquisite as were the vexations he heaped upon him, the man was obliged to express gratitude for his master's forbearance as regarded the law.

'He said he should never forget my consideration for him till death! Ha, ha!' 'My only puzzle,' I said, 'is what can induce him to stay with you?' And then the storm turned upon me, Eleanor. You will ask me, my dear, how, meanwhile, had Mr. Manners taken my letter of dismissal. I know now, Nell, and so will not revive the mystery that then added weight to my distress. He wrote me many letters, — but I never saw one!

And now, dear friend, let me pause and gather courage to relate the terrible events of that sultry, horrible—that accursed June.

CHAPTER II.—THE TERRIBLE JUNE.

It was about the middle of the month. Harriet was spending some hours with a friend, Edmund was out, and I had been left alone all day

for the first time since I came home. I remember everything that happened with the utmost distinctness. I spent the day chiefly in the garden, gathering roses for potpourri, being disinclined for any more reasonable occupation, partly by a vague, dull feeling of dread that made me restless, and which was yet one of these phases of feeling in which life depended on an energetic movement, one must trifle. In this mood, when the foreclosed mind, instinctively shrinks from its own great troubles, little things assume an extraordinary distinctness. I trode carefully in the patterns of the terrace pavement counted the roses on the white bush by the dial (there were twenty six), and seeing a beetle on the path, moved it to a bank at some distance. There it crept into a hole, and such a wild, weary desire seized on me to creep after it, and hide from what was coming, that—I thought it wise to go in.

As I sat in the drawing room there was a rose still whole in my lap. I had begun to pluck off the petals when the door bell rang. Though I heard the voice distinctly when the door was opened, I vow to you, dear Nell, that my chief desire was to get the rose pulled to pieces before I was disturbed. I had lunged the last petal into my lap, when the door opened and Mr. Manners came into the room.

He did not speak; he opened his arms, and I ran straight into them roses and all. The petals rained over us and over the floor. He talked very fast and I did nothing but cling to him, and endure in silence the weight which his presence could not remove from my mind, while he pleaded passionately for our marriage. He said that it was the extreme of all that was unreasonable, that our lives happiness should be sacrificed to the insane freak of a hardly responsible mind. He complained bitterly (though I could but confess justly!) of the insulting and intolerable treatment that he had received. He had come, he said, in the first place, to assure himself of my constancy—in the second, for a powerful and final remonstrance with my brother—and, if that failed, to remind me, that I should be of age next month; and to convey the entreaty of the Tophams that, as a last resource, I would come to them and be married from their house, I made up my mind, and promised; then I implored him to be careful in his interview with my brother, for my sake—to calm his own natural anger and to remember Edmund's infirmity. He promised, but I saw that he was slightly piqued by my dwelling so much on Edmund's feelings rather than on his. Ah! Nell, he had never seen one of the poor boy's rages.

It may have been half-past six when Mr Manners arrived; it had just struck a quarter to nine when Edmund came in and found us together. He paused for a minute, clicking his tongue in his mouth, in a way he had when excited; and then he turned upon me, and heaped abuse on insult, loading me with accusations and reproaches. George, white with suppressed rage called incessantly upon me to go; and at last I dared 'obey no longer; but as I went I touched his arm and whispered, 'remember! for my sake.' His intense 'I promise, my darling,' comforted me then—and afterwards, Nell, I went into a little room that opened into the hall and waited.

In about twenty minutes the drawing-room door opened and they came out. I heard George's voice saying this or something equivalent—(afterwards I could not accurately recall the words)—

'Good night, Mr. Lascelles; I trust our next meeting may be a different one.'

The next sentences on both sides I lost. Edmund seems to have refused to shake hands with Mr. Manners. The last words I heard was George's half-laughing—

'Next time Lascelles, I shall not ask for your hand—I shall take it.'

Then the door shut, and Edmund went into his study. An hour later, he also went out, and I was left alone once more. I went back into the drawing-room; the rose leaves were fading on the floor; and on the table lay George Manners' penknife. It was a new one, that he had been showing to me, and had left behind him. I kissed it and put it in my pocket; then I knelt down by the chair, Nell, and wept till I prayed; and then prayed till I wept again; and then I got up and tidied the room, and got some sewing; and, like other women, sat down with my trouble, waiting for the storm to break.

It broke at eleven o'clock that night, when two men carried the dead body of my brother into his own kitchen—foully murdered.

But when I knelt by the poor body, lying awfully still upon the table; when I kissed the face, which in death had curiously enough regained the appearance of reason as well as beauty; when I saw and knew that life had certainly gone,—that was not all. The storm had not fully broken till I turned and saw, standing by the fire, George Manners, with his hands and coat dabbled with blood. I did not speak or scream;

but a black horror seemed to settle down like a mist upon me. Through it came Mr. Manners' voice (I had not looked again at him)—

'Miss Dorothy Lascelles, why do you not ask who did it?'

I gave a sharp cry, and one of the laborers, who had helped to bring Edmund in, said gravely—

'Eh, Master, the less you say the better. God forgive you this night's work.'

George's hoarse voice spoke again.

'Do you bear him?' and then it faltered a little—'Doralice, do you think this?'

It was his pet name for me, (he was an Italian scholar), and touched me inexpressibly, and a conviction seized upon me that if he had done it, he would have not dared to appeal to my affection. I tried to clear my mind that I might see the truth, and then I looked up at him. Our eyes met, and we looked at each other for a full minute, and I was content. Oh, there are times when the instinctive trust of one heart is so far more powerful than any proofs or reasons—that faith seems a higher knowledge. I would have pledged ten thousand lives, if I had them, on the honesty of those eyes, that had led me like a will o' the wisp in the ball-room half a year ago! The new-year's dance came back on me as I stood there—my ball dress was in the drawer up stairs—and now! oh dear! was I going mad?

CHAPTER III.—THE TIME OF TRIAL.

Meanwhile he was waiting for my answer. I stepped forward, intending to take his hand, but the stains drove me back again. Where so much depends upon a right—or a misunderstanding, the only way is to speak the fair truth. I did so; by a sort of forced calm holding back the seething of my brain.

'George, I should like to touch you, but—I cannot! I beg you to forgive the selfishness of my grief—my mind is confused—I shall be better soon. God has sent us a great sorrow, in which I know you are as innocent as I am. I am very sorry—I think that is all.' And I put my hand to my head, where a sharp pain was beginning to throb. Mr. Manners spoke emphatically—

'God bless you, Doralice! You know I promised. Thank you forever.'

'If you fancy you have any reason to thank me,' I said, 'do me this favor. Whatever happens, believe that I believe!' I could bear no more, so I went out of the kitchen. As I went I heard a murmur of pity run through the room, and I knew that they were pitying—not the dead man, but me; and me—not for my dead brother, but for his murderer. When I got into the passage the mist that had still been dark before my eyes suddenly became darker, and I remember no more.

When my senses returned, Harriet had come home. From the first she would never hear George's name, except to accuse him with frantic bitterness of poor Edmund's death; and as nothing would induce me to credit his guilt, the subject was as much as possible avoided. I cannot dwell on these terrible days. I was very ill for some time, and after I had come down stairs, one day I found a newspaper containing the following paragraph, which I copy here, as it is the shortest and least painful way of telling you the facts of poor Edmund's death:—

THE MURDER AT CROSSDALE HILL.

'Universal horror has been excited in the neighborhood by the murder of Edmund Lascelles Esq., Crossdale Hill. Mr. Lascelles was last seen alive a little after ten o'clock on Friday night, at which time he left the house alone, and was not seen again living. At the inquest on Saturday, James Crosby, a farm laborer, gave the following evidence:—

'I had been sent into the village for some medicine for a sick beast, and was returning to the farm by the park a little before eleven, when near the lower gate I saw a man standing with his back to me. The moon was shining, and I recognized him at once for Mr. George Manners, of Beckfield. When Mr. Manners saw me he seemed much excited, and called out, 'Quick! help! Mr. Lascelles has been murdered.' I said, 'Good God! who did it?' He said, 'I don't know; I found him in the ditch; help me to carry him in.' By this time I had come up, and saw Mr. Lascelles on the ground lying on his side. I said, 'How do you know he's dead?' He said, 'I fear there is very little hope; he has bled so profusely. I am covered with blood.' I was examining the body, and as I turned it over I found that the right hand was gone. It had been cut off at the wrist. I said, 'Look here! Did you know this?' He spoke very low, and only said, 'How horrible!' I said, 'Let us look for the hand; it may be in the ditch.' He said, 'No, no; we are wasting time. Bring him in, and let us send for the doctor.' I ran to the ditch, however, but could see nothing but a pool of blood. Coming back, I found a thick hedge-stake covered with blood. The grass by the ditch was very much stamped

and trodden. I said, 'There has been a desperate struggle.' He said, 'Mr. Lascelles was a very strong man.' I said, 'Yes; as strong as you, Mr. Manners.' He said, 'Not quite; very nearly though.' He said nothing more till we got to the hall; then he said, 'Who can break it to his sister?' I said, 'They will have to know. It's them that killed him has brought this misery upon them.' The low gate is a quarter of a mile or more from the hall.'

Death seems to have been inflicted by two instruments—a wounding and a cutting one. As yet, no weapon but the stake has been discovered, and a strict search for the missing hand has proved fruitless. No motive for this wanton outrage suggests itself, except that the unhappy gentleman was in the habit of wearing on his right hand a sapphire ring of great value. [An heirloom; it is on my finger as I write, dear Nell. Oh, my poor boy.] All curiosity is astir to discover the perpetrator of this horrible deed; and it is with the deepest regret that we are obliged to state that every fresh link in the chain of evidence points with fatal accuracy to one, whose position, character, and universal popularity would seem to place him above suspicion. We would not willingly intrude upon the privacy of domestic interest, but the following facts will too soon be matters of public notoriety.

A younger sister of the deceased appears to have formed a matrimonial engagement with George Manners, Esq., of Beckfield. It was strongly opposed by Mr. Lascelles, and the objection (which at the time appeared unreasonable) may have been founded on a more intimate knowledge of the suitor's character than was possessed by others. The match was broken off, and all intercourse was suspended till the night of the murder, when Mr. Manners gained admittance to the hall in the absence of Mr. Lascelles, and was for some hours alone in the young lady's company. They were found together a little before nine o'clock by Mr. Lascelles, and a violent scene ensued, in the course of which the young lady left the apartment. (Miss Lascelles has been ill ever since the unhappy event, and is so still. Her deposition was taken in writing at the hall.) From the young lady's evidence it appears, 1st, that the passions of both were strongly excited, and she admits having felt sufficient apprehension to induce her to twice warn Mr. Manners to self control. 2dly, that Mr. Manners avowed himself prepared to defy Mr. Lascelles's authority in the matter of the marriage; and 3dly, the two sentences of their final conversation that she overheard (both Mr. Manners'), were what can hardly be interpreted otherwise than as a threat, that their next meeting should be a different one; and that then 'he would not ask for Mr. Lascelles's hand, but take it.'

The diabolical character of determined and premeditated vindictiveness thus given to an otherwise unaccountable outrage upon his victim goes far to take away the feeling of pity which we should otherwise have felt for the murderer, regarding him as under the maddening influences of disappointed love and temporary passion. Perhaps, however, the most fatally conclusive evidence against Mr. Manners lies in the time that elapsed between his leaving the hall and being found in the park with the murdered body. He left the house at a quarter past nine—he was found by the body of the deceased a little before eleven; so that either it must have taken him more than an hour and a half to walk a quarter of a mile—which is obviously absurd—or he must have been waiting for nearly two hours in the grounds. Why did he not return at once to the house of Mr. Topham? [where it appears that he was staying]. For what—or for whom—was he waiting. If he were in the park at the time of the murder, how came it that he heard no cries, gave the unhappy gentleman no assistance, and offers no suggestion or clue to the mystery beyond the obstinate denial of his own guilt, though he confesses to have been in the grounds during the whole time of the death-struggle, and though he was found alone with scratched hands and blood-stained clothes beside the corpse of his avowed enemy. We leave these questions to the consideration of our readers, as they will be for that of a conscientious and impartial jury, not, we trust, blinded by the wealth and position of the criminal to the hideous nature of the crime.

The funeral is to take place to-morrow. George Manners is fully committed to take his trial for wilful murder at the next assizes. The above condemning extract only too well represented the state of public feeling. All Middlesex—nay, all England—was roused to indignation, and poor Edmund's youth and infirmities made the crime appear the more cowardly and detestable.

CHAPTER IV.—DRIFTING TO THE END.

My misery between the time of the murder and the trial was terrible from many causes: my brother's death; George's position; the knowledge of his sufferings, and my inability to see or soothe them—and, worst of all, the firm conviction

of his guilt in every one's mind, and Harriet's ceaseless reproaches. I do not think I should have lived through it, but for Dr. Penn. That excellent and revered man's kindness, will, I trust, ever be remembered by me with due gratitude. He went up town constantly, at his own expense, and visited my dear George in Newgate, administering all the consolations of his high office and long experience, and being the bearer of our messages to each other. From him also I gleaned all the news of which otherwise I should have been kept in ignorance; how George's many friends were making every possible exertion on his behalf, and how an excellent counsel was retained for him. But far beyond his great kindness, was to me the simple fact that he shared my belief in George's innocence; for there were times when the universal persuasion of his guilt almost shook not my faith, but my reason.

Our chief difficulty, I confess, lay in the question that the world had by this time so terribly answered—who did it? If George were innocent, who was guilty? My poor brother had not been popular, and I do not say that one's mind could not have fixed on a man more likely to commit the crime than George, under not less provocation. But it was an awful deed, Nelly, to lay to any man's charge, even in thought; and no particle of evidence arose to fix the guilt on any one else, or even to suggest an accomplice. As the time wore on, suspense became sickening.

'Sir,' I said to him one day, 'I am breaking down. I have brought some plants to set in your garden. I wish you would give me something to do for you. Your shirts to make, your stockings to darn. If I were a poor woman I should work down my trouble. As it is—'

'Hush!' said the doctor; you are what God has made you. My dear madam, Janet tells me, what my poor eyes have hardly observed, that my ruff's are more worn than becomes a doctor in divinity. Now for myself—'

'Hush!' said I, mimicking. 'My dear sir, you have taught me to plot and conspire, and this very afternoon I shall hold a secret interview with Mistress Janet. But say something about trouble. What will happen?—How will it end?—What shall we do?'

'My love,' he said, 'keep heart. I fully believe in his innocence. There is heavy evidence against him, but there are also some strong points in his favor; and you must believe that the jury have no object to do anything but the truth, and that they will find accordingly. And God defend the right!'

Eleanor! they found him guilty!

I have asked Dr. Penn to permit me to make an extract from his journal in this place. It is less harrowing to copy than to recall. I omit the pious observations and reflections which grace the original. Comforting as they are to me, it seems a profanity to make them public; besides, it is his wish that I withhold them, which is sufficient.

'When he came into the dock he looked (so it seemed to me) altered since I had last seen him; more anxious and worn, that is, but yet composed and dignified. Doubtless I am but a prejudiced witness; but his face to me lacks both the confusion and effrontery of guilt. He looks like one pressed by a heavy affliction, but enduring it with fortitude. I think his appearance affected and astonished many in the court. Those who were prepared to see a hardened ruffian, or at least a cowering criminal, must have been startled by the intellectual and noble style of his beauty, the grace and dignity of his carriage, and the modest simplicity of his behavior. I am but a coting old man; for I think on no evidence could I convict him in the face of those good eyes of his, to which sorrow has given a wistful look that at times is terrible; as if now and then the agony within showed its face, at the windows of the soul. Once only every trace of composure vanished—it was then sweet Mistress Dorothy was called; then he looked simply mad. I wonder—but no! no!—he did not commit this great crime,—not even in a fit of insanity.'

'Mr. A— is a very able advocate, and, in his cross-examination of the man Crosby and of Mistress Dorothy did his best to atone for the cruel law which keeps the prisoner's counsel at such disadvantage. The counsel for the prosecution had pressed hard on my dear lady, especially in reference to those farwell words overheard by her, which seem to give the only (though that, I say, and incredible) clue, to what remains the standing mystery of the event—the missing hand. Then Mr. A— rose to cross-examine. He said:—

'During that part of the quarrel when you were present, did the prisoner use any threats or suggestions of personal violence?'

'No.'

'In the fragment of conversation that you overheard at the last, did you at the time under-