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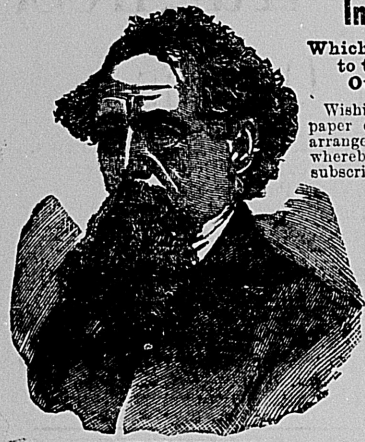
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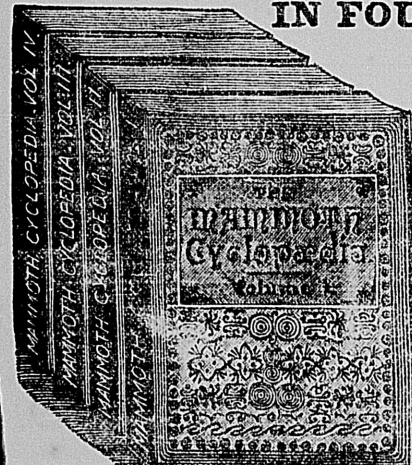
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## THE VEILED WOMAN.

Who was she? I had heard of the strange doings of a mysterious woman who flitted like a shadow through the city's streets at nightfall, entering the dwellings of the sick, a voluntary watcher by the shrouded forms of the dead, a dark-robed follower of funerals. I had heard of her, and confess that the tales that were told me by my gossipy landlady were not greatly in her favor.

"There's lots of mystery about that woman," said Mrs. Hodges as she poured my coffee one morning. "for they do say that she sees spirits, and is never so much enjoying of herself as when she is sitting up with a corpse. And then that long black veil she wears! They say it's a sign that she belongs to some secret society of spirits that nobody knows nuthin' about, and they don't low her to show her face, though I don't bieve the poor soul does any harm."

My curiosity was aroused, but though I plied my landlady with questions, I failed to elicit any more definite information regarding this strange woman than is contained in the foregoing paragraph.

But I inwardly resolved to know more about her when I became better acquainted in the town. I was even bold and curious enough to wish for a meeting with her—a meeting that came when I least expected.

I had but recently arrived in the town. I knew no one save my landlady and the man who roomed with me, and I saw the latter so seldom that I can hardly say we were very well acquainted. The little I saw of him, however, convinced me that he was a gambler. He never confided his affairs to me, but his habit of spending his nights away from home, his buoyant spirits when he would enter the room one morning, and the gloom which seemed to possess him the next, plainly betrayed his character.

I remember that he knocked at the door somewhat earlier than usual one night. I had been reading and was just preparing to retire. Without a word he drew a chair near the fire, sat down, and looking steadfastly at the coals in the grate, seemed lost in meditation. I rudely broke his reverie with a question:

"Did you ever see this mysterious woman about whom there is so much talk, who goes about in mourning and wears a sad face the year round?" I asked.

He frowned and seemed annoyed at the question. "Yes," he answered, "a crazy hag that haunts the streets at night, frightening little children and furnishing old women a theme for gossip over their teacups."

"Then there is nothing remarkable about her after all," I said in a tone of inquiry.

"I don't care to discuss her," he replied. "I have other things to think about just now. I lost \$500 to-night."

"In the street?"

"I suppose so," was the reply. "It amounts to the same thing. My cursed luck was—"

The sentence was unfinished. There was a knock at the door—a quick, excited rap, I might call it—and my companion arose and opened it. And the full, bright light from within revealed to my astonished gaze the black-robed form of a woman. I leaned forward to get a glimpse of her face, but a black veil hid it from view. But I noticed the face of the man who had opened the door on this dreary figure. It was livid with rage. Great knotted lines deformed his brow, and I thought I heard a muffled oath escape his lips. Then the woman stepping back into the shadow and whispering hoarsely, said: "I thought you were alone. You wanted to see me. For God's sake, come into the street!"

He closed the door, and without addressing a word of explanation to me, seized his hat and went out into the night.

I could not have sat still in that room after that, if my life had depended on it. The mystery of that meeting completely mastered me, and I was determined to fathom it.

Out into the dark I followed them, my slippery feet making no sound upon the stony street. On they went—strange, dark figures, darker than the night whose few feeble stars shone indistinctly in a gloomy sky. On they went, and still I followed, with step as noiseless as that of fate. I could faintly hear their voices in the distance, but could distinguish no word that was said.

How far I followed them I know not. Once or twice I saw the woman pause, but the man motioned her on, and she continued at his side until a grove, which served the city as a park, lying still and gloomy on the outskirts, was reached, and they entered and stood under the shadow of the trees.

I crouched behind a hedge and listened.

"Once for all," said the man, "will you leave this town and swear to follow me no more?"

"I can not," said the woman, piteously. "Because I love you! Oh, John!" she said, as she fell on her knees at his feet, "have mercy on me! Think of all I have suffered for you, and take me into the shelter of your love again!"

"A curse on your love," he cried. "It has been a curse to me. You are a blight to my life. What are you kneeling there for?" And he spurned her with his foot.

She rose weeping. Then the man, grasping her arm and hissing the words in her ear, said:

"I swear I will kill you if you cross my path again!"

"Oh, my God!" she cried, "my burden is heavier than I can bear! Only let me see my children once more, and you can take my life, if you will!"

"You shall never see them!" said the man. "You have disgraced them, as you disgraced me. They are dead to you forever."

She uttered a cry, like that of a lost soul, and fell heavily to the ground.

She lay there moaning and motionless. I saw the man glance furtively around, as if fearful that he was seen. Then he bent down.

I saw his fingers on the woman's throat—there was a struggle and a stifled cry, and I sprang from my hiding-place with a cry of horror on my

lips, the blood in my veins boiling with rage and indignation. I rushed forward. The wretch fled at my approach, stooping to shield himself from detection as he ran. I raised the woman in my arms; the print of his cruel fingers was on her white throat; but the villain had not killed her, though she lay in my arms as one dead.

"Help! Murder!" I shouted, and an echo came back through the gloomy woods: "Help! Murder!"

I heard the sound of hurried footsteps approaching. Was the would-be murderer coming back to try his strength with me? The figure of a man came rapidly towards us. I caught the gleam of a silver badge on his breast, and I knew that help was at hand.

"What's up?" asked the almost breathless officer, as he peered first in the woman's face and then in mine.

In a quick, excited manner I told him the story. He listened, and looked at me suspiciously.

The woman was breathing hard. "Loosen her dress at the throat," he cried, as he tugged at it nervously. "But, good God! we are a mile from the station, and she may die before we get there!"

Tenderly but swiftly we bore her along, until we reached our destination. We laid her gently down upon a cot in one of the officers' rooms. As the chief came forward and saw the woman's face, he exclaimed: "Why, I should know this woman. She is the mysterious creature of whom there has been so much talk in the city. Go for a physician—quick! Is this the wretch who did this devil's work?"

He grasped me by the wrist and peered into my face.

"No!" I cried, indignantly. "It was owing to my efforts that the woman lives now. I was only a witness to it."

Here the officer briefly recounted the circumstances of his meeting with me.

"I must place you under arrest," said the Chief, "until we can get better evidence of your innocence than you have given. Take him to a cell and lock him up."

"I am not guilty of this foul crime," I cried. "Come with me and I will lay my hands upon the guilty man."

By this time a physician had arrived, and accompanied by the same officer who had answered my call in the grove, I went to the house where I lodged.

The first grey streaks of dawn were in the east when we reached it. We entered the outer door with a night key which I carried in my pocket. The door of my room was locked. That was enough; the man we wanted was within.

"Who is there?" he asked, in a hoarse, natural voice.

"It is I—your room-mate," I answered.

The door was opened. The officer stood behind me in the shadow. He entered with me. "That is the man," I said, pointing at him, "and I am a witness against him."

He sprang forward and raised his hand to strike me, but the officer leveled a pistol at his head and bade him hold up his hands. In the twinkling of an eye the steel bracelets were on his wrists, and cursing and denying all knowledge of the crime with which I accused him, he was marched to the station.

The woman lay there moaning and raving in delirium. He was brought to her side. She shrieked as she caught a wild glimpse of his face. "Don't kill me, John, don't kill me! Don't kill me, because I love you!" she cried.

"It is enough," said the chief. "Take him to a cell."

"I didn't mean to kill her," he said, as he cast one remorseful glance upon the pale face, before he was led away, "but she has wrecked my life, and she deserves to die."

My story is quickly told: "The woman died that night, on that cot of straw in the station-house. Died raving, but blessing the hand that sought her life. As I knelt by her side when the breath had left her lips forever, I asked the physician to explain the mystery of her life."

"Few know," he said, "the story of her life, but it is familiar to me, and has been for months past. She volunteered to nurse the sick at the hospital, and while there she confided to me her melancholy story. The man who murdered her is her husband. He is a gambler. He made her young life miserable—treated her like a dog. She was beautiful, as you can see now. Driven to despair by his cruelty, she listened to the persuasions of a man who had known and loved her before her marriage with this fellow, and finally fled with him to a distant State. Her old love for this brute returning, and perhaps the desire to see her children again, she returned and sought forgiveness. Few know what she has suffered; few know what good she has accomplished. To those who did not know her she was a woman of mystery, and her somber habiliments, her visits to the sick, her vigils by the dead, her hidden life aroused the fear and superstition of the ignorant. She has kept as close to this man as she could for two years past, for he had hidden away her two children and she doubtless hoped to obtain from him some information of them. Besides, as I said, she loved him. It is a strange tale of sin and suffering and love and sorrow."

He ceased, and as we folded the white hands prayer-wise over the silent bosom I said:

"She has loved and suffered much, and should be much forgiven."

Atlanta Constitution.

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