Daily Appeal.

THE COQUETTE'S VICTIM.

A SKETCH FROM LIFE.

BY MRS. MARY C. VAUGHAN

The train went thundering and tearing at almost lightning speed through the rich country—past grain fields, and a fair, winding river, that glittered like a thread of silver as we caught glimpses of it in our rapid transit across the plain—past nestling hamlets, and long, barren like way-stations, and stopped only at the few larger places on the line. It was a hot, summer morning, and I had noticed my traveling companions a good deal, as is my custom when taking journeys without friends to relieve the tedium by conversation.

There had been the usual indications of character. Real ladies and real gentlemen had shone illustrious among the selfishness and vulgarity so unblushingly displayed by the crowd—those evil traits which are so apt to be thoroughly aired when their owners are away from home, and the restraints of the public opinion of their own communities. But there was one figure which fixed my attention more than all others. It was that of a woman, not old, but past middle-life, and dressed in the deepest mourning. She had evidently once possessed considerable beauty, but that was all faded now, her eyes being the only feature retaining any trace of her early loveliness. And th se—large, dark and brilliant, with a world of sadness in their depths, looking out of a face of almost ghastly pallor. Down the worn cheeks those eternal tears seemed to have worn their deep furrows, the channels of a grief whose bitterness they could not wash away.

Her dress was not slovenly worn—one saw at a glance that she was too truly a lady for that; but a carelessness in its arrangements indicated that it was assumed with little thought. And though very plain, its texture, and the harmony and fitness of its details, showed a cultivated taste, and also that its wearer had not to contend with the pinching pangs of poverty.

She was all alone, and sat quite silent and unobserving, companioned only, as it seemed, by her sad, sad thoughts. So still, so deeply mournful, so profoundly suffering, she drew me toward her by the strong magnetism of her grief. I would have given worlds to have been able to concentrate all sympathy, all consolation, all help, save that which came only from the divinest source, into one word, and enfolding that sufferer to me in my arms, to whisper it into one ear that seemed so dead to outward impressions.

But feeling thus, two causes restrained me. I knew nothing of the woman nor history, and conventional rules forbade me to approach a stranger with sympathy for her unknown woes. And thus we passed over scores of miles of our road—she woman and I, sitting so near that our garments touched, she in sad, and I in pitying silence, with seeing nothing around us, but feeling nothing but the might and mystery of her sorrow.

We stopped in the sultry noon at a large and busy city. Hurrying, rushing, scrambling, each man for himself and his, nobody for his neighbor, or any helpless or unprotected one. The passengers thronged out of the cars to gorge their hot and hasty dinner. Only this sad woman and myself remained. She, still and silent, and apparently unconscious of all that was going on around her, and forgetful of physical needs, of hunger, or muscles wearied by long inaction; I walking about the empty car for rest, and eating the delicate lunch, of fruit and white cakes, that was to me ambrosia compared to the steaming dinner which my fellow travelers swallowed in the frowsy station.

And now I bethought me of an excuse for speaking to her. I had something tangible to offer her—anything more real than my sweetless sympathy I could not have, and I approached with the little basket and its snowy napkin, that enshrined my white cakes, and ruby strawberries, and purple raspberries, daintily arranged, and forming a pretty enough picture to tempt an epicure.

"Do take some," I said. "I am sure you must be hungry, and the cakes were made, and the fruit arranged by the hands of a dear mother for her well beloved child."

At first she only looked up wonderingly, and shook her head. Evidently she scarcely comprehended more than that some disturbing presence had interposed between her and her companion-grief. But when I renewed my entreaties she thanked me with a smile—a very phantom of a smile it was—and partook sparingly of the delicate delicacies I offered her. And when I had filled the silver cup, drawn from my basket, with ice-cold water she drank that, and thanked me with another smile, and a few words in a voice very low and sweet.

She was evidently grateful for these little kindnesses, but the passengers began to drop in, in pairs and groups, with much loud talking, and she drew down her veil and was silent. I went sadly back to my seat, for I had only for a moment succeeded in drawing her from her mournful abstraction.

Soon we were in motion again, not so rapid as before this long pause, and going out through the dingy suburbs of the city, and past villas, like residences and scattered hamlets, toward the open country beyond. Soon upon our left the Mound up, tall and gray against the summer sky, the towers and walls of a large handsome structure. All eyes were turned toward it, as by a species of fascination. Questions were asked and answered, and various remarks, all indicating interest, were made. I, too, looked out toward the tall stone building, surrounded by its wall of masonry, and gazed on it with a sort of magnetic awe. For I had learned that it was the home provided by the State for the unfortunate insane—an asylum where shattered minds found such rest as remained for them on earth, where a few, under kindest, most judicious care, progressed healthward, and many alas! only went groping in their mental blindness toward the world where, at last, in God's infinite mercy, they should see and know.

I was still looking at the fast receding walls, when I was startled by a deep groan, followed by a heavy fall, and many exclamations of surprise, and a sudden movement of the people around. I turned to see that the lady in black, who had so interested me, had fallen almost at my feet.

In an instant I was at her side. I raised that pale face, now in all its features wan and rigid as if the deep swoon into which she had fallen had been death, and laid it upon my bosom. I chafed the cold hands, and held the flagon that some kind woman had proffered, that she might inhale the powerful perfume. There were plenty of willing helpers, and we raised the poor lady and laid her on a seat, and pillowed her head on the piles of soft shawls. And by and by a faint tinge of color stole into her white cheek, and the breath quivered upon her lips, and then she opened her eyes and gazed bewildered around.

By this time the train had stopped again, and either among the passengers, or from the crowd at the station, a physician was found, who came and administered a cordial; and soon, seeing her in sufficient good order, put her back her disordered hair, and, with patient smile, announced herself quite well. But I saw she was not so, and I sat down beside her resolved to make her my friend, if possible, that I might carry out a scheme which had already dawned in my mind.

She was shy and painfully reserved, but I succeeded. I had already knocked loudly at her heart's door, and I was not long in gaining entrance. When, an hour later, the train reached the town where my sister lived, whom I had come to visit, I left, taking the stranger-lady with me.

That night she fell very ill. All the tension of her long-tried strength relaxed—she drooped from the hour or that fearful swoon, and within two weeks my sister, her excellent husband, and myself, who had watched her to the hour of her life, laid her beneath the sod of that green country burial-ground. There, all life's sorrows past, "she sleeps well."

But before she died we learned the story of her life, and its last crowning sorrow.

Agnes Mountfort St. John, the bearer of two illustrious names, had lived five years in America—a widow, with an only son—her pride, her hope, her darling, her all that made her and life worth the living. She was the daughter of an English clergyman, a descendant of the old Mountforts of feudal times. Her husband, a St. John, sprung from the same lordly ancestry as the famous Lord Bollingbroke, but of a younger branch—was possessed of only a moderate competence. They had married, contest in live humbly if together, and had found life in their own land a hard struggle. One by one their children had died, till only Stephen, the eldest born, survived. Heavy expenses the cost of the young man's education, had some losses, had impaired their little fortune, and having small interest to help him on in any avenue open to a gentleman in the old world, he begged his parents to emigrate to America. The ties which bound them to the old world were merely traditional, for all of their respectable immediate families were dead, and though they clung fondly to their native land, they still were persuaded to yield to his request who was so dearto both.

I shall pass over the two years that followed their settlement in America. Their fortune proved ample for their support in the simple style they chose, on a pleasant country village, and Stephen applied himself to the study of his chosen profession, that of the law, living at home with his parents, and contributing to lighten all the pangs of their late removal from the scenes in which their lives had been passed.

At the close of that period, Mr. St. John suddenly sickened and died. In this hitherto bereavement Agnes leaned for support upon the strong arm of her son. She was not utterly alone, for she still had a son between whom and he self there was even more than the ordinary affection and confidence of the sacred relation that bound them. The fond mother could not be utterly miserable as she looked upon her handsome, noble boy.

But fate had not done its word. Another, a more terrible sorrow than any she had known menaced her.

Stephen St. John was an ardent student, and seldom mingled in the society of the village. In fact, such as he had been sought, he was seldom seen at any of the village gatherings until after he was admitted to the bar, and commenced the practice of his profession. His handsome person, the undeniable indications of his high birth and breeding, had procured him much notice before. But at the very outset of his career at the bar he achieved some legal triumph, which at once gave him standing in his profession. We Americans estimate merit by success, and to be a successful lawyer was more to the large portion of the inhabitants of L——— than to be a Mountfort St. John. The latter was but words, breath; the former something real, tangible, just as with us deeds must always be greater than names.

He was happy, and his mother was proud to know that he was already attracting notice, and making friends. She was gentle and humble, and both herself and son valued less their long descent than those traits which make a nobleman of the peasant's son, and win the bear of all titles—that of a man.

Into the midst of the calm content of their lives came a disturbing influence. St. John met at the house of Judge H., his friend and former preceptor, Caroline Lascelles. An irresistible fascination drew him at once to her side. She charmed, she bewildered him; and all the time she turned smiling around, and seemed to take little heed of her new conquest. St. John went home to think of her through restless hours; to dream of her when at last he slept, to have her image before him with his first waking thoughts.

He had no secrets from his mother, and he told her of his new experience. She trembled as she saw how intensely his deepest feelings were stirred. Perhaps there was a painful twinge of jealousy, for he was her all, and she had never yet thought of yielding him to another and were she anything save a jealous, but his happiness was paramount to her own, and she persuaded herself to see another take the place in his heart that she—his mother—could never fill.

She sought the acquaintance of Miss Lascelles, and found her, what all the world had before pronounced her, a vain, frivolous, heartless coquette, possessing some beauty, a great deal of art, and an indomitable will, which no impulse of affection, no feeling of remorse for the suffering she caused, ever turned from her purpose. Of course Mrs. St. John did not see all this at a single interview, but, with the prescience of her anxious affection, she felt and knew it.

She warned her son, and for the first time in his life he answered proudly and angrily. He loved, and he was ready to peril all, to stake everything on the merits of his peerless Caroline. To him she seemed angelic—all virtues, all graces, all lovable traits, seemed concentrated in her person and her mind.

He withdrew his confidence from his mother, or gave it but drifully or partially, and pursued his temporary idol. And that mother knowing best of all, the intensity of his feelings, and how much depended on the result, could only watch him with trembling anxiety.

The end came only too soon. Miss Lascelles spent two months in L——. On the eve of her return to her city home St. John put his hopes to the test. He poured out his whole soul, all his passionate love, all his intense yearning to make her his, and laid heart, hand, fortune, prospective fame, at her feet. As he spoke she regarded him with haughty surprise, which he was greatly agitated to observe. When he ended, she scornfully, in a few sever words, repeated him. Was there no hope for the future? None. She could not pledge herself to a poor lawyer with his fortune yet to make, with the encumbrance of a mother, who required living and comfort at home. Her parents had educated her for such a fate—she had no vocation for it.

And then she walked proudly from the room, and St. John, bewildered, stunned, went slowly homeward. He locked himself into his room. Not even his mother could comfort him now. Next morning he was found raving lightlitish. A brain fever, the result, perhaps of long and intense study, aggravated and hastened by the shock he had received, had gone mad him. For days and weeks he struggled with disease, and his pale, stricken mother watched him through fearful alternations of hope and fear.

At length the brain slowly returned. But she who watched him saw, with pangs unutterable, that the god-like mind had been shattered in its shrine. No light of reason had returned to the vacant, wandering eyes; his words were the aimless babbling of the maniac. And with health came back the mannerism of his disease, the wandering force, and the wistful care of strangers. To this had the false arts of a heartless girl reduced one of the noblest minds of my age.

A year from my chance meeting with Mrs. St. John, her son had been conveyed to the asylum, whence gray with the woe I had seen from the passenger train. She had long since pronounced helplessly insane, and as he required constant and peculiar attendance, and had, with the strange idiosyncracy of alienated minds, conceived a hatred for his mother, it was thought best for him to continue there. The sight of that helpless prison-housed her child might well account for the rush of feeling which had prostrated her in that deathly swoon.

Mrs. St. John had long been an invalid, and certain premonitions of her own death had led her to seek the home of a friend in New York, to arrange with him her pecuniary affairs, for her child's benefit. It was from this journey that she was returning when I met her. I have never regretted my kindness to one, the victim of such unpardonable misfortune, nor that I was enabled to soothe her dying moments with the fondest care.

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