

Selected Story.

A MESMERIC EXPERIMENT.

Thirty Christmas nights have come and gone since that one, so memorable in my life, and yet, sitting here in my solitary room, a gray-haired, lonely woman, the whole scene rises as vividly before me as though it had occurred but yesterday. I can see the comfortably but plainly furnished, low-ceiled, old-fashioned room, with its dark wainscoted walls, and its dim corners that the feeble light of a couple of composite candles could scarcely reach; I can see the half-circle of faces gathered round the hearth, looking glowing and pleasant in the ruddy glare of the firelight—all except one, that of a man who sat in the corner opposite to me.

I could not keep my eyes off that face, which had for me the fascination of ugliness; as the lights and shadows made by the flickering flame touched the shock of bristly hair that half concealed the low narrow forehead, the cavernous eyes, sunken cheeks and high mouth, half open with a cynical smile, that showed the tusk-like teeth, I could compare it only with a shifting series of gargoyles from some old monastic ruin.

We were all members of the company of the Theatre Royal X., and, it being a non-play night, we were assembled at the lodgings of one of our members, a lady, to do honor to her birthday. Our usual theme, the affairs of the theatre, past, present and future, being exhausted, the conversation, I cannot remember how, had turned upon mesmerism and clairvoyance, and I was stoutly declaring my utter disbelief in either, my skepticism being greatly intensified by the circumstance that Dr. Arnold—the man I have just described, and who was one of the low comedians of our company—took the opposite side. There had always been an antagonism between us, and, although I had no actual cause for such feeling, a positive dislike upon my part, which I believe was pretty strongly reciprocated upon his.

Although I was scarcely twenty at the time, I was what people would have called rather a strong-minded girl, with opinions of my own that I never shrink from asserting, with an obstinacy that no argument could overcome; and on this night, excited by a spirit of defiance to my cousin, I expressed them with a bigotry and contempt that were any thing but polite to those who differed from me.

"By your positiveness, Miss Grace," sneered Arnold, "I presume you have had a very large experience of the tricks of mesmerists."

"Oh indeed, I have not," I replied, sharply. "I was never at any exhibition of the kind in my life, and never intend to be. I should not have patience even to witness such a transparent imposture."

"Suppose," he said, and there was a gleam in his eyes which indicated rising temper—"suppose I could give you ocular demonstration that you are wrong, by placing some one in this room under mesmeric influence; I have done the thing often. If I did this before your own eyes, when you would be quite assured there could not be trick or collusion, would you believe it then?"

"I don't know that I should," I answered, doggedly. "If you have such power, I added, with a contemptuous smile, 'why don't you try it upon me?'"

Arnold was evidently taken aback. I do not think he dreamed of my taking up his challenge. He regarded me for some seconds with a doubtful, wavering glance, which I met defiantly and mockingly.

"I would prefer any one else in the room," he answered, hesitatingly.

"Of course you would," I replied, with a malicious laugh; "I am not a good subject; the mesmeric influence is powerless over misbelievers. O, I know all the jargon." And I cast a triumphant glance around the company, who were exceedingly amused at our discussion.

Arnold turned alternately white and red with rage and mortification.

"It is not that," he answered quickly, then paused; but, evidently stung by my contemptuous laugh, he added instantly, "Very well; be it so, since you desire it."

The prospect of having the discussion so summarily tested and adjudged created an immense excitement, and I could feel my own cheeks burning and my pulse galloping at fever heat as Arnold proceeded to make preparations for the experiment.

I anticipated the usual passes and hand-wavings, of which I had heard and read, but I soon perceived that his method was going to be entirely different. He began by placing two chairs exactly opposite to one another, in one of which he requested me to be seated; then he draped a large black coat round me, so that only my face rose above it; then a lamp, borrowed from the landlady of the house, was set in such a position that the light should focus upon my face; after which he took the chair opposite to mine, and desired me to fix my eyes firmly upon his, and not remove them for a second.

I followed his instructions, and the next moment I was staring intently into a pair of greenish-brown orbs that I could feel did not meet mine with equal steadiness. There was a profound silence, broken only by a little suppressed giggle from the females and an occasional low whisper from the men.

We had been thus only a few seconds when Arnold sprang up, exclaiming, "It is no use; I can't do it." A shout of laughter followed this confession of defeat, and, throwing off my drapery, I jumped up and joined heartily in the chorus.

Arnold was white as death and extremely agitated. He made no reply to the volleys of "chaff" that assailed him on all sides, but again turning to me, said, in a tone of intense earnestness, "I cannot mesmerize you, but you can me; those strong, steel-gray eyes of yours, with their metallic lustre, are far more potent than mine. Come, will you try?"

I did not need the inducement of hand-clapping and the chorus of "O, do!" that greeted the proposition, to promptly consent. I began to be deeply interested in the experiment, and now that I was accredited with possessing this occult power, my skepticism began to waver.

"But before we go any further," he said, "I must make one condition, and that is, should I fall into a comatose state, you will not put to me any question of a private nature, as I shall be compelled to answer truthfully, literally, whatever it may be."

I promised faithfully not to do so. The previous disposition was now reversed, the lamp was set so that the light should shine upon Arnold's face, and he was enveloped in the cloak, as I had been. And now, with all the nerve power I possessed, I fastened my eyes upon Arnold's. White and ghastly looked his face rising out of the blackness of the drapery,

which gave it almost the appearance of being divided from the body and suspended in space. The lips were wide apart, and the greenish eyes were dilated to their utmost extent, with a strained, fascinated look, such as they might have worn under the influence of a rattlesnake. I could scarcely suppress a shiver at this uncanny-looking picture; but a wild spirit took possession of me that night which soon swept away all such "compunctious visitations of nature." Everybody seemed to be thoroughly impressed by the weirdness of the situation; there was no giggling, no whispering; all was silent as death. After about a minute my eyes grew rigid in their intense stare, until it seemed to me that I no longer had the power to move or close them, or even wink a lid; gradually I could feel the pupils dilate, until they seemed to become two huge discs glowing with a lambent and metallic fire. I could see that every nerve of the white face was quivering, the breathing was short and labored, and a dull, stony glare came into the eyeballs—a far-away, trance-like look that told me consciousness was gone, and that the very soul of the man had passed over to my keeping. And I felt a cold, cruel, hard triumph in this, a desire to strain my mastery to the utmost. I rose from my seat, slowly moved backward, and imperiously beckoned him, never relaxing my fixed stare, which seemed to scintillate and flash. As I rose, he rose, clutching the edge of the table to guide his trembling steps. Slowly I moved, he followed, seemingly impelled by an involuntary impulse. I stopped suddenly; he stopped.

"What is your name?" I asked, imperatively. In a forced, hollow voice he gave me the name I afterwards discovered was his family name, Arnold being only a theatrical sobriquet. At this one of the gentlemen broke in, protesting: "No, no; that is against the bargain; no questions."

"It is time to put an end to it; I don't like it," said another.

"O, yes," added a lady; "it is too horrible!"

The interruption seemed to exercise the fiend that possessed me, and called me back to myself; with an effort I wrenched my gaze from that ghastly face. As I did so, Arnold, as though he had been only upheld by my eyes, fell upon the floor in strong convulsions.

Our experiment in mesmerism spoiled the rest of the evening; for although after a copious outward application of cold water, and a judicious inward one of neat brandy, he soon recovered and tried to laugh off his illness, it left a creepy, disagreeable depression upon all, which no amount of hot spirits and water forced jolly could succeed in dispelling.

As it may be supposed, the effect was strongest upon me, and it chiefly took the form of intense annoyance at the part I had played; I would have given anything to have recalled the past few minutes. After Arnold's recovery, by a tact under his hand, no one made any reference to the incident, and none so much as the principal actor in it, who laughed and joked in a feverish manner, and never allowed the conversation to flag for a single moment, as though he feared the subject might crop up again.

Everybody, however, was eagerly discussing the singular event the next morning at rehearsal. I avoided the gossiping groups, for the remembrance of the scene was a horror to me; so did Arnold, whom I studiously attempted to avoid; but he took an exactly opposite course, following me wherever I went, trying to engage me in conversation, and to catch my eye, as though some of the fascination of the previous night still surrounded me.

After a rather late dinner, for the rehearsal was very long, I was dozing in my chair, when there came a soft tap at the door, and to my sleepy "come in" there appeared upon the threshold the tall, gaunt figure of the man whom of all others I least desired to see. It gave me quite a shock. It was the first time he had ever called at my lodgings.

In common courtesy I was obliged to ask him to take a seat and draw near the fire, as the weather was cold. In a vague, listless manner he placed a chair in such a position that it exactly faced mine, dropped into it without a word, and tried to fix my eyes. I immediately shifted them, and gazed into the fire.

He made no attempt to account for this visit; he talked very little, and in an absent manner—that betrayed that his thoughts were not on his tongue—about the business of the theatre. I felt very embarrassed by his presence, and presently rose and rang for tea. What could I do but ask him to remain, and take it with me? He said "Thank you," and kept his seat. I felt quite terrified by the change that had come over him—from a noisy, jesting, rollicking kind of a fellow, who had always a gibe for me, to this silent, subdued man, with those dreadful eyes ever yearningly seeking mine.

At length he went away, and never in my life did I feel so thankful for anybody's departure.

But he came the next day about the same time, and acted in just the same manner, until the lights were brought in; then all at once, he rose from his chair, crossed over to where I was sitting, and, laying his hand upon my arm, said, in a hoarse whisper, "Mesmerize me!"

I started back, and answered, shudderingly, "Not for worlds!"

"You must!" he answered passionately. And somehow or other, I cannot tell how, a few minutes afterward we were sitting side-by-side staring into each other's eyes. In less than a minute there was in his dull, stony vagueness of insensibility.

I covered my face with my hands, but withdrew them, as I heard something fall heavily upon the floor, to see him huddled at my feet in convulsions, the froth bubbling from his lips.

I did not call for assistance; luckily I had some water and some brandy in the room. I knelt down and copiously bathed his head and face, and then with some difficulty forced a little of the spirit between his clenched teeth.

When he recovered I nearly fainted myself; but rallying by an effort, I told him very positively that he must not come any more.

"I cannot stay away; I must come," was his answer. And again the dilated eyes began to wander curvingly in search of mine.

I cannot describe the horror I felt at these visits, and at length I begged a lady friend I had in the theatre to come and stay

with me. The following afternoon he strolled in as usual, but finding I had a companion he looked very annoyed, and remained only a few minutes.

Several days passed, and I met him only in business. His manner was sullen, almost rude to me, at which I was much annoyed, for I now began to entertain hopes that he would persecute me no more.

The next day, however, he came to my lodgings. His manner was sullen, almost rude to me, at which I was much annoyed, for I now began to entertain hopes that he would persecute me no more.

After a few days my friend returned to her own lodgings. The next afternoon, at the usual hour, Arnold came as before. He seemed to waste day by day, like a man consumed by an inward fire; his cheeks were sunk in deeper hollows, and there were black rings round his eyes.

As soon as the lights were brought in, he again besought me to "mesmerize him." I firmly refused; but I could not rest my eyes upon him for a moment without his face beginning to quiver and his pupils to dilate, and the very feeling that I must not look at him made the desire to do so more imperative. Matters went on thus from day to day.

But surely, it will be said, you could have devised some means of keeping him away; you might have requested your landlady to refuse him admittance. Truly, I could have done so, but—well, I must confess, it even in my own defence—Arnold had begun to throw a strange glamour over me; I dreaded his coming, yet I experienced a vague yearning when he was absent. I had fallen myself into the meshes of the spell I had unconsciously cast upon him.

One afternoon he arrived rather earlier than usual; there was certainly some occult sympathy between us, for the moment he entered the room I felt that a crisis was come.

He was in very weak health, and he sank down in a chair looking pale and exhausted, and wiping the damp from his forehead, while his breathing was very labored; and there was a feverish glitter in the restless eyes, and a red spot in each hollow cheek.

"How very pale you look," I said pityingly; "let me give you a glass of wine."

"No, I want nothing," he said in a gasping tone; "there's quite fire enough within in me now; I am being slowly burned up."

"Have you seen a doctor?" I asked, growing very nervous.

"A doctor?" he echoed, with a mocking laugh. "O, yes, I've seen a doctor but he can do me no good. It is you who are killing me."

"I?" I echoed faintly.

"Yes," he answered; "since the night you tore the heart and soul out of my body I cannot live without you, and I won't."

I was very much terrified by his wild, excited look, but replied, with a great show of firmness, "You talk nonsense, Arnold; why, you are married already."

I did not know at the moment whether it was really so, but there was a vague impression among the company that such was the case, and it was upon that of our acquaintance that I had based my remark.

"I do not, but I find it true. And under such circumstances how dare you address me in such terms?" I exclaimed, growing very indignant, perhaps more in seeming than in reality.

"Yes," he replied, dejectedly, "I am married to a woman I hate, to a woman I left at the church door. I was forced into it by my friends—never mind why—that would not interest you."

He paused for a moment, then laying his trembling fingers upon my arm, he added, "Allice," he had come to call me by my Christian name, "if anything should happen to her—if she should die—would you be my wife?"

I started away from him exclaiming, "Don't talk like that; it is too horrible!"

But he followed me, and again grasped my arm, and said, "Allice, I told you just now that I cannot live without you, and that I will not, and I swear before God that if you do not give me this promise, when I leave this house I will throw myself over the bridge into the river—I swear it!"

Men—and women, too—say these things in moments of strong passion, without keeping their words; but I knew that he would keep his; the mysterious sympathy that had been created between us told me so, told me that if he left me with that thought in his heart he would not be a living man within the next hour.

It was nearly dark, just between the lights, and his face gleamed out of the shadows white and terrible, and then I thought how it would look when it was drawn out of the water with the long dark hair clinging about it.

"It is not too much to ask of you," he went on, pleadingly. "Why, she may outlive us both; more than likely; there is nothing shocking about it—she is nothing to me, never has been; only the mockery of a ceremony links us."

"But what is the use of such a pledge, what satisfaction can it be to you?" I said, still with my face covered, for I dreaded to meet his eyes.

"I don't know," he answered; "it would give me a sort of hope that I cannot live without that I won't live without."

Well, I gave him the promise. I dare say you will consider it very wicked in me to do so, I think so myself. But I thought it was almost impossible that I should ever be called upon to fulfill it, and how could I hesitate when a man's life seemed to be at stake?

The following morning as I was seated at breakfast, I caught sight of Arnold's dark figure passing my parlor window, and the next moment I heard his well-known knock at the street door. I put down the cup of coffee that I had raised half way to my lips, while an unaccountable dread came over me.

One glance at his countenance as he entered the room told me that something had happened. He did not look at me, not even exchange a greeting, as he laid down his hat and took a chair.

"I have strange news to tell you, Allice," in a voice thick and indistinct from agitation.

"For God's sake, don't tell me that—" I could not complete the utterance of my fears; my voice died away in my throat, and with parted lips and rigid eyes I could only await the explanation.

Meanwhile he had taken from his pocket a letter, which he rose and offered me. It had a deep black border.

I shrank back; I would not touch it; I knew his countenance was going to happen—

"You have cruelly entrapped me," I exclaimed, bitterly.

He threw himself upon his knees at my feet. "I swear most solemnly," he cried, "I did not. It was very sudden, the letter will tell you so; heart disease—her friends had scarcely a moment's warning."

There was that in his tone I could not disbelieve, and when, after a while, I brought myself to read the fatal letter, I found his assertions were fully corroborated.

"That makes it all the more horrible," I cried, "for now I shall feel as if I were in some way the cause of her death."

I implored him to spare me from my promise, as nothing could come from a marriage contracted under such an impulse. But he only repeated the old words: "I cannot live without you, and I won't."

My friend, who could perceive how disheartened we were, dashed in her power to persuade me to break with him. "Leave the company," she said, "give no notice of your intention, and go home, or take another engagement under another name."

But I felt that I could not break a vow so solemnly made, and which fate, whether for good or evil, had suddenly called congealable. Matters went on thus from day to day.

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