

The Weekly Thibodaux Sentinel.

JOURNAL OF THE 9TH SENATORIAL DISTRICT.

Official Journal of the Parish of Lafourche and of the Town of Thibodaux.

VOL. XVIII.

THIBODAUX, LA., SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 1883.

NO. 27.

A Fatal Mistake

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Author of

"PETERED, YET FREE," "CLOUDS AND SUNSHINE," "STELLA'S ERROR," "FALSE PRIDE," "STRICKEN DUMB," ETC.

[CONTINUED.]

"You will not go, Clarence, will you?" said Clarice; "you have suffered so much today, and you are worn out with all you have endured. You will not go?"

"Not go, cousin Clarence?" exclaimed the young man; "you must indeed think me weak if you can imagine that the loss of a false woman can so much affect me! No, no! Art shall console me. A glorious future shall wipe out the past! I will show this woman that the artist in his greatness may be worthy the love of an Empress!"

Clarence Suydam rose and looked at his watch.

"Eight o'clock," he said; "plenty of time. Good-night, Clarice."

"When will you return?" asked his cousin.

"By eleven, at the latest."

"Cousin Clarence," said Clarice, earnestly, "do not go to this place to-night. There is something at my heart that tells me that harm to yourself will result from this meeting. If this Mr. Spencer desires to patronize you, let him come here—or let him wait till to-morrow."

"Impossible, Clarice. I may lose a valuable patron if I fail to keep this appointment."

"Stay, Clarence; there is danger before you!"

"Danger?"

"Ay, danger. I feel it—I know it."

"Fahaw, my poor little cousin, this is folly," said the young man. "You need fear no danger, and at eleven o'clock you shall see me safe at home."

"You promise, Clarence?"

"I will return at eleven."

"Swear it, cousin," said Clarice, solemnly.

"I swear."

The artist seized Clarice's hand and pressed it in his own; then, hurrying down the stairs, he left the house and walked slowly along the street.

Clarence sat pale and motionless before the deserted supper table.

For two hours he sat in the same attitude, immovable as a statue, but when the clock upon the chimney-piece struck eleven she rose from her seat and walked to the window.

"Eleven o'clock," murmured Clarice; "the hour has struck, and he has not yet returned. Clarence Suydam never yet broke his oath. My cousin is dead!"

"Twelve—one—two—three—four o'clock struck from the turrets of the neighboring church; but still she waited.

"I am waiting for his corpse," she murmured, as the long night wore away. "I am waiting to receive his corpse, for he never will return alive."

CHAPTER III
"I AM SAFE NOW!"

Miss Maud Ovington had returned at half-past one o'clock from a ball given by one of the leaders of fashion, and was her hands full of floating assure gauze, looped bows and there with water-lilies and diamonds.

This pale and cloud-like dress gave her the appearance of some beautiful water-symph newly emerged from her crystal fountain.

Her long yellow hair had fallen loosely over her shoulders, and hung about her waist like a shower of golden rain. Her large blue eyes were unattractively dilated, and shone with feverish light.

Sometimes she clasped her small jeweled hands and lifted them wildly above her head.

"Will he never come?" she cried, again and again. "Is this suspense to last forever?"

At last, exactly as the hands of the time-piece pointed to ten minutes before five, a cautious knock sounded upon the panel of the gilded door.

"At last!" she exclaimed—"at last!"

She sprang toward the door and unlocked it almost noiselessly; then, opening it with the same caution, she admitted a man wrapped in a heavy great coat, and with his chin muffled in a cashmere shawl.

Cold as the night was, heavy drops of perspiration rolled down his swarthy face, and his breath came short and quick, as if he had been running.

"Well!" exclaimed Miss Ovington—"well!"

The man hesitated for some moments, twisting the brim of his hat round and round in his trembling hands, and staring woefully straight before him.

Then, with visible effort, and without looking at Miss Ovington, he said, slowly:

"I've done everything, madam, according as was arranged."

Miss Maud Ovington drew herself up to her fullest height, and a glance of mingled joy and triumph shot across her expressive countenance.

"I am very glad," she said.

There was something almost terrible in the slow, deliberation with which she pronounced these few words.

"You have done me a great service," she said, after a long pause, during which she had seated herself in a thoughtful attitude before the costly toilet-table—"you have done me a great service, and I will not forget my promise."

She unlocked her dressing-case, which was a massive casket of ebony inlaid with gold. She pressed a spring in the inner part of the casket, and a secret drawer flew out, disclosing a few neatly-folded papers and a roll of bank notes.

Miss Ovington took out the roll of notes and handed to the man.

"Take this," she said. "It was to have paid for my wedding dresses, but Stewart must give me credit for those. Who would have thought to look at this room, that there is

no one in this great city more in need of money than the Honorable James Ovington? But what of that?" she added, with a sudden change of tone. "Give me the packet, William—the packet!"

The man recoiled a few paces.

"I'm very sorry, madam," he answered, looking down, as if afraid to meet the eyes of the beautiful creature before him—"I'm very sorry, but I couldn't get that."

"You have not brought me the packet?"

"No, madam."

"He hadn't it about him, then?"

"No, madam."

"And yet you—"

"I did as you directed, madam, replied the man, "because, by his words and his manner, I fancied he had the packet that you wanted about him, and I offered him what you told me if he'd give it up, but he wouldn't; so I told him what you said, and there was only one course left, and then—"

She stopped him with an imperious gesture of her small hand.

"Enough!" she said; "you did as I told you?"

"Yes, madam."

"To the letter?"

"To the letter, madam," answered the man, still looking down.

She waived her hand haughtily, and the man crept toward the door.

"Stop!" she exclaimed. "Come back; I have something to say."

The man returned and stood awaiting her pleasure as before.

"I have said nothing to you," she murmured slowly, "of keeping the secret of this night's business. I have asked no oath from you, for I know that such as you break your oaths as lightly as you take them. You have been well paid for what you have done, have you not?"

"Yes, madam."

"And it was done of your own free will?"

"Yes, madam."

"You will keep your secret then, remember, for your own sake, not for mine. You understand me?"

"Yes, madam," answered the man, lifting his eyes for the first time, and looking the woman full in the face, "I understand you perfectly now, and shall not forget a word that you've said."

"Go then," said Miss Ovington, coldly, "since you understand. Yet stay—one word more. On my marriage, you will leave my father's service and enter that of the General. You will be better paid than you have been here."

The man bowed low.

"You are very good, madam," he said. "I want no thanks; go!"

She followed the servant to the door and closed and locked it as noiselessly as she had opened it.

"The General will not see the traces of to-night's business in my face to-morrow. I am safe now!"

CHAPTER IV
THE MIDDNIGHT GUY.

The Oak Street Station was brightly lighted all night long, according to custom, and the blinds were partly drawn.

The organ had been busy in the latter part of the evening, booking the miserable wretches brought before him, most of them in various degrees of intoxication, and now, in the early morning, he sat quietly reading the newspaper.

For an hour he was undisturbed, then the outer door swung open and a young man hastily entered. He was light, well-built, and of medium height. A loose-fitting cape protected his shoulders from the chill air, and a black sash but partly concealed his classic forehead.

With quick breath, he addressed the sergeant.

"Sir," he said, "there has been a murder committed!"

The officer dropped his paper and looked up, stolidly, at the speaker.

"I am not here to make a charge, but to ask help at once!" cried the young man, following up his first statement before the sedate sergeant had an opportunity to speak.

"Take it easy, sir," said the officer, calmly, tapping a bell at his side. "Where did the affair occur?"

"Down at the river front. I was passing along South street, and as I came near Peck Slip I heard a groan. I looked across the street, and saw a man at that moment push another into the water and run. I set up a cry and started in pursuit; but the man was too fleet of foot."

"Did you call for the police?" said the sergeant.

"No; I was so horror-stricken that I thought of nothing but running him down, and getting him in my grasp."

The official shook his head and again tapped the bell.

"Can you describe the man whom you saw run away?"

"Only his dress," replied the young man; "for I could not get a look at his features—he was at too great a distance ahead."

The two policemen who had been summoned were dispatched with the young man who had given the information to the scene of the trouble.

After half an hour's search about the docks, by the aid of lanterns, the men returned to the station as wise as when they left it.

No one on board the vessels moored along the docks had heard any unusual noise. Not a single soul except the breathless young man seemed to know aught about the murder or attempt at murder.

The sergeant asked a dozen or two questions and then bade the young man a peremptory "good morning," thus giving him to understand that he wished to hear nothing more of what he termed "a delusion."

Later in the day, the young man who had caused the police so much trouble wended his way to the residence of Clarence Suydam.

He asked for Clarence, and was admitted immediately by the servant of the house.

He walked slowly up the stairs and entered the studio quietly—a place in which he and Clarence had passed many happy hours.

He found the once pleasant room deserted. The pictures were all turned to the wall, and a black curtain hung over the easel—the easel upon which still remained the unfinished portrait of Miss Ovington.

"Dead!" he exclaimed. "Clarence, my friend—my life-long friend—dead! This is indeed a bitter blow!"

He sank into a chair near the easel, and covered his face with his hands.

He scarcely knew how long he had remained seated in this melancholy attitude when the curtains between the two apartments were slowly drawn apart, and Clarice appeared, standing in the opening between them.

Her white face was more colorless than the purest marble; her large dark eyes gazing from this white face had a terrible and stony expression.

"Ah, Mr. Dalton, you have returned!" she exclaimed, clasping her slender hands and slowly approaching the young man.

"It was surely an all-wise Providence which directed your footsteps hither, for I have need of a friend."

"I know all!" answered the young man. "I ask you no question, for your answer could tell me nothing which I have not already learned from the aspect of this once familiar room. Those pictures turned from the light of day, that gloomy drapery upon the easel, the closed shutters, and the darkened chamber—all speak of one calamity—death. Clarence Suydam is dead. Do not distress yourself to tell me the terrible truth, Clarice; I know all."

The young girl answered with a mocking laugh—a laugh horribly discordant in its tone.

"You know all!" she exclaimed. "You know nothing of the bitterness of my despair!"

"What can I know more than that Clarence is dead?" asked Mr. Dalton.

"There are many kinds of death," replied Clarice, with an icy despair that was dreadful to look upon.

"In Heaven's name, what mean you, Clarice?" exclaimed the young man.

"I mean that my cousin Clarence Suydam, has been murdered!"

"Murdered!" gasped the young man. "Murdered!" he repeated in a hoarse whisper.

"Yes," answered Clarice—"brutally, treacherously murdered!"

"Clarice, what do you mean?"

"Clarence left here last night, promising, if alive, to return at eleven o'clock. He has not returned, and you know he never yet broke a promise."

"Never," replied the young man. "But you could have any motive for so horrible a deed?"

"What motive?" she repeated, with a smile of dark meaning. "Ay, what indeed?"

"Tell me all, Clarice," said the young man. "You cannot doubt my interest in him that concerns my old friend, or my eagerness to aid you in the endeavor to ascertain his fate."

"Seat yourself here, then," replied Clarice—"here, opposite this easel, for there is something hidden by that curtain which I will show you when the time comes."

"His portrait?"

"No; the portrait of a woman. Within the year that followed your departure for England, Clarence was engaged by a wealthy gentleman to give lessons in painting to his daughter—a beauty and a woman of fashion, very young, very amiable, and very much beloved by those who know her. You know Clarence Suydam's enthusiastic nature; you will not therefore be surprised to hear that he fell in love with this woman."

"And she returned his affection?"

"She did, or she pretended to do so. Clarence confided in me; he told me all—his happiness in the present, his hope in the future. She had sworn to share his humble fortunes in spite of all the world—in defiance of the harsh code of society which reserves beauty and wealth for its own station. They were betrothed. They met often, but secretly; and, when separated for any length of time, they corresponded—still secretly. This endured without interruption until yesterday, when my cousin's idol came here to tell him with her own lips—with the calm insolence of her class—that she was false to every vow she had ever uttered."

"Infamous woman!" muttered Mr. Dalton. "More than this, she demanded of him the letters she had written to him during the past year—letters that would have eternally compromised her had they fallen into the hands of her betrothed husband. These letters Clarence refused to restore; nay, more, he swore that he would deliver them to General Dumont, the man she was to marry."

"But what has this to do with your cousin's disappearance?" exclaimed Mr. Dalton. "Clarence Suydam looked at him for a few moments in silence."

"Perhaps nothing," she murmured—"perhaps much!"

She then told the young man of the letter which Clarence had received upon the previous night—the letter which invited him to the meeting from which he had not returned.

"Have you that letter in your possession?" asked Mr. Dalton.

"No; Clarence had it in his pocket when he left the house," answered Clarice. "I went early this morning to the hotel named in that letter, and found that no one of that name had been staying there. The people belonging to the house were very willing to give me all the information in their power, but they could throw little light upon the mystery. They told me that a person had walked into the dining-room at a quarter past eight, and had given a card to the waiter with the name of Spencer written upon it. A gentleman will call here at half-past eight to ask for me," this man said; "you can tell him that I am waiting for him here." At half-past eight, a person answering my cousin's description came in and was shown at once to the dining-room; ten minutes afterward, the two men left the house together."

"And this is all you could ascertain?"

"Yes, all, James—all!"

"When your cousin Clarence left this house did he carry with him the letters which the lady had asked him to surrender?"

"He did. He told me once he always carried her letters about him in a sealed packet.

"They are dearer to me than my life," he said, "and I will never part with them but with life!"

"Does this lady know of your cousin's disappearance?"

"She has heard nothing from me," answered Clarice; "but I am satisfied that she knows of Clarence's disappearance."

"Strange!" the young man said, thoughtfully.

Then a cold chill ran through his veins, and a horrible suspicion—a suspicion that he would not utter—flashed through his brain.

"Look at her face," said Clarice, lifting the curtain from before the picture, "and tell me if you can read the secrets of this woman's soul!"

James Dalton gazed long at the beautiful miniature.

"The face is that of an angel!" he exclaimed; "no shadow of wrong can lurk beneath the light of those radiant blue eyes."

Clarice laughed scornfully as she dropped the black drapery over the easel.

"That is ever man's reasoning," she said; "do you forget that the Marchioness de Brinvilliers was as lovely as a Hebe—that Lucretia Borgia was more beautiful than Juno? The face is but a mask, the more completely hidden is the heart beneath."

"Hark!" exclaimed the young man. "I heard a carriage stopping at the door below. Can it be any tidings of Clarence?"

"No; those who have destroyed Clarence Suydam are above suspicion. It is not to the police that I must look for help."

She walked to the window and looked out. "It is Miss Ovington's carriage!" she exclaimed. "What can have brought her here? Nay, do not stir, James," she added, as the young man was about to leave the room. "I told you that I should have need of your aid. Wait! wait and watch!"

The room was in shadowy obscurity, only illuminated by long rays of light, which streamed through the narrow apertures between the shutters, which were left a little way open to admit this light. James Dalton seated himself in the shadow; Clarice Suydam remained standing before the easel.

Miss Maud Ovington drew back with a gesture of astonishment as she entered this half-darkened room.

"What, in mercy's name, does this mean?" she exclaimed.

"It means, Miss Ovington," answered Clarice, "that my cousin, Clarence Suydam, is dead!"

"Dead?"

"Yes. You are surprised, are you not?"

"Terribly surprised," said Miss Ovington, sinking into a chair, and holding her handkerchief before her face.

"And yet his life or death could be of little consequence to you," replied Clarice, "since you had proved your indifference to him by deserting him for a wealthier suitor."

"You are very cruel to me, Miss Suydam," said Miss Maud Ovington, removing the handkerchief from her face, and lifting her bright blue eyes, with a piteous expression, toward the inflexible countenance of Clarice; "but I will not speak of that now. Tell me, for mercy's sake, when and how did your cousin die?"

"You were here yesterday, Miss Ovington?" answered Clarice, solemnly.

"I was."

"My cousin, Clarence Suydam, died upon the night succeeding your visit—last night!"

"His death, then, was terribly sudden, for he was in perfect health when I saw him. In Heaven's name, Miss Suydam, speak out—how did your cousin die?"

"Shall I speak out, Miss Ovington?" asked Clarice, with peculiar emphasis upon her words.

"Yes."

"No, Miss Maud Ovington, it is too soon yet for plain speaking. I decline to tell you anything respecting my poor, unhappy cousin, but that he is dead."

There was silence for some minutes, during which Miss Ovington seemed to be thinking deeply.

"Miss Suydam," she said, after this pause, "it is in your power to grant me a very great favor."

"Indeed, madam?"

"Will you grant it?"

"Perhaps—when I know what it is."

"Your cousin had in his possession a number of letters written to him by me before my engagement to the General. All papers belonging to Mr. Suydam have no doubt passed into your hands since his death. Will you return those letters to me?"

"I cannot, Miss Ovington."

"You cannot?"

"No, I cannot, because those letters are not in my possession. Clarence Suydam had no secrets from me—we were as brother and sister—and I know that he carried the packet containing your letters about him until the hour of his death."

The rays of sunlight streaming through the narrow openings in the shutter shone full upon the face of Miss Ovington. Clarice Suydam saw that face change to the color of alabaster.

"He carried the letters about with him at the time of his death!" exclaimed Miss Ovington. "Are you sure?"

"I am sure."

"You could swear it?"

"With my dying breath, if it were necessary."

"Enough, Miss Suydam. I have asked you these questions and you have answered them candidly. I will distress you no longer by my presence, which must help to remind you of your grief. Good morning."

The accomplished woman of fashion bowed and swept from the room.

She descended the stairs and hurried to her carriage, which was waiting for her at the door of the house.

"To Brooklyn," she said to the coachman, who assisted her into the vehicle.

This coachman was the man whom she had called William upon the previous night.

The man turned pale as Maud Ovington gave this order.

"Madam," he said, in a low, warning voice, "not there, surely. You forget the danger."

"Less danger than in trusting to a hypocrite," she answered coldly. "I have reason to think you have deceived me."

"You wish to see him then?" said William.

"I do."

"Then you shall see him, and from his lips you shall hear that I have spoken the truth. But you cannot see him until to-night. There would be danger to us both in that place before dark."

Miss Ovington shrugged her shoulders impatiently.

"Let it be so, then," she said. "To-night, after dark."

CHAPTER V
THE MYSTERIOUS MESSAGE.

Among the lions of New York society was General Granby Dumont, of the United States Army, a man of about thirty-five; that is to say, in the fairest and fullest period of man's life. An accomplished gentleman, a statesman and a soldier, Granby Dumont was one of those men who add lustre to society. It was little wonder, then, that he should be proud, not with the paltry pride of the purse-proud parvenu, but with the noble sentiment of a high-born gentleman, who scorned a mean or dishonorable action.

He had reached the age of thirty-five without having married, because he had never met with any woman whom he had considered worthy to bear his idolized widowed mother's proud name.

But in Miss Maud Ovington he thought that he beheld all that was perfect in woman—youth, beauty, innocence, candor, truth, all that can make even the highest rank yet more elevated by adding to it the inherent nobility of virtue.

He believed this, and he made an offer of his hand to her who was already mistress of his heart.

He was accepted, and he believed that he was also loved. He little knew how seldom the heart goes with the hand among the household flowers of the world—the artificially-cultured beauties of fashionable life.

The soft blue eyes met his with a loving light in their azure depths. The rosy lips were parted in a gentle smile. Was it possible he could look so deceit in such a face?

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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