

EPICRAM.

There are some spirits nobly just, unwarp'd by self or pride; Great in the calm, but greater still when dashed by adverse tide; They hold the rank no king can give, no station can disgrace— Nature puts forth her gentlemen, and monarchs must give place.

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 huge 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 monkish ruin.

We were all members of the company of the Theater 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 theater, 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 Tony 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 a 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 shrank from asserting, with an obstinacy that no argument could overcome; and on this night, excited by a spirit of defiance to my friends, I expressed them with a bigotry and contempt that was anything 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 trickeries 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 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 a 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 mystic influence is powerless over disbelievers. Oh, I know all the jargon!"

And I cast a triumphant glance round 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."

that I was myself 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, that 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 his face, and Arnold 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 visitings 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 staring 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 following, seemingly impelled by an involuntary but resistless impulse. I stopped suddenly; he stopped.

"What is your name?" I asked, imperatively. In a forced, hollow voice, he gave one, that I afterward 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.

"Oh! yes," added a lady, "it is too horrible!" The interruption seemed to exorcise the fiend that possessed me, and call 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 and forced jollity 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 tacit understanding, no one made any reference to his strange illness; indeed, all seemed desirous for a time of putting it out of their thoughts—and none so much as the principal actor in it, who laughed and jested 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.

Arnold 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 theater. 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 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 vis-a-vis, staring into each other's eyes. In less than a minute there was in his the 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 cravingly 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 theater to come and stay with me. The following afternoon he strolled in as usual, but, finding I had a companion, he looked very much 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 relieved, for I now began to entertain hopes that he would persecute me no more. The change that had come over him was a constant subject of green-room comment. He had always been extremely thin; now 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 rims round his eyes.

After a few days, my friend returned to her own lodgings. The next afternoon, at the usual hour, Arnold came as before. 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 almost unquerable. Matters went on thus for upward of a week.

"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 in my own defense—he 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 within the meshes of the spell I had unconsciously cast upon him.

One afternoon Arnold arrived rather earlier than usual. There certainly was some occult sympathy between us, for the moment he entered the room I felt that a crisis had come. He was in very weak health, and he sank down in a chair looking pale and exhausted, and wiped 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 ill 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 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. "Oh, yes, I have seen a doctor; but he can do me no good. It is you who are killing me."

"I!" I ejaculated, 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 looks, but replied, with a great show of firmness:

"You talk nonsense, Arnold. Why, you are a married man already!"

I did not know at the moment that it was really so, but there was a vague impression among the company that such was the case, and it was upon that authority that I spoke.

"How did you know that—you questioned me when I was under your influence?" he retorted, sharply.

"I did not; but I find it is 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:

"Alice"—he had come to call me by my Christian name—"if anything were to happen to her—if she were to die—would you be my wife?"

"Don't talk like that! It's too horrible!" I exclaimed, starting away from him.

But he followed me, and again grasped my arm, and said:

"Alice, 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 dank hair clinging about it.

"It is not much to ask of you," he went on, pleadingly. "Why, she may outlive us both; more than likely. There is nothing shocking in 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 can't live without, that I won't live without."

Well, I gave him the promise. I daresay you will consider it very wicked of 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 low well-known knock at the street door. I put down the cup of coffee that I had raised halfway to my lips, while an unaccountable dread stole over me. One glance at his countenance as he entered the room told me that something had happened. He did not look at me, nor even exchange a greeting, as he laid down his hat and took a chair.

"I have strange news to tell you, Alice," he said, in a voice thick and indistinct with 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.

Meantime he had taken from his breast-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 its contents.

"You knew what was going to happen—you have cruelly entrapped me!" I bitterly exclaimed.

He threw himself upon his knees at my feet. "I swear most solemnly," he cried, "I did not! It was very sudden, as the letter will tell you—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 there fully confirmed.

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

I implored him to release me from my promise, as nothing good could come of a marriage contracted under such auspices; but he only repeated the old words:

"I cannot live without you, and I won't!"

My friend, who could perceive how ill-assorted we were, did all in her power to persuade me to break with Arnold.

"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 so suddenly called upon me to fulfill.

No, I am wrong. I did not love him; it was a glamour only—whether the result of supernatural influence or mere superstition, I cannot pretend to say. It was a mixture of dread, repulsion, and fascination.

That day two months was our wedding-day. I had striven hard to postpone it to a much later date, but he would not give me a moment's peace until I consented.

"She was my wife only in name," he kept urging, "so what need is there of delay?"

Although the strange manner of our wooing was unknown to everybody, save the friend I have before mentioned, it was impossible for the company not to see how matters stood between us. Somehow we had drifted away from the rest, and now kept aloof from them, and only an occasional hint, or innuendo, or sly look, told us of their observation. I know we were the constant theme of conversation and wonderment, but I do not think that any one ever dreamed it would be a match.

We were both equally desirous of keeping our approaching marriage a profound secret. My friend, and one of the actors, whom Arnold had almost sworn to secrecy, were to be the only witnesses, so that when on that bright March morning we entered the quiet suburban church, only a few strange loiterers were there. We were dressed in our ordinary costumes, and no one who had met us would have suspected our purpose. When he passed the ring over my finger, his hand was like ice; so were his lips, that just touched mine at the end of the ceremony; and I saw no joy in the livid face, that was as expressionless as though carved in stone.

We walked back from the church to my lodgings, where we were to be domiciled for the present. He scarcely spoke the whole way. He left me at the door, saying that he was obliged to go somewhere, but that he would return in time for dinner, which was arranged for three o'clock.

I ran up stairs to my bed-room, my heart ready to burst with mortification, and had a good cry. My friend did all she could to console me, and urged me to put a cheerful face on matters. After a while I rallied a little, went down stairs, sat down to the piano, and played and sang to pass away the time.

Three o'clock came and passed, and still he did not return. Then his friend, who had remained with us, went in search of him. In about half an hour he came back, bringing Arnold with him. He afterward told me that he had found him playing cards and recklessly treating everybody who entered the room at a tavern used by the actors. I always possessed a great deal of self-control, and I kept myself quite tranquil.

It had been arranged that we should sup at my friend's lodgings, and thither, after the performance, for we played that night, we went. There were only four of us—the four present at the ceremony. Arnold was dull and sullen, and at times seemed scarcely conscious of where he was, for, when addressed, he would start and look vacantly about him, like one suddenly aroused from a doze.

It was well toward morning before we turned our faces homeward. Silently he pursued his way; and I was too proud to speak. But oh, the agony, the shame, the humiliation I endured that night! When we arrived at our lodgings, the fire was out. It was a very chilly night, and he complained of being cold, and said he would rekindle it. While he went away seeking some wood in the kitchen, I ran up stairs to my room and went to bed. At last my aching, swollen eyes closed, and I fell asleep.

When I awoke, the cold gray dawn of the Spring morning was just stealing across the darkness of my room. I awoke with a start and sat bolt upright, with a sense of ineffable horror. Had I been dreaming? I could not remember. Yet there was upon me all the terror which is left by some ghastly nightmare.

I leaped out of bed, huddled on a dressing-gown, and with bare feet hurried down the stairs. It was an impulse, nothing more, for I had no thought in what I was doing. I opened the parlor door and looked in. All was dark and silent.

"He has gone to sleep upon the sofa," was my reflection.

My woman's pride prompted me to return to my chamber, but some other feeling held me rooted to the spot. The chinks of the shutters were penciled with faint lines of light. I crossed the room, unbarred and threw them open, and looked up at the sky. The waning moon was high in the heavens, over which a faint roseate flush was just stealing, and a wild chorus of birds in the trees close by alone broke the deep stillness of the early morning. I stood gazing upon the picture for some seconds, not because I felt its beauty, but because I dared not turn my head.

When, after a time, I summoned up resolution to do so, it was slowly, and by degrees. First my eyes fell upon the sofa; that was empty; then they traveled toward the hearth. The fire had burned into a great hollow, gray and brown within, black above. I could see only a portion of the grate, as an easy-chair was drawn in front of it. There was something in the chair, something lolling sideways; and there was a coat-sleeve with a hand dangling across one arm. I could feel my hair bristle and my heart stand still as I crept up to it, and saw a huddled heap of clothing, in which was half buried a livid, hair-strewn face. It was my husband—dead.

NOTE.—This story is not only founded upon facts, but the events happened almost exactly as they are related here.—Temple Bar.