

Mother of Pearl



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by **Fitz James O'Brien**



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I met her in India, when, during an eccentric course of travel, I visited the land of palankeens and hookahs.

She was a slender, pale, spiritual-looking girl. Her figure swayed to and fro when she walked, like some delicate plant brushed by a very gentle wind. Her face betokened a rare susceptibility of nervous organization. Large, dark, gray eyes, spanned by slender arches of black eyebrows; irregular and mobile features. A mouth large and singularly expressive, and conveying vague hints of a sensual nature whenever she smiled. The paleness of her skin could hardly be called paleness; it was rather a beautiful transparency of texture, through the whiteness of which one beheld the under-glow of life, as one sees the fire of a lamp hazily revealed through the white ground-glass shade that envelops it. Her motions were full of a strange and subtle grace. It positively sent a thrill of an indefinable nature through me to watch her moving across a room. It was perhaps a pleasurable sensation at beholding her perform so ordinary an act in so unusual a manner. Every wanderer in the fields has been struck with delight on beholding a tuft of thistle-down flouting calmly through the still atmosphere of a summer's day. She possessed in the most perfect degree this aerial serenity of motion. With all the attributes of body she teemed to move as if disembodied. It was a singular and paradoxical combination of the Real and the Ideal, and therein I think lay the charm.

Then her voice. It was like no voice that I ever heard before. It was low and sweet—but how many hundreds of voices have I heard that were as low and just as sweet! The charm lay in something else. Each word was uttered with a sort of dove-like “coo”—pray do not laugh at the image, for I am striving to express what after all is perhaps inexpressible. However, I

mean to say that the harsh gutturals and hissing dentals of our English tongue were enveloped by her in a series of vocal plumage, so that they flew from her lips—not like pebbles or snakes, as they do from mine and yours, but like humming-birds, soft and round and imbued with a strange fascination of sound.

We fell in love and married, and Minnie agreed to share my travel for a year, after which we were to repair to my native place in Maine and settle down into a calm, loving country life.

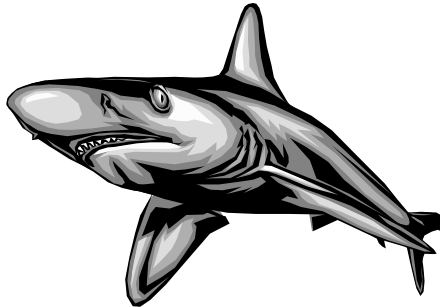
It was during this year that our little daughter Pearl was born. The way in which she came to be named Pearl was this:

We were cruising in the Bay of Condatchy, on the west coast of Ceylon, in a small vessel which I had hired for a month's trip to go where I listed. I had always a singular desire to make myself acquainted with the details of the pearl fishery, and I thought this would be a good opportunity: so with my wife and servants and little nameless child—she was only three months old—on whom, however, we showered daily a thousand unwritable love-titles, I set sail for the grounds of a celebrated pearl fishery.

It was a great although an idle pleasure to sit in one of the small coasting boats in that cloudless and serene climate, floating on an unruffled sea, and watch the tawny natives, naked, with the exception of a small strip of cotton cloth wound around their loins, plunge into the marvelously clear waters, and after having shot down far beyond sight, as if they had been lead instead of flesh and blood, suddenly break above the surface after what seemed an age of immersion, holding in their hands a basket filled with long, uncouthly-shaped bivalves, any of which might contain a treasure great as that which Cleopatra wasted in her goblet. The oysters being flung into the boat, a

brief breathing spell was taken, and then once more the dark-skinned diver darted down like some agile fish to recommence his search. For the pearl oyster is by no means to be found in the prodigal profusion in which his less aristocratic brethren, the Mill Ponds and Blue Points and Chinkopins, exist. He is rare and exclusive, and does not bestow himself liberally. He, like all high-horn castes, is not prolific.

Sometimes a fearful moment of excitement would overtake us. While two or three of the pearl-divers were under water, the calm glassy surface of the sea would be cleft by what seemed the thin blade of a sharp knife, cutting through the water with a calm, even, deadly motion. This we knew to be the dorsal



fin of the man-eating shark. Nothing can give any idea of the horrible symbolism of that back fin. To a person utterly unacquainted with the habits of the monster, the silent, stealthy, resistless way in which that membranous blade divided the water, would inevitably suggest a cruelty swift, unappeasable, relentless. This may seem exaggerated to any one who has not seen the spectacle I speak of. Every sea-faring man will admit its truth. When this ominous apparition became visible all on Lard the fishing boat were instantly in a state of excitement. The water was beat-

en with oars until it foamed. The natives shouted aloud with the moist unearthly yells; missiles of all kinds were flung at this Seeva of the ocean, and a relentless attack was kept up on him until the poor fellows groping below showed their mahogany faces above the surface. We were so fortunate as not to have been the spectators of any tragedy, but we knew from hearsay that it often happened that the shark—a fish, by-the-way, possessed of a rare intelligence—quietly bided his time, until the moment the diver broke water, when there would be a lightning-like rush, a flash of the white belly as the brute turned on his side to snap, a faint cry of agony from the victim, and then the mahogany face would sink convulsed never to rise again, while a great crimson clot of blood would hang suspended in the calm ocean, the red memorial of a sudden and awful fatality.

One breathless day we were floating in our little boat at the pearl fishery watching the diving. “We” means my wife, myself, and our little daughter, who was nestled in the arms of her “aya” or colored nurse. It was one of those tropical mornings the glory of which is indescribable. The sea was so transparent that the boat in which we lay, shielded front the sun by awnings, seemed to hang suspended in air. The tufts of pink and white coral that studded the bed of the ocean beneath were as distinct as if they were growing at our feet. We seemed to be gazing upon a beautiful parterre of variegated candy tuft. The shores fringed with palms and patches of gigantic species of cactus, which was then in bloom, were as still and serene as if they had been painted on glass. Indeed the whole landscape looked like a beautiful scene beheld through a glorified stereoscope. Eminently real as far as detail went, but fixed and motionless as death. Nothing broke the silence save the occasional plunge of the divers into the water, or the noise of the large

oysters falling into the bottom of the boats. In the distance, on a small narrow point of land, a strange crowd of human beings was visible. Oriental pearl merchants, Fakeers selling amulets, Brahmins in their dirty white robes, all attracted to the spot by the prospect of gain (as fish collect round a handful of bait flung into a pond), bargaining, cheating, and strangely mingling religion and lucre. My wife and I lay back on the cushions that lined the after-part of our little boat, languidly gazing on the sea and the sky by turns.



Suddenly our attention was aroused by a great shout, which was followed by a volley of shrill cries from the pearl-fishing boats. On turning in that direction the greatest excitement was visible among the different crews. Hands were pointed. While teeth glittered in the sun, and every dusky form was gesticulating violently. Then two or three Negroes seized some long poles and commenced beating the water violently. Others flung gourds and calabashes and odd pieces of wood and stones in the direction of a particular spot that lay between the nearest fishing-boat and ourselves. The only thing visible in this spot

was a black, sharp blade, thin as the blade of a pen-knife, that appeared slowly and evenly cutting through the sill water. No surgical instrument ever glided through human flesh with a more silent, cruel calm. It needed not the cry of "Shark! Shark!" to tell us what it was. In a moment we had a vivid picture of that unseen monster, with his small, watchful eyes, and his huge mouth with its double row of fangs, presented before our mental vision. There were three divers under water at this moment, while directly above them hung suspended this remorseless incarnation of Death. My wife clasped my hand convulsively, and became deathly pale. I stretched out the other hand instinctively, and grasped a revolver which lay beside me. I was in the act of cocking it when a shriek of unutterable agony from the ayah burst on our ears. I turned my head quick as a flash of lightning, and beheld her, with empty arms, hanging over the gunwale of the boat, while down in the calm sea I saw a tiny little face swathed in white sinking—sinking—sinking!

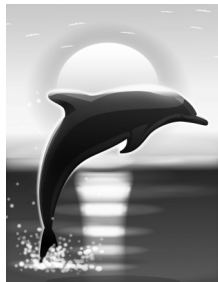
What are words to paint such a crisis? What pen, however vigorous, could depict the pallid, convulsed face of my wife, my own agonized countenance, the awful despair that settled on the dark fare of the *ayah* as we three beheld the love of our lives serenely receding from us forever in that impassible, transparent ocean? My pistol fell from my grasp. I, who rejoiced in a vigor of manhood such as few attain, was struck dumb and helpless. My brain whirled in its dome. Every outward object vanished from my sight, and all I saw was a vast translucent sea and one sweet face, rosy as a sea-shell, shining in its depths—shining with a vague smile that seemed to bid me a mute farewell as it floated away to death!

I was roused from a trance of anguish by the flitting of a dark form through the clear water, cleaving

its way swiftly toward that darling little shape that grew dimmer and dimmer every second as it settled in the sea. We all saw it, and the same thought struck us all. That terrible, deadly back fin was the key of our sudden terror. The shark! A simultaneous shriek burst from our lips. I tried to jump overboard, but was withheld by someone—little use had I done so, for I could not swim a stroke.

The dark shape glided on like a flash of light. It reached our treasure—in an instant all we loved on earth was blotted from our sight! My heart stood still. My breath ceased; life trembled on my lips. The next moment a dusky head shot out of the water close to our boat—a dusky head whose parted lips gasped for breath, but whose eyes shone with the brightness of a superhuman joy. The second after two tawny hands held a dripping white mass above water, and the dark head shouted to the boatmen. Another second, and the brave pearl diver had clambered in, and laid my little daughter at her mother's feet. This was the shark! This the man-eater! This hero in sun-burned hide, who, with his quick aquatic sight, had seen our dear one sinking through the sea, and had brought her up to us again, pale and dripping, but still alive!

What tears and what laughter fell on us three by turns as we named our gem rescued from the sea "Little Pearl"!



II

I had been about a year settled at my pleasant homestead in Maine when the great misfortune of my life fell upon me.

My existence was almost exceptional in its happiness. Independent in circumstances, master of a beautiful place, the natural charms of which were carefully seconded by art; married to a woman whose refined and cultivated mind seemed to be in perfect rapport with my own; and the father of the loveliest little maiden that ever tottered upon tiny feet — what more could I wish for? In the summertime we varied the pleasant monotony of our rustic life by flying visits to Newport and Nahant. In the winter a month or six weeks spent in New York, party-going and theatre-going, surfeited us with the rapid life of a metropolis, but gave us food for conversation for months to come. The intervals were well filled up with farming, reading, and the social intercourse into which we naturally fell with the old residents around us.

I said a moment ago that I was perfectly happy at this time. I was wrong. I was happy, but not perfectly happy. A vague grief overshadowed me. My wife's health gave me, at times, great concern. Charming and *spirituelle* as she was at the majority of occasions, there were times when she seemed a prey to a brooding melancholy. She would sit for hours in the twilight in what appeared to be a state of mental apathy, and at such times it was almost impossible to rouse her into even a moderate state of conversational activity. When I addressed her she would languidly turn her eyes on me, droop the eyelids over the eyeballs, and gaze at me with a strange expression that—I knew not why—sent a shudder through my limbs. It was in vain that I questioned her to ascertain if she suffered. She was perfectly well, she said, but weary. I consulted my old friend and neighbor, Doctor Melony,

but, after a careful study of her constitution, he proclaimed her, after his own fashion, to be "sound as a bell, Sir; sound as a bell!"

To me, however, there was a funereal tone in this "bell." If it did not toll of death, it at least proclaimed disaster. I cannot say why those dismal forebodings should have possessed me. Let who will explain the many presentiments of good and bad fortune which waylay men in the road of Life, as the witches used to waylay the traveler of old, and rise up in his path prognosticating and, it may be, cursing.

At times, though, Minnie, as if to cheat speculation, displayed a gayety and cheerfulness beyond all expectation. She would propose little excursions to noted places in our neighborhood, rustic "sprees," as it were, and no eyes in the party would be brighter, or no laugh more ringing than hers. Yet these bright spots were but checkers on a life of gloom. Days passed in moodiness and silence. Nights of restless tossing on the conch. And ever and anon that strange furtive look following me as I went to and fro!

As the year slowly sailed through the green banks of summer into the flaming scenery of the fall, I resolved to make some attempt to dissipate this melancholy under which my wife so obviously laboring.

"Minnie," I said to her one day, "I feel rather dull. Let us go to New York for a few weeks."

"What for?" she answered, turning her face round slowly until her eyes rested on mine—eyes still filled with that inexplicable expression. "What for? To amuse ourselves? My dear Gerald, how can New York amuse you? We live in a hotel, each room of which is a stereotyped copy of the other. We get the same bill of fare—with a fresh date—every day for dinner. We go to parties that are a repetition of the parties we went to last year. The same thin-legged young man leads 'the German,' and one could almost imagine

that the stewed terrapin which you get for supper had been kept over from the previous winter. There is no novelty—no nothing.”

“There is a novelty, my dear,” I said, although I could not help smiling at her languid dissection of a New York season. “You love the stage, and a new and, as I am told, a great actress has appeared there. I, for my part, want to see her.”

“Who is she? But, before you answer, I know perfectly well what a great American dramatic novelty is. She has been gifted by nature with fine eyes, a good figure, and a voice that has a tolerable scale of notes. Someone, or something, puts it into her head that she was born into this world for the special purpose of interpreting Shakespeare. She begins by reciting to her friends in a little village, and, owing to their encouragement, determines to take lessons from some broken-down actor, who ekes out an insufficient salary by giving lessons in elocution. Under his tuition—as she would under the instruction of any professor of that abominable art known as ‘elocution’—she learns how to display her voice at the expense of the sense of the author. She thinks of nothing but rising and falling inflections, swimming entrances and graceful exits. Her idea of great emotion is hysterics, and her acme of by-play is to roll her eyes at the audience. You listen in vain for a natural intonation of the voice. You look in vain on the painted—over-painted—face for a single reflex of the emotions depicted by the dramatist. Emotions that, I am sure, when he was registering them on paper, flitted over his countenance and thrilled his whole being as the auroral lights shimmer over the heavens, and send a vibration through all nature! My dear husband, I am tired of your great American actress. Please go and buy me half a dozen dolls.”

I laughed. She was in her cynical mood, and none

could be more sarcastic than she. But I was determined to gain my point.

"But," I resumed, "the actress I am anxious to see is the very reverse of the too-truthful picture you have painted. I want to see Matilda Heron."

"And who is Matilda Heron?"

"Well, I can't very well answer your question definitely, Minnie; but this I know, that she has come from somewhere out West, and fallen like a bomb-shell in New York. The metaphor is not too pronounced. Her appearance has been an explosion. Now you, *blasé* critic of actresses, here is a chance for a sensation! Will you go?"

"Of course I will, dear Gerald. But if I am disappointed, call on the gods to help you. I will punish you, if you mislead me, in some awful manner. I'll—write a play, or—go on the stage myself."

"Minnie," said I, kissing her smooth white forehead, "if you go on the stage you will make a most miserable failure. A good critic never yet made a good actor, and, *vice versa*, an actor, good or bad, never yet was a good critic."

III

We went to New York. Matilda Heron was then playing her first engagement at Wallack's Theatre. The day after I arrived I secured a couple of orchestra seats, and before the curtain rose Minnie and I were installed in our places—I full of anticipation; she, as all prejudging critics are, determined to be terribly severe if she got a chance.

We were both of us too well bred, too well brought up, too well educated, and too cosmopolitan to experience any qualms about the morality of the play. We had read it in the French under the title of *La Dome aux Camélias*, and it was now produced in dramatic form under the tide of "Camille."

If my wife did not get a chance for criticism, she at least got a sensation. Shall I be vulgar, and say that Miss Heron's first entrance "knocked her?" It was so wonderfully unconventional. The woman dared to come in upon that painted scene as if it really was the home apartment it was represented to be! She did not slide in with her face to the audience and wait for the mockery that is called "a reception." She walked in easily, naturally, unwitting of any outside eyes. The petulant manner in which she took off her shawl; the commonplace conversational tone in which she spoke to her servant, were revelations to Minnie and myself. Here was a daring reality. Here was a woman who, sacrificing for the moment all conventional prejudices, dared to play the Lorette as the Lorette herself pays her dramatic life, with all her whims, her passion, her fearlessness of consequences, her occasional vulgarities, her impertinence, her tenderness and self-sacrifice!

It was not that we did not see faults. Occasionally Miss Heron's accent was bad, and had a savor of Celtic origin. But what mattered accent, or what mattered elocution, when we felt ourselves in the presence of an inspired woman!

Did it ever strike a critic, who, when Hamlet is played, or Lady Macbeth, insists that the voice of the actor or actress must be melodious, to inquire of himself whether Hamlet in his lifetime was distinguished for a splendid vocal organ, or that Lady Macbeth was celebrated for the deep melody of her accents? Don't we require rather too much of the tootle-tootling of the voice in our dramatic artists? A pretty effect to which the vocal outbursts of nature are entirely sacrificed? But this is a story and not a dissertation on the drama. Suffice to say that, in common with my wife, I hate what is called elocution.

Miss Heron's "Camille" electrified both Minnie and

myself. My wife was particularly *bouleversée*. The artist we were beholding had not in a very marked manner any of those physical advantages which Minnie had predicated in her onslaught on the dramatic stars. It is true that Miss Heron's figure was commanding, and there was a certain powerful light in her eyes that startled and thrilled; but there was none of the beauty of the "favorite actress." The conquest that she achieved was purely intellectual and magnetic.

Of course we were present at the neat performance. It was "Madea." We then beheld the great actress under a new phase. In "Camille" she died for love; in "Medea" she killed for love. I never saw a human being so rocked by emotion as was my wife during the progress of this tragedy. Her countenance was a mirror of every incident and passion. She swayed to and fro under those gusts of indignant love that the actress sent forth from time to time, and which swept the house like a storm. When the curtain fell she sat trembling in the box—vibrating still with those thunders of passion that the swift lightnings of genius had awakened. She seemed almost in a dream, as I took her to the carriage, and during the drive to our hotel she was moody and silent. It was in vain that I tried to get her to converse about the play. That the actress was great she acknowledged in the briefest possible sentence. Then she leaned back and seemed to fall into a reverie from which nothing would arouse her.

I ordered supper into our sitting room, and made Minnie drink a couple of glasses of Champagne in the hope that it would rouse her into some state of mental activity. All my efforts, however, were without avail. She was silent and strange, and occasionally shivered as if penetrated with a sudden chill. Shortly after she pleaded weariness and retired for the night, leaving me puzzled more than ever by the strangeness

of her case.

An hour or two afterward when I went to bed I found Minnie apparently asleep. Never had she seemed more beautiful. Her lips were like a bursting rosebud about to blow under the influence of a perfumed wind, just parted as they were by the gentle breath that came and went. The long dark lashes that swept over her cheek gave a pensive charm to her countenance which was heightened by a rich stray of nutty hair that swept loosely across her bosom, tossed in the restlessness of slumber. I printed a light kiss upon her forehead, and with an unuttered prayer for her welfare lay down to rest.

I know not how long I had been asleep when I was awakened from a profound slumber by one of those indescribable sensations of mortal peril, which seem to sweep over the soul, and with as it were the thrill of its passage call louder than a trumpet, Awake! arouse! your life hangs by a hair! That this strange physical warning is in all cases the result of a magnetic phenomenon I have not the slightest doubt. To prove it, steal softly, ever so softly, to the bedside of a sleeper, and although no noise betrays your presence, the slumberer will almost invariably awaken, aroused by a magnetic perception of your proximity. How much more powerfully must the stealthy approach of one who harbors sinister designs affect the slumbering victim! An antagonistic magnetism hovers near; the whole of the subtle currents that coarse through the electrical machine known as Man are shocked with a powerful repulsion, and the sentinel mind whose guard has just been relieved, and which is slumbering in its quarters, suddenly hears the rappel beaten and leaps to arms.

In the midst of my deep sleep I sprang with a sudden bound upright in bed, with every faculty at its post. By one of those unaccountable mysteries of our

being, I realized, before my eyes could be by any possibility alive to external objects, the presence of a great Horror. Simultaneously with this conviction, or following it so quickly as to be almost twin with it, I beheld the vivid flash of a knife, and felt an acute pain in my shoulder. The next instant all was plain, as if the scene, instead of passing in a half-illuminated bedroom, had occurred in the full sunlight of the Orient. My wife was standing by my bedside, her hands firmly pinioned in mine, while on the white coverlet lay a sharp table-knife red with the blood which was pouring from a deep wound in my shoulder. I had escaped death by a miracle. Another instant and the long blade would have been driven through my heart.

I never was so perfectly self-possessed as on that terrible occasion. I forced Minnie to sit on the bed, while I looked calmly into her face. She returned my gaze with a sort of serene defiance.

“Minnie,” I said, “I loved you dearly. Why did you do this?”

“I was weary of you,” she answered, in a cold even voice—a voice so level that it seemed to be spoken on ruled lines, “that is my reason.”

Great Heavens! I was not prepared for this sanguinary calm. I had looked for perhaps some indication of somnambulism; I had vaguely hoped even for the incoherence or vehemence of speech which would have betokened a sudden insanity—any thing, every thing but this awful avowal of a deliberate design to murder a man who loved her better than the life she sought! Still I clung to hope. I could not believe that this gentle, refined creature could deliberately quit my side at midnight, possess herself of the very knife which had been used at the table, across which I lavished a thousand fond attentions, and remorselessly endeavor to stab me to the heart. It must be the act of

one insane or laboring under some momentary hallucination. I determined to test her farther. I adopted a tone of vehement reproach, hoping if insanity was smoldering in her brain to fan the embers to such a flame as would leave no doubt on my mind. I preferred that she should be mad than to feel that she hated me.

“Woman!” I thundered fiercely, “you must have the mind of a fiend to reply my love in this manner. Beware of my vengeance. Your punishment shall be tenible!”

“Punish me,” she answered; and oh! how serene and distant her voice sounded! “Punish me how and when you will. It will not matter much.” The tones were calm, assured, and tearless. The manner perfectly coherent. A terrible suspicion shot across my mind.

“Have I a rival?” I asked; “is it a guilty love that has prompted you to plan my death? If so, I am sorry you did not kill me.”

“I do not know any other man whom I love. I can not tell why it is that I do not love you. You are very kind and considerate, but your presence wearies me. I sometimes see vaguely, as in a dream, my ideal of a husband, but he has no existence save in my soul, and I suppose I will never meet him.”

“Mimie, you are mad!” I cried, despairingly.

“Am I?” she answered, with a faint, sad smile slowly overspreading her pale face like the dawn breaking imperceptibly over a cold gray lake. “Well, you can think so if you will. It is all one to me.”

I never beheld such apathy—such stoical indifference. Had she exhibited fierce rage, disappointment at her failure, a mad thirst for my life-blood, I would have preferred it to this awful stagnation of sensibility—this frozen stillness of the heart. I felt all my nature harden suddenly toward her. It seemed to myself as if

my face became fixed and stern as a bronze head.

“You are an inexplicable monster,” I said, in tones that startled myself, they were so cold and metallic; “and I shall not endeavor to decipher you. I will use every endeavor to ascertain, however, whether it is some species of insanity that has afflicted you, or whether you are ruled by the most vicious soul that ever inhabited a human body. You shall return to my house tomorrow, when I will place you under the charge of Doctor Melony. You will live in the strictest seclusion. I need not tell you that, after what has happened, you must henceforth be a stranger to your daughter. Hands crimsoned with her father’s blood are not those that I would see caressing her.”

“Very well. It is all one to me where I am, or how I live.”

“Go to bed.”

She went, calmly as a well-taught child, coolly turning over the pillow on which was sprinkled the blood from the wound in my shoulder, so as to present the under-side for her beautiful, guilty head to repose on; gently removed the murderous knife, which was still lying on the coverlet, and placed it on a little table by the side of the bed, and then without a word calmly composed herself to sleep.

It was inexplicable. I stanchd my wound and sat down to think.

What was the meaning of it all? I had in my life been over many lunatic asylums, and had, as one of the various items in my course of study, read much on the phenomena of insanity, which had always been exceedingly interesting to me for this reason; I thought that it may happen that only through the aberrated intellect was it that we could approach the secrets of the normal mind. The castle, fortified and garrisoned at every angle and loophole, guards its interior mysteries; it is only when the fortress crumbles

that we can force our way inside, and detect the secret of its masonry, its form, and the theory of its construction. But in all my researches I had never met with any symptoms of a diseased mind similar to these my wife exhibited. There was a uniform coherence that completely puzzled me. Her answers to my questions were complete and determinate — that is, they left no room for what is called “cross-examination.”

No man ever spent such a night of utter despair as I did watching in that dimly-lit chamber until dawn, while she, my would-be murderess, lay plunged in so composed and calm a slumber that she might have been a wearied angel rather than a self-possessed demon. The mystery of her guilt was maddening; and I sat hour after hour in my easy-chair, seeking in vain for a clew, until the dawn, spectral and gray, arose over the city. Then I packed up all our luggage, and wandered restlessly over the house until the usual hour for arising had struck.

On proceeding to my room I found my wife just completing her toilet. To my consternation and horror she flung herself into my arms as I entered.

“Oh, Gerald!” she cried, “I have been so frightened. What has brought all this blood on the pillow and the sheets? Where have you been? When I awoke and missed you, and discovered these stains, I knew not what to think. Are you hurt? What is the matter?”

I stared at her. There was not a trace of conscious guilt in her countenance. It was the most consummate acting. Its very perfection made me the more relentless.

“There is no necessity for this hypocrisy,” I said; “it will not alter my resolve. We depart for home today. Our luggage is packed, the bills are all paid. Speak to me, I pray you, as little as possible.”

“What is it? Am I dreaming? Oh! Gerald, my dar-

ling, what have I done, or what has come over you?" She almost shrieked these queries.

"You know as well as I do, you fair-faced monster. You tried to murder me last night, when I was asleep. There's your mark on my shoulder. A loving signature, is it not?"

I bared my shoulder as I spoke, and exposed the wound. She gazed wildly in my face for a moment, then tottered and fell. I lifted her up and placed her on the bed. She did not faint, and had strength enough left to ask me to leave her alone for a few moments. I quitted her with a glance of contempt, and went downstairs to make arrangements for our journey. After an absence of about an hour I returned to our apartments. I found her sitting placidly in an easy-chair, looking out of the window. She scarcely noticed my entrance, and, O God! the same old distant look was on her face!

"We start at three o'clock. Are you ready?" I said to her.

"Yes. I need no preparation." Evenly, calmly uttered, without even turning her head to look at me.

"You have recovered your memory, it seems," I sneered. "You wasted your histrionic talents this morning."

"Did I?" She smiled with the most perfect serenity, arranged herself more easily in her chair, and leaned back as if in a reverie. I was enraged beyond endurance, and left the room abruptly.

That evening saw us on our way home. Throughout the journey she maintained the same apathetic air. We scarcely exchanged a word. The instant we reached our house I assigned her to her apartments, forbidding her strictly to move from them, and dispatched a messenger for Doctor Melony. Minnie, on her part, took possession of her prison without a word. She did not even ask to see our darling little

Pearl, who was a thousand times more beautiful and engaging than ever.

Melony arrived, and I laid the awful facts before him. The poor man was terribly shocked.

“Depend on it, it’s opium,” he said. “Let me see her.”

An hour afterward he came to me.

“It’s not opium, and it’s not insanity,” he said; “it must be somnambulism. I find symptoms, however, that puzzle me beyond all calculation. That she is not in her normal condition of mind is evident; but I cannot discover the cause of this unnatural excitement. She is coherent, logical, but perfectly apathetic to all outward influences. At first I was certain that she was a victim of opium. Now I feel convinced that I was entirely wrong. It must be somnambulism. I will remain a few weeks in the house, and trust me to discover this mystery. Meanwhile she must be carefully watched.”

Melony was as good as his word. He watched her incessantly, and reported to me her condition. The poor man was dreadfully puzzled. The strictest surveillance failed to elicit the slightest evidence of her taking any stimulants, although she remained almost all the time in the apathetic state which was so terrible to behold. The Doctor endeavored to arouse her by reproaches for her attempt on my life. She, in return, only smiled, and replied that it was a matter in which she had no further interest. Not a trace of any somnambulist habit could be discovered.

I was thoroughly wretched. I secluded myself from all society but that of Melony; and had it not been for him and my darling little Pearl I am certain that I would have gone mad. The most of my days I spent wandering in the great woods which lay in the neighborhood of my farm, and my evenings I endeavored to divert with reading, or a chat with the good Doctor. Yet, talk of what we would, the conversation would

always return to the same melancholy topic. It was a maze of sorrow in which we invariably, no matter in what direction we wandered, brought up at the same spot.

IV

The Doctor and myself were sitting one evening, late, in my library, talking gloomily enough over my domestic tragedy. He was endeavoring to persuade me to look more brightly of the future; to dismiss, as far as possible, from my mind the accursed horror that dwelt in my home, and to remember that I had still a dear object left on which to center my affections.

This allusion to little Pearl, in such a mood as I was then in, only served to heighten my agony. I began immediately to revolve the chances that, were my wife's disease really insanity, would it not be perpetuated in my dear child? Melony, of course, pooh-poohed the idea; but with the obstinacy of grief I clung to it.

Suddenly a pause took place in the argument, and the dreary sounds that fill the air in the last nights of autumn swept around the house. The wind soughed through the tree-tops, which were now almost bare, as if moaning at being deprived of its leafy playmates. Inexplicable noises passed to and fro without the windows. Dead leaves rushed along the piazza like the rustle of the garments of ghosts. Chilly draughts came from unseen crevices, blowing on back and cheek till one felt as if some invisible lips were close behind, pouring malignant breaths on face and shoulder.

Suddenly the pause in our conversation was intruded on by a noise that we knew came neither from air or dry leaf. We heard sounding through the night the muffled tread of footsteps. I knew that, saving

ourselves, the household had long since retired to bed. By a simultaneous action we both sprang to our feet, and rushed to a door which opened into a long corridor leading to the nursery, and which communicated, by a series of rambling passages, with the main body of the home.

As we flung back the door a light appeared at the farther end, advancing slowly toward us. It was borne by a tall, white figure. It was my wife! Calm and stately, and with her wonderful serene step, she approached. My heart was frozen when I saw spots of blood on her hands and night-robe. I gave a wild cry, and rushed past her. In another instant I was in baby's room. The night-light was burning dimly; the colored nurse was sleeping calmly in her bed; while, in a little cot in another part of the room, I saw—ah! how tell it?—I can not! Well, little Pearl was murdered—murdered! My darling lay—

It was I who was now insane. I rushed out of the room back into the corridor to slay the fiend who had done this horrible deed. I had no mercy for her then. I would have killed her a thousand times over. Great God! She was leaning against the wall conversing calmly with the doctor as if nothing had happened; smoothing her hair with her reddened fingers, nonchalant as if at an evening party. I ran to her to crush her. Melony leaped between us.

“Stop,” he cried. “The secret is out.” As he spoke he held up a little silver box containing what seemed to be a greenish paste. “It is Hasheesh, and she is confessing!”

Her statement was the most awful thing I ever listened to. It was as deliberate as a lawyer's brief. She had contracted this habit in the East, she said, long before I knew her, and could not break it off. It wound her nature in chains of steel; by degrees it grew upon her, until it became her very life. Her existence lay as

it were in a nutshell, but that shell was to her a universe. One night, she continued, when she was under the influence of the drug, she went with me to see a play in which the wife abhors her husband and murders her children. It was "Medea." From that instant murder became glorified in her sight, through the medium of the spell-working drug. Her soul became rapt in the contemplation of the spilling of blood. I was to have been her first victim, Pearl her second. She ended by saying, with an ineffable smile, that the delight of the taking away of life was beyond imagination.

I suppose I must have fainted; for when I awoke from what seemed oblivion I found myself in bed with Doctor Melony by my side. He laid his finger on his lip, and whispered to me that I had been very ill, and must not talk. But I could not restrain myself.

"Where is she?" I muttered.

"Where she ought to be," he answered; and then I caught faintly the words, "private madhouse."

Oh, Hasheesh! Demon of a new Paradise, spiritual whirlwind, I know you now. You blackened my life, you robbed me of all I held dear; but you have since consoled me. You thought, wicked enchanter, that you had destroyed my peace forever. But I have won, through you yourself, the bliss you once blotted out. Vanish past! Hence present! Out upon actuality! Hand in hand, I walk with the conqueror of time, and space, and suffering. Bend all who hear me to his worship! ☼

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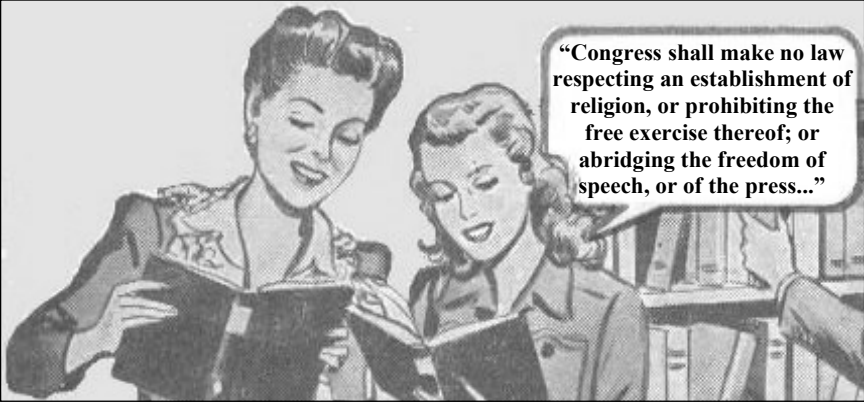
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