

Rainforth's Strange Case.

By WILL LIENBEE.

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(Continued from last week.)

CHAPTER III.

A thrill of horror went through the room. It was a moment long to be remembered in Mayburg.

The audience farthest away from the justice's desk only knew in a vague way what was taking place and strained their ears to catch every sound.

"Grace Dangerfield! It can't be so! My God, she could not have committed the deed!"

It was the agonized voice of Gerald Rainforth that broke the stillness, and leaping forward he knelt beside the woman's prostrate form.

"It is Grace Dangerfield of Darkwood Hall. She has confessed to committing the murder!" From lip to lip the words flew through the densely packed audience till the subdued murmur of many voices swelled into a continuous hum.

Hastening forward to where the prostrate woman lay, I bent over her. Her face was as pale as death, and she lay so motionless that I feared she was already dead. But presently the faint flutter of her pulse told that she still lived.

"She must be removed from this close room at once," I said, arising and addressing the sheriff. "Where shall we take her?"

The sheriff consulted the justice for a moment and then said: "Bring her into my house. I'll see that she's well cared for till she recovers."

Court was immediately adjourned, and then strong arms lifted the unconscious woman and bore her through a side door from the courthouse to the sheriff's dwelling that stood adjoining the jail a short distance away. She was deposited upon a lounge in the little back parlor, where the sheriff's wife—a kind, sympathetic woman—came forward, anxious to administer to the wants of the stranger.

I shall not go into the details of what immediately followed, save in a few hasty sentences. Miss Dangerfield recovered consciousness in a short time after being taken to the sheriff's home, but she immediately grew delirious with all the symptoms of brain fever. As a matter of form, she was placed under guard, but it was plainly evident that there would be little need of such, for there were several chances to one that she would never recover from the illness the great excitement had thrown her into. The housekeeper of Darkwood Hall, one of the patient's most trustworthy servants, came to assist in taking care of her mistress.

The sudden turn of affairs in the mysterious murder case was a seven days' wonder to the inhabitants of Mayburg. It was the all absorbing theme of every tongue. Yet the whole matter was veiled in as much mystery as it had been at the very outset. Since her startling declaration that she had committed the awful deed Miss Dangerfield had remained in such a condition as to make any explanation on her part impossible. So there was nothing to be done but to wait patiently for her recovery.

All sorts of reports and stories were set about, some of which were to the effect that she who had confessed to



"Grace Dangerfield! It can't be so!" the murder was insane. Others said that she was evidently trying to shield the young artist, who was the real criminal.

So strongly and so inconceivably mixed had the affair become that the justice refused to release Gerald Rainforth even on the heaviest bail till the whole matter could be subjected to a thorough investigation.

And thus matters stood. Miss Dangerfield lay at the point of death at the sheriff's home with but small chance of recovery, while Gerald Rainforth had been returned to the jail to wait further developments.

It was not until the day following the one on which occurred the dramatic scene in the courtroom that I found an opportunity to read the manuscript given me by Gerald Rainforth. It contained a strange, romantic story and was full of interest. I give it in full below.

GERALD RAINFORTH'S STORY. I hardly know why I write this, for nothing seems less likely at this moment than I shall ever find it necessary to give to the world the particulars of the incidents I am about to record, yet something seems to tell me that I am writing this for a purpose, but if it is ever given to another it will be to one who is my dearest friend and to whom some explanation of my past conduct is due.

After the death of my parents I spent four years in college, and then, having developed a taste for painting, I took up that art as a study, and for three years I received instructions from the best painters of Europe. Then I began traveling, and possessed of an ample fortune, with no near relatives with whom I might make my home, I drifted about

wherever fancy led. It was just three years ago last June that the series of incidents of which I shall write began to take place. I was in Rome at that time, whither I had gone to pursue my studies as an artist. Shortly after my arrival in the Eternal City I accidentally stumbled upon Ralph Redburn, a former schoolmate, who was an artist full of enthusiasm, and, I might add, airy dreams. He had his studio near the Piazza di Spagna, in what had doubtless once been a palace of considerable magnificence, but which was now so tumbled down and given to neglect as to resemble a barn more than a place for human habitation. But Ralph Redburn was eccentric and had a great passion for rains, especially when it came to paying rent, for rains rent very cheaply in Rome, and the young artist found it necessary to use economy.

By his urgent invitation I established myself in his studio, which might easily have accommodated a half dozen others, and by a liberal use of rugs and draperies I succeeded in making the place quite comfortable.

I had been three months in Rome and was beginning to feel a desire for a change of scene when one evening as I was strolling past the church of Trinita del Monte I saw a young lady emerge from the edifice and enter a carriage that stood in waiting. She was an American, I knew at the first glance, and was possessed of such rare loveliness of form and face that for a moment I stood staring after her as if stupefied. She was of medium height, with a complexion of the clearest olive, and eyes large and lustrous, with a hue of deep violet in their shadowy depths. She passed so close to me that I caught the faintest odor of the strange sweet perfume that clung to her garments. Then she entered the carriage and was driven rapidly away.

I stood there as if transfixed till the carriage had vanished from sight; then recovering myself, and noticing that my stupid staring had excited the attention of a group of beggars who were collected near the church entrance, I hastily drew a few pieces of silver from my pocket, and tossing them to the ragged mendicants I walked on.

But I could not forget the face of the strange beauty, and in spite of my efforts to banish her from my mind she would reappear before my mental vision with such frequency as to astonish even myself. For the next few days I spent a great deal of my time in the vicinity of the church of Trinita del Monte, but my visits to that neighborhood were unproductive of any result save to increase my desire to again behold her who had awakened in me an interest I had never before felt in woman.

In the next week that followed I think I must have searched for her through every portion of the city, yet I failed to discover the slightest trace of her. One evening nearly a month later something very strange happened. For more than an hour I had been sitting alone in the studio, puffing away at a cigar or indulging in reflections over the past. It had grown quite dark in the room when suddenly I seemed to become aware of a presence near me. Then the strangest thing happened—was I dreaming, or what was it that came to my vision? It seemed as if a door in the old ruined wall swung open, revealing the interior of a room beyond. There were two persons in the room—one a stoutly built man of about 50; the other a young girl—who whom I had seen at the church of Trinita del Monte! She was half reclining upon a luxurious couch, while one white arm, from which the loose flowing sleeve had fallen back, rested affectionately upon the shoulder of the man whose easy chair was drawn close to her side. Presently the man turned and laid his arm about the girl's waist, and although I heard no sounds the expression of his face and the movements of his lips told me that he was speaking to her upon some subject of grave importance.

Her face was turned to his, and I could plainly see traces of sorrow and pain depicted upon her countenance. Then apparently the man ceased speaking and fixed a look of entreaty upon the beautiful girl. Suddenly she lifted her hand above her head, her lips moved, while a strange look of pain and determination crossed her face. Then the man caught her in his arms and pressed a kiss upon her brow.

A moment later the scene changed. The man was alone in his easy chair. Suddenly the door opened, and an evil visaged man of perhaps 28 years entered. As he entered the other rose from his chair with a violent start, rage and astonishment upon his face. With a quick gesture the older man pointed to the door, but was met with a smile of scorn from the other. The next instant he strode forward and grasped the intruder by the arm as if to eject him from the house. A ferocious light gleamed in the eye of the young man. Then, disengaging himself from the grasp upon his arm, he dealt his adversary a blow in the temple. The old man reeled backward, then sank down in a heap upon the floor. The other stood over him for several moments as if stupefied; then bending down he laid his hand over the victim's heart. For 10 seconds he remained motionless, bending over the prostrate man; then he arose, a look of horror upon his countenance, which gradually gave place to one of abject terror. Glancing quickly about the room as if to assure himself that he had not been discovered, he turned and fled.

With a violent start I leaped from my chair and glanced quickly about me. The scene had vanished, and the room was in total darkness, save where a dim ray of moonlight stole through the high window in the ruin wall. What had happened? Had I really been dreaming, or had I in some mysterious way been permitted to witness an actual scene that had transpired at that very moment in some distant part of the city? Had I suddenly been endowed with the subtle power of second sight, or by what inexplicable freak of the occult had I been able to discern what had appeared before my vision? Surely it could have

been no dream! Yet, as my sober second thought came to me, I gave that as the only explanation.

At this point I was aroused from my bewildering reflections by the cheery voice of Ralph Redburn, who had just returned from a stroll in the Villa Borg-here gardens and had almost stumbled over me in the darkness.

When a light had been made, I related to him the strange circumstance of the vision I had beheld, but he only smiled and said:

"It's only a dream, my boy. This old ruin is having a bad effect on your constitution. You need something to brace you up."

Nearly a week later, while returning from a drive across the campagna, I came upon the ruins of an old temple which looked so picturesque in its desolate, decayed grandeur, that I resolved to make a sketch of it. It stood near the outskirts of the city and was flanked on one side by a deep ravine. On the other and eastern side, just at the summit of a gentle slope, gleamed the white walls of a picturesque villa, its vine wreathed columns and wide sweeping porches looking cool and inviting in the warm glow of the Italian sun.

The next day I returned to the ruin, where I spent the day sketching the picturesque pile. I had given the driver of the conveyance in which I had come instructions to return for me at sunset, but owing to my limited knowledge of Italian and his utter ignorance of English he doubtless misunderstood me, for he failed to put in an appearance. Tired with my day's work, I threw myself upon the ground, my back resting against a broken marble column, to wait the driver's return. Thus reclining, I fell asleep and straightway was visited by one of the most strange and vivid dreams of my life. Even now as it comes back to my mind I can hardly realize that it was only a dream. The dream did not begin as dreams usually do—vague and fanciful—seeming unreal and absurd to the waking mind, but it appeared that I had barely closed my eyes when, moved by some strange impulse, I arose from my reclining position. But what seemed most strange was it appeared as if I could see myself still reclining against the column where I had fallen asleep. Yet this excited no wonder in my second self.

Turning from the spot, I began wandering through the ruins. On, on I wandered, now amid gloomy corridors, where bats and owls flew past on rapid wings; now in some spacious hall where the moonbeams, creeping through innumerable crevices in the crumbling walls, interlaced the rock strewn floor with bradings of silvery white. On, on, with only one aim and one desire, and that was to find the one I loved. It seemed as if I had known her all my life and loved her with such intense passion that every moment I was separated from her caused me the keenest anguish.

Whither she had gone I did not know. I only knew that I must find her, and with anxious heart I wandered from room to room in the great ruin, my mind in a wild tumult of hope and fear.

Suddenly I came to a high wall, it seemed, and looking upward I beheld an open window high above my head, and something seemed to tell me that beyond the window I would find her for whom I searched. Like one half crazed I leaped up the wall, clinging to small projections that scarcely afforded sufficient footing for a cat, yet with desperate energy I drew myself up to the window sill and looked into the rooms. There upon a couch, fast asleep, lay the one I loved. A moonbeam coming through the window touched her face, and then I seemed to know that the one I had sought and loved so long was the whom I had seen at the church of Trinita del Monte.

With a cry of joy I tried to draw myself up to the opening, but something seemed to weigh heavily upon me, preventing my ascent. I called loudly to her within the room, but she did not awake. Again and again I called to her, beseeching her to come to me, but she only moved uneasily upon her pillow as if her sleep had been disturbed by my cry. Then I felt my hold upon the wall slowly giving way, and with an agonized cry upon my lips I fell back and down, down into the darkness, and with this I awoke.

I sprang to my feet, startled and bewildered at the vividness of the dream. I drew out my watch and glanced at it by the moonlight. It was 12 o'clock! Was it possible that I had slept so long? I must find some conveyance at once and return to the city.

The night had grown chill, and I shivered as I picked up my sketchbook and walked from the gloomy shadows of the ruin. How vivid my dream had been! Was it a dream? It hardly seemed possible. As I reflected over the strange incident it all came to me like a flash.

I knew then that I was madly in love with the strange woman I had seen at the Trinita del Monte church. It had all been revealed to me in my dream, and it seemed to me that I must find her now at any cost. I will never give over the search. Every aim and every ambition of my life should be centered in an object—to find her and to tell her of my love.

Un governable and intoxicating pulsings of passion fired my soul to a degree never before dreamed of as I stood across the level court that lay east of the ruin. I was just turning a corner of the broken wall when I heard the rattle of a garment and a light step near me. Then there was a gleam of white draperies as the form of a woman glided into view.

I stood stock still with astonishment. Was it a ghost of the ruin? The strange apparition, the place and the hour all conspired to thrill me with a momentary feeling of superstition and awe. Slowly and almost noiselessly the figure approached. I stood still, speechless and breathless. The unaltered grace of form and movement told me that this was a beautiful woman even before I saw her face. A light shawl of creamy whiteness was wrapped about her form. Her head was bare, her dark hair fell in a

sheveled mass about her shoulders, and her loose, flowing garments looked strangely and intensely white in the silvery brightness of the moon.

As she drew near the moonlight fell full upon her face, showing her features as distinctly almost as if it had been day. A startled cry almost rose to my lips, but died away. Was I still dreaming? Were my senses leaving me, or what in the name of heaven did it mean? The face of the strange apparition was that of the one I had seen in my dream—the same that had filled me with amazement at its loveliness at the church of Trinita del Monte.

I stood there as if petrified, powerless to move, my whole being weighted down by an inexplicable and subtle fas-



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ination. No, it could not be real. I was still dreaming. I should soon awake to the sharp disappointment of the reality. The thoughts forced themselves upon my mind, causing me to feel the keenest anguish.

The white draped figure of the woman passed so close to me that I could have touched her with my hand, and every feature had been plainly revealed. Her eyes, large and lustrous, were staring as if at vacancy, and every movement was as if she were utterly oblivious to her surroundings. Scarcely had I noticed these facts when the truth came to me like a flash, breaking the spell that had fallen over me. She was a somnambulist! The thought quickly grew into a conviction.

I turned quickly and followed her, a wild tumult of passion pulsing through my being. It was no dream then. I had found her at last! Was it fate that had directed her steps to that place, or had my spirit called her thither while I thought I had only been dreaming? Heaven only knows. Yet till my dying day I shall never cease to believe that it was my spirit that called her to the ruin that night.

Like one entranced, I followed her, keeping close behind. She crossed the open court. Then through a broken archway she glided like a spirit. Then, turning, she was about to make her way along the very verge of a deep pitfall when with a cry of horror I sprang forward and caught her by the arm. I had heard that those who walk in sleep are never harmed by walking in perilous places, yet the thought that she was in danger made me forget everything else for a moment.

As my hand touched her arm she stopped abruptly. Then I saw that she had awakened. For a moment there was an astonished, bewildered look in her eyes. Then she uttered a low cry of terror, and turning quickly fled across the open court. The next instant I saw her stagger, then reel downward and fall in a heap upon the rock strewn ground.

Leaping forward, I soon reached her side and was bending over her prostrate form. She lay limp and lifeless, her head resting against a sharp stone, against which it had struck as she fell. As I lifted her head I saw a stain of blood upon her temple. Had the blow killed her? My God! The very thought drove me to the verge of insanity. Hardly knowing what I did, I lifted her from the ground and deposited her upon a little strip of grass that grew near where she had fallen. Then removing my coat I placed it beneath her head. Still she lay motionless, as if death had already claimed her. What must I do? Where could I go for help? I glanced about me, but the nearest sign of human habitation was the villa upon the slope an eighth of a mile away. Perhaps I might find some one there who could assist me, yet I dared to leave her alone for a single moment.

As I again turned my attention to her I saw with a thrill of joy that life was not extinct. She uttered a faint moan, and there was a slight fluttering of the lips. It was as if a breeze, after all, and she would soon recover. The thought gave me more life than I had ever before experienced. I bent down and began to examine the wound upon her temple. To my infinite relief, I found that it was not serious, yet a single blow had rendered her unconscious. But I now believed that her senses had been caused more by terror than by the blow she had received.

I sat there by her side chafing her hands while I watched the life slowly coming back to her. The shawl she had worn had slipped from her shoulders, and now for the first time I discovered that she was clad in only her night-dress. This fact about in my mind that she was a somnambulist.

Now that I had discovered that she was not a merely inert great joy came to me, and it seemed as if I could have sat there forever, holding her hand in mine, forgetting all else save that I was with the one I loved. The very touch of her hand thrilled me with a strange ecstasy. A wild tumult of passion surged through my soul. Mad with the intoxication of her presence, the torturing fear that I should soon be separated from her pressed in me for one brief moment the selfish hope that consciousness might be restored to her just yet. It was a wild, cruel hope which I crushed back with a feeling of bitter self-reproach.

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