

CLOUD CHIEF.

L. MATHER, Editor.

BEAUTIFUL HANDS.

Such beautiful, beautiful hands! They're neither white nor small, And you, I know, would scarcely think That they were fair at all.

Such beautiful, beautiful hands! These patient hands weary and sad, These patient hands weary and sad, These patient hands weary and sad,

MY ONLY GHOST.

FROM THE AUTHOR.

I had from childhood that low order of courage which consists in not knowing what fear is. It was an imperfection of nature which was unnecessarily landed at the expense of my brothers and sisters, who, having a more poetical and more highly strung organization than myself, did know what fear was.

Yes, this was Gertrude's room! There was her portrait on the wall. A straight young woman, with a profusion of light hair, blue eyes with a far-off look, a melancholy beauty, tender and sensitive, that face which the poet calls "poetess's."

Around the room were costly trifles, the spoils of an Euro-ean trip. The room was fitted up queerly with hand-made linens, suits of a mor, boxing gloves, fishing foils. I looked to Mrs. Morton for an explanation.

As I gave up on my own account, Mr. Ayscough. During your visit here you will have an occasion to visit from him. He comes and goes as he pleases. In the adjoining room are poor Gertrude's trunks, which neither he nor I have ever sufficiently unpacked. We have never unpacked.

As I went through the spacious sun-linen-closet, and so on, to a bedroom, where were many dresses. Some dresses hung in the closet, some bottles of perfumes, and ladylike things laid on the bureau and tables. A slight have just stepped from her room, and I was not surprised to find a sad pleasure in the young man's material.

One Sunday evening I was walking up and down, looking particularly at a fine Venetian picture, a wilderness of color and action,—one of those pictures of Leutze, in which a myriad of events are pictured as going on at the same time—when my eyes were irresistibly drawn toward a mirror, and I saw—good God! what did I see?—a tall, straight, female figure, covered with a profusion of light hair. I saw the dead Gertrude, stepped from her grave, the very presentment of the image I had so often studied. She stood on the balustrade of the grand staircase, the same image was reflected through the mirrors, where I could not see the reflection, where I stood. She reached me by the hand.

The horror was so great that I do not know how long I looked. I was sure I saw her start to go, and I followed her. I lost sight of both mirror and staircase before I reached the door, but certainly I heard a door

stray mouse or other intruder had violated their quiet loneliness. I was very much attracted by Gertrude's picture. It so happened that I had never seen her; her brief hour of youthful bloom had been spent before I returned, an army officer's widow from my hard life on the Western frontier.

After Mrs. Morton had been gone about a month, I had a visit from Mr. Ayscough. He was a pale and interesting young man, very refined and educated, evidently much influenced by his sorrow. He talked incessantly about his wife, and was interested in my admiration of her portrait. He took me in to show me some of the contents of the trunks. To my horror I found that some very valuable jewelry and silver comprised part of that mysterious luggage which had never been unpacked.

"But, Mr. Ayscough," I exclaimed, "you are not going to leave these valuable things here in this empty house, unlocked and strewn about in these trunks, and no one but me to take care of them?" He laughed a sort of empty laugh, as if he did not care much what became of them, and gave me no sort of satisfaction. From that moment, I do not know why, I began to feel troubled. I had had the comfort of seeing all the family silver carried off to the bank before Mrs. Morton went away, and, if I had thought of them at all, I was convinced that all burglars were aware of that fact and would never trouble me in the least. Now I had a sort of uneasy sensation about Mr. Ayscough's room which I would gladly have had removed—in fact, it became the focus of many uneasy sensations.

Mr. Ayscough like to come to the library and look over the new books which were sent to me to criticize. One day he took a book on Spiritualism which soon fascinated him. I was extremely sorry when I saw how he fastened to it and began to drink in a sort of dangerous comfort from it. He talked to me about it, and asked me if I had any belief in the communion of spirits.

He found a most robust unbeliever in me. All my habits of thought, my rough experience of life, my anti-nervous temperament were against the theory and practice of Spiritualism. He went away after a few days, and I returned to my lonely life. Perhaps I was not sorry when I heard one day the unusual sound of a voice asking for at the front door, and went down to see my nephew Richard, a good young fellow from the West, who had come to the city to make his fortune, and who had found me out.

Richard was of course very anxious to see the signs of the great metropolis, so we agreed to make a tour of the amusements. He took me out of an evening, perhaps three times a week, I remember being very much charmed with a pair of acrobats, a man and woman, who were entirely independent of the law of gravitation, and who sailed through the air "on the flying trapeze" with all the aplomb and fearlessness of birds. Richard used to laugh at me as I, right after night declared in favor of the acrobats. The woman was a beautiful creature, and had for me a strange and weird attraction which I could not account for, but it is unnecessary to try to account for some things, I began at this time to believe that I was growing fanciful, a thing which never had occurred before. Once or twice I had sleepless nights. I thought a great deal too much about the jewelry and silver in Mr. Ayscough's rooms, and I began to make my inspections of the house with a sort of anxiety.

One of my great pleasures, particularly of a Sunday evening, had been to have Thomas light all the gas that I might see the works of art to advantage; and it gave to me, too, a sense of companionship which I needed. On that evening Nancy and Thomas took their only pleasure. They went out, leaving me entirely alone. The policeman in the square had become somewhat of an acquaintance of mine, and I had provided myself with a whistle by which I could call him if necessary in those periods of utter loneliness. Sometimes, as he walked under the window, I would step to the balcony and speak to him; so long as I heard his tramp, tramp, I was not utterly isolated.

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shut at the top of the stairs as I reached the lower step. It was the door of Mr. Ayscough's apartment. The vision was gone, but two senses had been appealed to—sight and hearing. I had sense enough to open the front door, sound my whistle, and then I dropped senseless. When I resumed my consciousness I found myself on the sofa. The private watchman was bending over me and I told him my story.

"You're getting a brain fever, ma'am," said he; "you're alone too much; you must try for a little more company. If you saw a woman going up stairs we'll soon catch her; but I guess she was here," tapping his forehead. So, summoning some of his brotherhood, we went to Mr. Ayscough's rooms, which we found locked, everything undisturbed, the portrait was in its accustomed place. Was it true that she had stepped from it to come and speak to me? Or, had my brain furnished the tall white figure? Of course it was the latter, and I did not intend to be conquered by such an illusion. I had an interview with a physician, who told me that these things are not uncommon.

"It is very natural, my dear madame," said the doctor, "that you should have invited this particular appearance, both by your having looked so much at the picture and by your after conversations with Mr. Ayscough on Spiritualism. You did not know how much lodgment those topics had made in your brain. We never know until the time is past how a thing has taken root. Now, I advise you to leave this house and travel. After your course of life, and you will not be troubled by specters."

After talking with the doctor, I determined to remain; I did not feel that this was a thing to be afraid of. My natural courage came to my relief, and I determined to stay and fight my battle on the same field. Richard returned, heard my ghost story, and was very much amused that his prosaic relative should have a vision.

I went on with my work, lived my old life, and saw no more ghosts. I knew I could conquer my nerves, if I had any, but I was very glad when Mr. Ayscough came to spend a few days. The next morning after his arrival, however, he came down to breakfast with a very perplexed countenance. As he walked around my writing table he took up and examined my letter paper. It was of the plainest kind, foolscap, generally, and as he laid it down he laughed rather nervously and said:

"Mrs. Martin, you must pardon me. I have met with such a singular loss. You remember my writing table; it had a quantity of note paper with my monogram on it. I was in the habit of writing my notes from here, and last evening I looked for some and found it all gone. Of course it is a very trivial question; but do you know anything about it?" Of course my indignation smothered every other sentiment. For a moment, however, I remembered that to Mr. Ayscough I was but a poor old woman whom Mrs. Morton had placed in her house to take care of it, and I was in the habit of using a great deal of paper. So he put the two together and supposed I was guilty of the petty theft.

I answered him as calmly as I could that I knew nothing about his paper. He came again after spending an hour in his apartments, and asked me to come and examine them with him. After a moment's embarrassment, I began: "I don't know, Mrs. Martin, but I am sure these things are not as I left them. I was nothing, but they have been disturbed! Oh, these dresses of Gertrude's, do they not seem to have been displaced—I could almost say so!"—he turned pale—"I feel almost as if she herself had been here. There is a certain perfume in the air which she used to use. Could Nancy have been fumbling amongst these things?" We called the housekeeper, who owned to having swept, but was above all charges as to a wring of the dresses.

We dismissed poor Nancy, and looked over the valuables. They were intact not a jewel had been moved; but my most assiduous eloquence could induce Mr. Ayscough to remove these valuables to a safer place. As I was looking through the room before leaving them, I picked up a little embroidered slipper, of which I could not find the mate, and I showed it to Mr. Ayscough, asking him if it could have fallen out of one of the trunks. He took it and looked at it long and earnestly, and finally said that he thought it had belonged to a costume that Gertrude had worn in some private theatricals in Florence. It did not look to me exactly like the slipper of a lady, but this explanation seemed to give it a pace. I took it out of the room with me, absently, and threw it on a shelf of my own closet.

As August, with its dull heat, came on, I yielded to Richard's solicitations and went with him to the seaside for a few days. When I went back to my lonely charge I had a great fit of literary industry to make up for my long and to me unexpected vacation at the seaside. With a sort of sense of duty neglected, I went, one day, my rounds over the house. As I descended to the lower regions I found Nancy quite agitated over a discovery which she had made outside the door. The

wisteria vine, which I had noticed as carrying its brave luxuriance from the ground to the chimneys, looked faded and cut, as if some blight had passed over it. It had long passed its blossoming, and was in that dark green, rather dusty condition which city vines assume when the summer has nearly gone. It did look faded and broken. Perhaps some animal had run across it, and had here and there twisted off a leaf or a tendril.

Going up stairs I went to my closet for the key of Mr. Ayscough's room, and as I did so, I noticed that the queer little embroidered slipper was gone! In a moment, all my superstitious terror came back upon me. As I entered Mr. Ayscough's room, where the portrait hung, I was struck by a sense of something wrong. I know what. Here was the portrait, and the handsome ornaments of the room were untouched. I looked in vain for some proof of disorder. I soon found it. The writing table was opened, paper spread about, and a pen with fresh ink in it was lying on the silver inkstand!

As I stood gazing at this inexplicable thing, a door swung to, and started me from my stupor. I went to the inner room through the linen-closet. As I did so, the door leading to the garret gave a shove, as if by an invisible hand. I had never noticed or thought of this door before, nor had I ascended to those garret rooms since Mrs. Morton had taken me thither on the first day of my arrival.

A sense of infinite horror took possession of my soul. I was then in the land of spirits. The dead Gertrude did haunt these rooms, consorted to her. It was her pleasure to come back and write at her table, even arrange the cast-off garments she had worn, to use the perfumes she had loved in life—perhaps to go up into that play-room where she had played as a child, and whither I would follow her.

I was lifted out of myself. I went on, I knew not how, up the garret stairs; nor was I much astonished when I found on the topmost landing the little embroidered, spangled slipper which I had missed from my closet shelf.

I went on toward the pleasant bedroom which was curtained by the wisteria vine, and looked in. There she lay, the golden-haired Gertrude of the picture, sleeping on the bed in the corner. This was no trick of the imagination, for on one foot was the companion slipper I held in my hand. Her breathing was regular and soft, and the color of youth and health was on her cheek and lip. Fear seemed to depart out of me. I approached and took hold of the hand which lay outside the light coverlet. No sooner had I touched it than it grasped mine like a vice. The being, good or evil or woman, started up and held me fast.

"Who and what are you?" said I. "A woman, like yourself," answered the ghost. "Have pity on me." "And why are you here—what does it mean?" The creature looked at me with staring eyes, jumped from the bed and looked the door.

"Do not look frightened," said she; "I like you very much; you and I have lived together all summer. I have heard you talk with Mr. Ayscough. I know I frightened you about the ghost. I found out the first night we came here how much I looked like the picture of a dead lady, and I have copied her dress so that I could use the likeness to the best advantage if ever I should be caught. But I have overstepped myself and have been caught at last! It does not matter. I am sick. I shall not last long. But I must go! It is almost time for rehearsal. Ferdinand is waiting for me. Let me go. How could I grow so careless!" "Let me go," said I, "out of this house! Never! Burglar—theft—I know not what!" "No, neither. Come with me to Mr. Ayscough's rooms. Every jewel, every bit of silver is safe. I have taken nothing but some paper, and that is all here. You shall have it, but you must let me go. We are the acrobats you have often been to see. I would hear you arrange in the morning with the nephew to come and see us in the evening. Then I would look for your good, kind eyes and gray hair in the audience, and I would thank the little knows how intimate we are, and I would laugh at the thought. Now come and see that I am no thief, and then let me go!"

So she took me down unresistingly to the lower rooms. Possessing herself of the keys, she unlocked the trunks and showed me the sparkling diamonds, the pearls, the silver, which were indeed all there, all intact. She then looked longingly in the other trunks. "Ah!" said she, "I do love luxury! But no; I am no vulgar thief!" "How did you get in this house?" at last I found voice to say. "Oh, we climbed by the wisteria vine. It was nothing to us; we often live in deserted houses in the summer, a fortress is no stronger than its weakest point. We are acrobats; we go over roofs, up vines, into windows easily; but I must go. You will find a little place under the fence where we have removed a board. After nightfall we would creep in, and then ascend by the vine. We always went out by the front door, when we could, and that was often, for you went for your walks, or were shut up in the dining-room or library. We know how to watch our chance, both with a man

without. Never was a city house so sheltered from outside observation as this; you have no neighbors in the intrusive sense. We have unfastened a window or two out of which we could always drop into the garden. You have been a placid and kindly hostess to two people who love *dis-oblige*; believe me, madame, we could have frightened you out of your wits!"

She darted up stairs and returned like lightning, went to Mr. Ayscough's table and gathered some more sheets of paper, rolled them rapidly together, took one of my marble hands, and pressing it kindly, skipped out of the door.

Yes, I let her go. I was powerless. Down the front staircase, out of that handsome, respectable house she went, and I had promised to protect it! Two tumblers—acrobats—gymnasts—thieves, murderers, burglars, for aught I know had been fellow-inmates with me, and I had let one of them go—a pretty prospectress! I can not remember how I did it, but I know I wrote a telegram to Mr. Ayscough and sent Nancy for the doctor. I know I wrote also a letter, for it is before me:

"MR. AYSCOUGH: Yesterday in visiting your apartment I became convinced that some intruder had been meddling with your rooms. I will confess to you that I have been the victim of superstitious fears, and that I believed once that I saw the ghost of your wife. I was weak enough to feel these fears come over me again. As I searched about the rooms, laid in terror, I observed the little garret door swing gently open. I ascended to find a woman sleeping in the nursery bed. No astonishing was the likeness to Gertrude's picture, that I still believed I saw a wraith. "I took the hand, however, of a live woman. It was the acrobat Rossini, now performing at Baskely Theatre. She and her husband having gained access to the garret rooms in the early summer, by means of the wisteria vine have lived there ever since. "She has taken nothing. I have let her escape. Forgive me and forgive her. She seems a half-bred poor creature, and I have a fellow feeling for her. "MARY MARTIN."

When the doctor came I was past speech or action. In the delirium of a brain fever I passed three months. When Mr. Ayscough arrived he read my letter. The doctor says his fury surpassed all description. I do not wonder! to have nothing to wreak his vengeance upon but a feeble old woman, battling in the idiosyncy of a brain fever.

Yes, yes! there were the acrobats! They were to be found and punished. They, the miserable disturbers of his holiest solitude, the invaders of his dearest privacy, he would wreak his vengeance on them!

The doctor, sitting by the bedside, heard his infuriated words, and at the same time glanced over the morning paper.

"Stop, Mr. Ayscough," said the old gentleman, "your indignation is just and natural, but the power of revenge is taken from you. A greater than we are has spoken. 'Vengeance is mine,' saith the Lord." And he read the following paragraph:

"HORRIBLE ACCIDENT AT THE BLAKELEY THEATRE. The well-known German acrobats, Ferdinand and Rossini, in the performance of their great flying trapeze act, last evening, missed the net and fell with terrible force to the floor. The woman is dead. The man still lingers, suffering horribly. He was noticed as being unsteady and nervous when he began, and the woman was evidently entreating him to stop; but he would not. She was a beautiful and loving creature, evidently educated above her profession; but the man said to have been a drunken and sullen brute. This terrible accident of course caused an immense sensation. The large audience immediately dispersed, saddened by this dreadful spectacle. It is hoped that it will bring these acrobatic performances to a disfavor for a very long time."

I never saw Mr. Ayscough again; but he left me a handsome present. I afterward had reason to believe that he gave the unfortunate acrobat a decent and Christian funeral.

I never attempted again to live alone in a great house, nor do I flatter myself a woman of courage; all that dear illusion was taken out of me by rather an extraordinary experience I grant; but still it has been taken away. True courage would not have fainted away; true courage would have caught the woman, and would not have had a brain fever. Yet for all she cost me, I have still a great tenderness for my *only ghost*.

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