

The Storyteller

THE HOUSE OF MYSTERY

A TRUE STORY

Now, if this particular dwelling, known familiarly as No. 23, was not haunted by disembodied spirits from the immaterial world, it was, at least, pervaded by that sense of mystery, a something uncanny, which marked its isolation from its neighbors to the right hand and to the left. It was an ordinary-looking structure, such as in the little metropolis was frequently seen; red-brick painted, white shutters obtrusively closed, and a dull green door, to which a few steps led. These details were everyday and conventional, but were rendered gruesome, as the neighbors averred, by the fact that none knew positively whether or no the tenement was inhabited. Now, as the neighborhood was quite a populous one, and as its denizens certainly had their full share of curiosity, it was altogether remarkable that such a state of affairs could continue for so many years, and that the habitation in question could remain enwrapped in a very veil of secrecy.

It is true that peeping Toms, not a few, had climbed back fences and, as shall be seen hereafter, some there were who had gone farther into the mystery, but without being able to bring it to a satisfactory solution. So that No. 23 remained an extremely uncomfortable place to pass by, especially on dull, autumnal evenings, and those who were acquainted with the history of the house, or rather with its lack of history, were sure to hurry past with furtive glances at the closed shutters, as if expecting to catch a glimpse of ghastly faces peering thence. Two things were certain—no light ever shone from any window, and no living being had been seen to enter or to come forth from the closed door.

A certain number of the most veracious, as well as the most prying of the neighbors, testified to having heard on divers occasions sounds resembling groans, which were said to have proceeded from the lower storey of the apparently tenanted tenement. These rumors gave a filip to the popular tenor, and stimulated a very proper pride with which the quarter was animated, in possessing a genuine and awe-inspiring mystery, certainly a valuable asset in its way.

For the fame thereof spread abroad and attracted adventurous spirits from other and less favored portions of the town, who gathered about the unsociable mansion, and, in the course of their investigations, very frequently paid visits to local merchants in quest at once of information and refreshment. No. 23 unquestionably brought money to the neighborhood and fame to those who had hitherto lived in a sylvan solitude of obscurity. The nearest neighbors became subjects of envy, as well as almost of civic importance. In due sequence ranked the favored ones who dwelt directly across the way, those who occupied quarters of any sort in the rear, and the grocer at the corner, who was understood to keep in stock the latest and most reliable bits of gossip concerning the untenanted house.

Bolder spirits, who were drawn to the spot by a love of adventure, invariably put the question as to whether or no the premises had ever been invaded by the curious, who had, as it seemed, every right to satisfy their legitimate curiosity. This query came to be regarded as an imputation on the courage or the enterprise of the locality, and to be resented accordingly, while loquacious tongues hastened to assure all comers that no less than three persons still living within reasonable distance of No. 23 had actually crossed its mysterious threshold, and their version of what they had seen, though varying in some particulars, was thus far uniform. The house, they agreed, was divided into several apartments, all of which, at the time of visitation, had undoubtedly been uninhabited. Yet the rooms were one and all handsomely furnished, the carpets were rich, the wall paper well preserved, and the whole showing evident signs of care and watchfulness. There was not a cobweb, inseparable accompaniment of deserted houses, to be seen anywhere, and the dust which might have been expected to have gathered in a dwelling long closed up was noticeably absent. Pretty ornaments and expensive trifles lay scattered about in profusion, and the larder showed such a stock of groceries as might have been in evidence where an occupant was shortly expected to take possession of a residence.

So the years went by, and the boys who had climbed the back fences or peered in at windows became bearded men, weighed down with the anxieties of life, and the maidens who had clung to their sweethearts

with pretty tremblings as they passed the mysterious edifice became wives and care-burdened heads of families. The neighbors to right and to left, across the way, and in the rear, impelled by the exigencies of time and circumstance, abandoned their posts of vantage, and removed to newer, if less picturesque, portions of the town. The grocery at the corner was torn down and replaced by a modern apartment building.

One by one, the adventurous three who had penetrated to that strange interior paid the debt of nature, and only the voice of tradition, gradually growing fainter, carried on the result of their investigations. The shades of oblivion threatened to close about the dwelling. Even its mystery ceased at last to attract.

Suddenly, however, the old house blazed out into a new glory. The solution of the mystery, which had hung about it like a veil, brought to its doors some hundreds of busy idlers or idle busybodies who throng the streets of every town—or village, for the matter of that. The story was a singular one, worthy of being chronicled among curious happenings. It came to light upon the death of a prominent civic official, who had for many years occupied a position of trust. He had been noted for his strict integrity and exact fulfilment of the duties of his post. Little else had been known about him. His business acquaintances frequently wondered if he were married; his few friends why he had never married. In the course of years, his singular and pathetic story had been forgotten. He was a silent man, reticent to a fault, shunning the society of his fellows and spending his leisure hours none knew how or where. At his death, however, the whole history became public property, and may be epitomized in these few and brief lines, as is the case with so many a life-story.

When David Dalton was thirty years of age he was good-looking, agreeable in manner, and possessed of a moderate inheritance, which, together with the lucrative position he had obtained by family influence, made him in every respect emphatically a good match. As he was a favorite in society, a universal wish seemed to prevail there to see him happily married and to the 'right girl.' Needless to say, that as to the latter particular opinions varied indefinitely, contrary ones being held by marriageable maidens, by their mothers, by grave and serious papas, bachelor friends, and by the few who really had David Dalton's welfare seriously at heart.

The young man steered his way successfully through this vortex of popularity, and if matrimony appeared at all to his mental vision, it was at a point very distant, indeed, upon his horizon. One clear, frosty night of January—how the stars did sparkle in the blue empyrean and the hoar-frost did glisten on the branches of the trees!—David set forth, unsuspecting that Destiny lay in wait for him at the first street corner. Usually he went home from the 'quiet evenings' to which persevering friends continually invited him, heart whole and as fancy free as the snowdrifts that blew down from the mountain-side. On this occasion he entered a room where stood a young and slender girl in a soft, evening gown of gray, with deep, violet eyes, a pretty flush on either cheek, hair that shone as gold in the firelight, and a smile which met David Dalton at the threshold and held him for evermore in bonds.

It has long been unfashionable to talk of love at first sight, or love at all, for the matter of that. But this story deals not with fiction—a love which lasted till his death and forms the basis of this narrative. Local tradition, grown vague in the lapse of time, hints that the favored lady did not at once reciprocate. She was a belle, conquest is sweet, and she felt no disposition to relinquish her undoubted advantages for those less apparent, of becoming the wife of an older, and, to her mind, a prosaic man. David Dalton was deterred by no obstacle, however, and his persistent, devoted, and tender courtship of the lovely lady reads like those pages from the great romancists which forever have power to stir the human heart. One has to be reminded that that lover of the far away, invested with a curious halo of romance, in the chronicles of a city, was only a public official, fulfilling the sordid duties of his office to the letter and yet finding time to write letters which breathe the very soul of a noble and enduring passion.

At last the little lady was touched, and dainty missives, worn and time-stained, remain in her delicate handwriting. Among these is one in which she thus consents to name the wedding-day:—

'I suppose, then, David, I must at last name the wedding-day. I suppose I must say the 4th of May, since you have so often reproached me with unreasonable delay. Otherwise, I should have been tempted to put off our marriage until June, since May is so unlucky. But let it be as you please. I must learn to please