

The Storyteller.

HER GUARDIAN ANGEL.

(Conclusion.)

AUGUST 6.—In answer to my inquiries, Miss Featherstone said the only strange thing she felt was a suffocation at night, and that she had now adopted the custom of sleeping on a lounge near the window. 'But don't tell this to my aunt,' she added hastily.

'Why?'

'She hates fresh air,—she says it is an English mania; and she goes into my room every night and closes the window and shutters.'

'Indeed! But how do you manage?'

'The girl hesitated a moment before answering, rather timidly: 'Mr. Neilson are you a Catholic, may I ask?'

'Of course you may ask; and I am very glad to tell you that I have the happiness of being a Catholic, like my fathers before me.'

'Then you will hardly think me superstitious if I tell you of a strange dream I have had?'

'No, my child. I have seen and heard too many strange things not to know that we touch on the supernatural oftener than we care to acknowledge.'

'Well, now I have courage to tell you something that I have never spoken of before. I must preface it by relating a little of my convent life. The nun to whose care I was confided on my arrival in Princethorpe was held in very high repute for her sanctity and sweetness. Her name in religion was Sister Angela, and she instilled into my young mind a great love of my Guardian Angel; and this has ever since been one of my special devotions. She died when I was 12 years old; and before her death she obtained permission to give me a little stone-china angel, whose hands are spread out in the act of blessing, while in the clouds at his feet is a little stoup for holy water. I prize this as one of my dearest treasures, and always hang it on or over my bed. The first night I experienced that curious feeling of want of air I had gone to my room about 11 o'clock—'

'I beg your pardon?—was it here or at the Manor?'

'Oh, at the Manor! I have never had these attacks any place else.'

'On entering my room, I at once noticed that my angel was lying against the pillow, and thought the string had broken; but on examination found it was intact. I concluded it had slipped off the nail; so replaced it and went to bed as usual. I had slept perhaps an hour when I dreamed that the angel stood beside my bed and pulled me by the arm, making me a sign to rise; and that I followed him with great difficulty into my dressing-room, where he motioned to a couch and instantly disappeared. I awoke and found I was really in my dressing-room; and the window, which I remembered my maid had closed before she left me, was wide open. It was one o'clock; so I fetched a wrap, threw it over me and went to sleep. Next morning I returned to my bedroom early. (I rise often before my maid calls me at eight.) But on opening the door I found the room suffocating. Knowing that I had not unfastened the window catch, I did not go in, but dressed and escaped by the terrace. I left the door open between the rooms in order to ventilate the bedroom.'

'As my aunt belongs nominally to the Greek church but is practically an infidel, I did not allude to my night's experience. But she started on seeing me, remarked I was very pale, and questioned me closely. I merely replied that my bedroom window had a very difficult clasp; then she grew cross and declared our English mania for air was most absurd, and that she considered my habit of sleeping with open windows very bad for the health. Since then she has made it a point to follow me into my room at night to see that the windows and shutters are barred. I submit for peace' sake. I know that I shall not be in her house much longer. But I open the door between my bedroom and dressing-room every night, leaving the window of the latter open; and whenever I feel the air oppressive in my bedroom I sleep on the couch in my dressing-room. I have had a feeling of security there since my dream.'

We talked for a long time, and I believe now that the Colonel's suspicions were well-grounded. I must manage to sleep in the manor house, and examine Alys' room and the Lady Zara's. By keeping Alys here until the ball she will be safe. I must think over my next step.

AUGUST 10.—Alys Featherstone has no organic disease. I examined her thoroughly yesterday. We are great friends. Her health is decidedly better, and Mathom agrees with me that she must never again be left with her aunt. We have planned that Lady Featherstone shall be induced to come here until the second day before the ball, when both ladies will proceed with the Colonel to Hasley Towers. I am invited, but shall feign some excuse; and in the absence of the chief conspirators it is strange if Hamet and myself cannot fathom this mystery.

AUGUST 20.—Lady Zara is here. Her son accompanied her hither, but went to London soon after. He will come down for the ball at Hasley Towers. We are all to go to the Manor on the 7th September, sleep there that night, and next day go on to Hasley Towers. This morning Alys gave me a pretty medal of the Angel Guardian, which I promised always to wear; she showed me her little statue, which I agree with her in venerating. Mathom hints at a match between her and young Lord Netterville. I should be glad; he is a fine young fellow, and manages to be here pretty often. We must be extremely cautious. Lady Zara will not see her plans upset without a struggle.

AUGUST 27.—The Moat is full of people, and we have had some good shooting here. It is all very pleasant after life in India. I think I shall buy a place in this neighborhood, if I succeed in my present pursuit. Mathom mentioned a small property called 'The Oaks,' about 10 miles from here, which he heard was in the market. I'll see about it. Alys is rapidly losing that pallid tint, and eats and sleeps well.

SEPTEMBER 3.—If all goes well, I trust my next entry will be 'Victory.' I had a novena of Masses begun yesterday, and have promised a marble statue of the Guardian Angel to the new church which Alys tells me she will build in Featherstone when she comes of age. She hopes to get the Benedictines to make a foundation there; it would be a blessing to the whole neighborhood.

SEPTEMBER 7.—The party at the Manor has just driven off to Hasley Towers, leaving me, with my faithful Hamet, master of the field. We arrived late yesterday evening. I warned Alys to sleep in her dressing-room; although a fragment of a conversation between Lady Featherstone and her son, which Hamet overheard, shows no present danger. Young Featherstone came here some hours before our arrival, and received us cordially. During the evening Hamet saw mother and son pacing up and down the avenue in earnest talk. Gliding from shrub to shrub, my dusky friend came within hearing distance only as they were about to separate; but the few words he caught were important.

'You must try to have patience,' Lady Featherstone said impressively, 'until we return; then we'll end this.'

'What I don't understand,' answered her hopeful son, 'is why you have delayed so long.'

'I have not delayed, Harold; nor can I understand why I have failed; however, my measures are so well taken now that I cannot fail next time.'

'And no risk?'

'None whatever. Heart failure!'

He laughed, and she glided away like the snake she resembles.

About an hour before we were to start Hamet called the Colonel, and, with a grave face, told him an old wound in my shoulder had reopened while I was making an effort to close a refractory bag; he had bandaged it, but it would not be safe for me to go to Hasley Towers. The Colonel expressed sincere regrets and insisted on remaining with me. I energetically refused to have any nurse save Hamet; so, assuring them I should be perfectly well when they returned (I could easily do so), and apologising to the lady of the house for the trouble I was giving, with a light heart I saw them take their departure.

I have recovered marvellously; but must keep to my room for the next two days for the sake of appearances. Hamet tells me the Greek maid and Mr. Featherstone's Greek valet have gone to Hasley Towers with the family; he has assured the remaining servants that they may all take a holiday on the 10th and he will attend to me. The laboratory is locked: this evening he must take the impress of the lock and get a key made in Southminster.

SEPTEMBER 9.—Hamet has procured the key. I will examine the rooms to-night. The servants' quarters are far removed, and Hamet has slept in a room near mine since my supposed accident.

SEPTEMBER 10.—Great heavens! what a fiend that Greek is! Now I know all. Last night Hamet and I went into Alys' room. There was nothing unusual to be seen. The apartment is tastefully, even richly, furnished; and I wondered how she could feel a want of air in such a fine, lofty room, with three large windows. The bedstead is pretty and light, apparently; it is constructed of strong rods of polished brass, which run round the sides and foot in a scroll pattern, gradually rising towards the head until they form a fantastic knot of large white enamelled water-lilies, with big green leaves.

Somehow, the bedstead attracted me, and as I put my hand on the side to push it towards the light I found, to my surprise, it was screwed in its place. A cry brought Hamet to my side, and presently his keen eyes discovered a small orifice, not wider than that of a pipe-stem, in the lily bud which hung gracefully down beside the pillow. We traced the stem to the top of the bed, and then the agile Afghan swung himself up to the very apex, and found that the stem disappeared in the wall of Lady Featherstone's laboratory. Carefully marking the place it entered, we opened the laboratory door.

The room is small and arranged in the usual fashion. At first we saw nothing at all remarkable, except a long, flexible tube which hung from the wall and evidently corresponded with the brass stem that pierced the bricks. Immediately beneath it lay a long, rounded steel box, and the moment I saw it the whole diabolical plot burst upon me. It was one of the tubes of carbon dioxide, or carbonic acid, such as are furnished to brewers; and merely required to be placed in communication with the everhanging tube, when the gas would rise and diffuse itself through the pipe until it escaped by the deadly lotus bud and stifled its unsuspecting victim. Every precaution was taken. A new and very intricate clasp had been placed on the window of Miss Alys' dressing room; a stucco ornament lay ready to cover the orifice on the laboratory wall when the tube should be removed; and a green enamelled pistil lay beside it, to be inserted in the opening of the lily bud. Truly all was cunningly contrived, and well may Alys thank her Guardian Angel. We stole away, leaving no sign of our presence and carefully locked the door. Now to catch the would-be murderess in the act!

SEPTEMBER 12.—Thank God we have succeeded, and Alys has left forever that accursed woman's abode! On the afternoon of the 11th I awaited on the terrace the return of the party to the Manor. I was warmly congratulated on my recovery; though I still feigned the invalid slightly. Lady Zara complained of fatigue; her son, she said, had been called to London by an urgent telegram. (It looked better that he should be absent at the contemplated tragedy, I suppose.) Alys was radiant, and the Colonel seemed in excellent spirits. I was silent till after dinner; then