

The Miniature

J. Y. Akerman

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Calling one day on a friend, who had amassed a large collection of autographs, and other manuscript curiosities, he showed me a small quarto volume, which had been bequeathed to him by a relative, a physician, who for many years had been in extensive practice in London.

'He attended the patients at a private asylum for insane persons of the better classes,' said my friend, 'and I have often heard him speak of the writer of that beautiful MS, a gentleman of good family, who had been an inmate of House upwards of thirty years,' at the time he was first called to attend him.

On looking over the volume, I found it filled with scraps of poetry, extracts from classic authors, and even from the Talmudic writers; but what interested me most was a narrative of several pages, which appeared so circumstantially related as to leave little doubt of its being partly, if not wholly, founded on fact. I begged permission to make a transcript, which was readily granted, and the result is before the reader.

'We laugh at what we call the folk of our ancestors, and their notions of destiny, and the malignant influences of the stars. For what will our children deride us? Perhaps for dreaming that friendship was a reality, and that constant love dwelt upon earth. I once believed that friendship was not a vain name, and thought, with the antique sage, that one mind sometimes dwelt in two bodies. I dreamt, and woke to find that I had been dreaming!

'George S was my chum at school, and my inseparable companion at college. We quitted it at the same time, he to proceed to London, where he was in expectation of obtaining a lucrative appointment in one of the English colonies, and I to return for a short period to the family mansion, When I reached Hall, I found several visitors, among whom was my cousin, Maria D . She had grown a woman since I had last met her, and I now thought I had never seen a more perfect figure, or a more bewitching countenance. Then she sang like a siren, and was an elegant horsewoman. Will those who read this wonder that I fell in love with her, that I spent nearly the whole of the day in her company, and that I could think of nothing in the world besides.

'Something occurred to delay my friend George's departure from England, and, as he was idling about town, I invited him to Hall. Great as was my regard for him, I now, however, discovered that I could live less in his company. No marvel! I preferred the society of my lovely cousin, upon whose heart, I had the happiness to learn, my constant attentions had already made a sensible impression. I hesitated to make her an offer, though I had even reason to believe our attachment was mutual, partly, perhaps, from that excessive delicacy which constantly attends on true love, and partly because I wished to do so when my friend should have left us less exposed to intrusion. Would that the deep sea had swallowed him up, or that he had rotted under a tropical sun, ere he had come to Hall!

'One morning I arose earlier than usual, and was looking from my chamber window on the beautiful prospect which the house commanded. Wrapped in a delightful reverie, of which my lovely cousin was the principal subject, I paid but little attention to the sound of voices below.

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Suddenly, however, I awoke to consciousness: for the sweet tones of a woman in earnest conversation struck on my ear. Yes, it was hers it was Maria's. What could have called her forth at so early an hour? As I looked earnestly towards the walk which ran through the plantation, I saw emerge from it my cousin and my friend! My heart rose to my lips, and choked my utterance, or I should have cried out at the sight. I withdrew from the window, and threw myself on the sofa, tormented with surmises a thousand times more painful even than realities.

'At the breakfast table I was moody and thoughtful, which my friend perceiving, attempted a joke; but I was in no humour to receive it, when Maria, in a compassionating tone, remarked that I looked unwell, and that I should take a walk or ride before breakfast, adding, that she and George S had walked for an hour and more in the plantation near the house. Though this announcement was certainly but ill calculated to afford perfect case to my mind, it was yet made with such an artless air, that my more gloomy surmises vanished, and I rallied; but I wished my friend would take his departure. Right truly says the Italian proverb, "Love's guerdon is jealousy."

'After breakfast, George S proposed a stroll on foot to the ruins of the Cistercian Abbey, about a mile distant from the Hall, to which I at once assented. As we walked along the beautiful and shady lane which led to the ruin, George was as loquacious as ever, talked of everybody and everything, and of his confident expectation of realizing a fortune abroad. I was, however, in no humour for talking, and made few remarks in reply; but he appeared not to heed my taciturnity, and, when he arrived at the spot, broke forth into raptures at the sight of the noble ruin.

And truly it was a scene the contemplation of which might have lulled the minds of most men!

A thousand birds were caroling around us; the grass near the ruin was not long and rank, but short, close, studded with trefoil, and soft as a rich carpet. Luxuriant ivy climbed the shattered walls, bleached by the winds of centuries; and the lizards, basking in the sun, darted beneath the fallen fragments at the sound of our footsteps as we approached the spot.

'We both sat down on a large stone, and surveyed the noble oriel. I was passionately fond of Gothic architecture, and had often admired this window, but I thought I had never seen it look so beautiful before. My moody thoughts fled, and I was wrapped in the contemplation of the exquisite tracery, when I was suddenly roused by my friend, who, patting me familiarly on the back, exclaimed, "'It is a beautiful ruin, Dick! How I wish thy sweet cousin, Maria, had accompanied us!'"

I was struck dumb by this declaration; but my look was sufficiently eloquent to be understood by him, and he did not fail to interpret it aright. He appeared confused, and I, regaining my self-possession, arose from my seat with the laconic remark, "Indeed!"

'George S attempted a laugh, but it failed; he was evidently as much disconcerted and disquieted as myself. How lynx-eyed is love! We mutually read each other's hearts at the same moment.

"I am sorry for you, Dick," said he, after a short pause, affecting very awkwardly an air of indifference; "'pon my soul, I am; but I'm over head and ears in love with the girl, and should die at the bare thought of her encouraging another."

I wished for the strength of Milo, that I might have dashed out his brains against the huge stone on which we had been sitting. I felt my very blood seethe and simmer at the declaration, and with my clenched fist I struck him a violent and stunning blow, which, though it did not beat him to the ground, sent him staggering several paces backward.

"'Liar!" screamed I frantically, "take that! You dare not proceed with your folly."

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'Recovering his feet, George S laid his hand on his sword, which he half unsheathed; but, as if conscious of there being no witness present, or wishing, perhaps, still further to convince me of the advantage he possessed, he did not draw..' "Nay," said I, "out with your weapon; nothing less will do. I would rather lose my birthright than yield to thee one, without whom life would be valueless."

'He smiled bitterly, wiped his bruised and bloody face, and slowly drew from his bosom a small miniature, encircled with diamonds, which he held before my eyes. One glance was sufficient, it was a portrait of Maria! It was that face which, sleeping or waking, has haunted me these thirty years past.

' "Villain!" I cried, clutching at the portrait with my left hand, while I snatched with my right hand my sword from its sheath, "you have stolen it."

'With assumed coolness, which it was impossible he could feel, he smiled again, put back the miniature in his bosom, and drew his sword. The next moment our weapons crossed with an angry clash, and were flashing in the morning's sun.

'My adversary was a perfect master of his weapon, and he pressed upon me with a vigour which any attempt to retaliate would have rendered dangerous in one so much inferior to him in skill. Maddened as I was, I yet restrained myself, and stood on my guard, my eyes fixed on his, and watching every glance: my wish to destroy him was intense. The fiend nerved my arm, and, while he warmed with the conflict, I became more cool and vigilant. At length he appeared to grow weary, and then I pressed upon him with the fixed determination of taking his life; but he rallied instantly, and, in returning a thrust, which I intended for his heart, and which he parried scarcely in time, his foot slipped, and he fell on one knee, the point of my sword entering the left breast by accident. It was not a deep wound, and perhaps he felt it not; for he attempted to master my sword with his left hand, while he shortened his own weapon, and thrust fiercely at my throat, making at the same time a spring to regain his feet. But his fate was sealed: as he rose, I dashed aside the thrust intended for me, and sheathed my weapon in his left breast. I believe I must have pierced his heart; for he sank on his knees with a gasp, and the next moment fell heavily on his face, with his sword still clutched tightly in his hand.

'Wearied, and panting from the effects of the violent struggle, I threw myself on the large stone which had so recently served us for a seat, and looked on the body of my adversary. He was dead! that fatal thrust had destroyed all rivalry, but at the price of murder, the murder of one who had been my friend from boyhood upwards! A thousand conflicting emotions racked me as I beheld the piteous sight. Hatred was extinguished, and remorse succeeded; yet I still thought of the audacity of him who had provoked such deadly resentment. Fear, too, fear of the consequences of this fatal encounter in a solitary spot, without witnesses, added to the intensity of my misery, and I groaned in anguish. What was to be done? Should I go and deliver myself up to justice, and declare the whole truth? Should I fly, and leave the body of my friend to tell the dismal tale? or should I bury him secretly, and leave it to be supposed that he had been robbed and murdered? As each suggestion was canvassed and rejected, in my despair, I even thought of dying by my own hand.

' "Ah! miserable wretch!" I exclaimed, "what hast thou done? to what dire necessity has a fair and false face driven thee? Yet I will look once more on those bewitching features which have brought me to this wretched pass!"

'I stooped, and turned the dead man on his back. His pallid face was writhen and distorted, his lips were bloody, and his eyes, which were wide open, seemed still to glare with hatred and defiance, as when he stood before me in the desperate struggle for life and death. I tore open his vest, and discovered the wound which had killed him. It had collapsed, and looked no bigger than the puncture of a bodkin: but one little round crimson spot was visible, the haemorrhage was internal. There lay the miniature which, a few minutes before, had been held up exultingly to my frantic gaze. I seized, and pressed it to my lips, forgetting in my transports how dearly I had purchased it.

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'This delirium, however, soon subsided, and my next thoughts were of the dead body. I looked about me for some nook where I might deposit it. There was a chasm in the ground among the ruins a few yards off, where the vaulted roof of the crypt had fallen in. It was scarcely large enough to admit the corpse; but I raised it in my arms, bore it thither, and with some difficulty thrust it through the aperture. I heard it fall, as if to some distance, with a dull, heavy sound; and, casting in after it my adversary's hat and sword, I hurried from the spot like another Cain.

'At dinner, one glance from Maria, as I replied, in answer to her enquiry after George S, that he was gone to make a call a few miles off one glance, I say, thrilled through my very soul, and almost caused me to betray myself. All noticed my perturbed look, and, complaining of violent headache, I withdrew from the table ere the meal was ended, and betook myself to my chamber.

'How shall I paint the horror of that evening, of the night that succeeded it, and the mental darkness which fell upon my wretched self ere the morning dawned! Night came; I rang for lights, and attempted to read, but in vain; and, after pacing my chamber for some hours, overpowered by fatigue, I threw myself on the bed and slept, how long I know not. A succession of hideous dreams haunted my slumbers, still I was not awakened by them; the scenes shifted when arrived at their climax, and a new ordeal of horrors succeeded, yet, like him who suffers from nightmare, with a vague consciousness that all was not real, I wished to awake. Last of all, I dreamt that I was arraigned for the murder of my friend. The judge summed up the evidence, which, though purely circumstantial, was sufficient to condemn me; and, amidst the silence of the crowded court, broken only by the sobs of anxious and sympathizing friends and relatives, I received sentence of death, and was hurried back to my cell. Here, abandoned by all hope, I lay grovelling on my straw bed, and cursed the hour of my birth. A figure entered, and in gentle accents, which I thought I recognized, bade me arise, quit my prison-house, and follow. The figure was that of a woman closely veiled, She led the way, and passed the gaolers, who seemed buried in profound sleep. We left the town crossed the common, and entered a wood, when I threw myself at the feet of my deliverer, and passionately besought her to unveil. She shook her head mournfully, bade me wait a while till she should return with a change of apparel, and departed.

I cast myself down at the foot of an aged oak, drew from my bosom the portrait of Maria, and, rapt in the contemplation of those lovely features, I did not perceive the approach of a man, the ranger of the forest, who, recognizing my prison-dress, darted upon me, exclaiming, "Villain!

you have escaped from gaol, and stolen that miniature from the Hall!"

I sprang to my tact, thrust the fatal portrait into my bosom, and would have fled; but he seized, and closed with me. In the struggle which followed we both fell, I undermost. At that moment I awoke; I was in reality struggling with some one, but whom I could not tell; for my candles had burnt out, and the chamber was in total darkness! A powerful, bony hand grasped me tightly by the throat, while another was thrust into my bosom, as if in search of the miniature, which I had placed there previous to lying down.

'With a desperate effort I disengaged myself and leaped from the bed; but I was again seized, and again my assailant attempted to reach my fatal prize. We struggled violently; at one time I seemed to be overpowering him, and for several moments there was a pause, during which I heard my own breathing, and felt my own heart throbbing violently; but he with whom I contended seemed to breathe not, nor to feel like a warm and living man. An indescribable tremor shook my frame; I attempted to cry out, but my throat was rigid, and incapable of articulation. I made another effort to disengage myself from the grasp of my assailant, and in doing so drew him, as I found by the curtains, near to the window. Again the hand was thrust into my bosom, and again I repelled it.

'Panting with the violence of the struggle, while a cold sweat burst out at every pore, I disengaged my right hand, and, determined to see whom I was contending with, I dashed aside the curtain. The dim light of the waning moon shone into the chamber; it fell upon the face of my antagonist, and one glance froze the blood in my veins. It was he! it was George S; he whom I had murdered, glaring upon me with eyes which no mortal could look upon a

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second time! My brain whirled, a sound like the discharge of artillery shook the place, and I fell to the ground, blasted at the sight!

Here follows a few incoherent sentences, which I have not deemed it necessary to transcribe. The reader will probably supply the sequel to this sad story.