

# The Bloomfield Times.

FRANK MORTIMER, }  
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BY  
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### MADAM VAIL'S APPARITION.

A Remarkable Story.

SEEMING that some persons either willfully or otherwise, have made a marvellous story of the affair of my late mistress, Madam Abigail Vail, of Barden's Wood, near Bolton, I, Martha Hobson, have considered it my duty to explain the whole matter as it actually occurred before my own eyes.

I had been twelve years housekeeper and confidential attendant to Madam Vail, when she was taken with what proved her last illness. She was quite old—nigh upon three-and-seventy, though up to this time she enjoyed tolerable health. She had been a widow and childless for more than forty years, in which time she had lived very secluded at Barden's Wood, about a mile from Bolton town. She got the place from her husband. It had been very grand in its day, but at this time was a dingy, gloomy, rather tumble-down old house, though the lands were very valuable, as everybody knew. It was said there was lead and silver on one part of the place which, if worked, would have brought a fortune. The old lady's kin, who expected to be her heirs, were very anxious to persuade her to; and Mr. Simon Vail even brought up to Barden three gentlemen, one a mineralogist and the others clever-looking business agents, to examine the mine, and make term with her, but it was all in vain. She wouldn't even listen to what they had to say. She was old, she said, and didn't want to be bothered with such things in the remnant of her days. She hadn't long to live, and when she was gone her heirs could do as they pleased about the property; but for herself all that she desired was to be let alone, to live and die in peace. And as they left the house, I, peeping through the closet door at the head of the stairs, heard Mr. Simon muttering something about a "pig-headed obstinate old case."

I had never much fancied Mr. Simon, though most people like him, and he was the old lady's favorite. I thought he smiled too much, and there was a sort of watchful slyness in his gray eyes that reminded me of a cat. Still I knew no harm of him. He wasn't madam's own blood relation, only a nephew of her husband. Her own kin were few enough and distant enough. Mrs. Arethusa Mills and Miss Grace Brown were the nearest of these—great-nieces, both of them; and these two, with Mr. Simon, and old Doctor Hurde and his wife, and young Captain Findley, and Mr. Podgers, were all that she'd included in her will. I didn't particularly like any of them, and it was my private opinion that none of them cared overmuch for the old lady, though she wouldn't have believed it, so attentive, and respectful, and affectionate as they all behaved. Miss Grace was the only one who never made any show of being fond of her, and Miss Arethusa used often to remark in the old lady's hearing how cold and selfish the girl was. I didn't think so; but Miss Grace was young and pretty, while Miss Thusa was turned of thirty and by no means a beauty, with her long neck and dangling ringlets, and the everlasting simper upon her thin lips. So it was natural that she shouldn't be too fond of Miss Grace. They used both to

stay a good deal at Barden's Wood, for they had no money or homes of their own. Miss Arethusa generally made friends and stayed around; but Miss Grace was quiet and retiring, and most people thought her cold.

Ever since Miss Grace had been sixteen Madam Vail had wanted her to marry young Doctor Lee, as soon as he had finished his studies and settled into practice in Bolton. He was a fine young man, of a good family, but poor as a church-mouse; and madam didn't approve of the match. She argued, and coaxed, and threatened, and stormed; but Miss Grace's only answer was, "I love him, Aunt Vail, and he loves me. I have promised to become his wife, and ought to cling to him the more on account of poverty." So at last the old lady got very angry, and threatened not to leave her a penny, unless she gave up Dr. Lee. But Miss Grace, though gentle, was firm. And I know at the time of the last illness of the old lady she had actually made a will, cutting off Miss Grace, with a quarter of what she left each of the others, with the exception of Mr. Simon, to whom she bequeathed the most of the property. It had all been left her by her husband to do with as she pleased.

I was sitting knitting in madam's room at the time she was seized with the fit, which was the commencement of her last illness. From the first she seemed persuaded that she would not recover, and as soon as she was a little rallied, began to make preparations for the end. Among other things she made me bring her, in presence of Mrs. Dr. Hurde, and Mr. Simon, and Miss Arethusa, was a little ebony box with silver mountings, which she had always kept locked in her private secretary. This she unlocked, and took out three large gold lockets containing miniatures of her husband and four children, the latter of whom had all died in their childhood. I had never heard her mention them, nor had any one dared to do so in her presence—for we all knew how terribly she had taken on at their deaths. Yet now she appeared quite calm, as she looked at them one by one, and then handed them to me to put under her pillow till her lawyer should arrive.—She would herself give them to him, whom she had appointed her executor.

"They are to be put in my coffin and buried with me," she said, in conclusion. "I fancy I can rest better with those dear faces beside me; and there is no one living would prize them as I would wish."

"Ah, Aunt Abigail!" said Miss Arethusa, reproachfully, and lifting her pocket-handkerchief to her eyes—

"Dear Aunt Abigail!" said Mr. Simon, eagerly, "don't be so unjust to me, at least. This the portrait of my own dear uncle, these of my darling little cousins. I remember them as if it were yesterday.—Dear aunt, give them to me. You must know how dearly I should prize them for both your sake and theirs."

As he spoke he took the lockets from my hands, and turned to the window, as if to examine the paintings, though I saw he was looking closely at the setting. This was of white brilliants, which in the light shone dazzlingly.

"No, Simon," answered the old lady to his appeal; "no Simon, those dear faces must be buried with me. It will be a comfort to have them near me, even in death."

"What, just as they are, aunt?" asked Miss Arethusa, hesitatingly, and also glancing at the settings.

"Just as they are," she repeated feebly. "It is the only portion of my wealth that I shall take with me, and surely none of you will grudge me this little."

"They are very valuable diamonds," said Dr. Hurde, solemnly, "and—excuse me, Mrs. Vail, my dear madam, but many poor people would bless you for the comforts these could bring them."

"I have not forgotten the poor," replied

the old lady, a little sharply, I thought, "as you will see from my will. These diamonds were my husband's wedding-gift to me. I had them set in these lockets on that account. They are to be buried with me exactly as they are."

"Certainly—certainly!" said the doctor, hastily. "Any wish of yours, my dear madam, is, as you must be aware, sacred to us all."

But as I looked around, I saw some queer glances exchanged; and Mrs. Hurde, a pale, delicate, nervous woman, whispered to Miss Arethusa:

"Isn't it a shame? Real diamonds, that cost old Vail thousands of pounds, as I've been told by my mother." And Miss Arethusa, in reply, cast up her eyes and shook her head dolefully.

That night the old lady died—very suddenly, with only a gasp and a quiver to mark the last change; and before noon the next day, I and Miss Grace had decently laid her out, and Miss Grace, with tears falling quietly had crossed the poor withered hands, and placed in them a few white flowers which she gathered from her own flower-pots up stairs.

"Poor Aunt Abigail," she said, "a sad and lonely lot was hers. I trust that she is now happy with the husband and children whom she loved."

As for the rest of them—Dr. Hurde, and Mr. Simon, and young Captain Findley, and Mr. Podgers (which last two had come post-haste on hearing the news)—only come in once to see that all was right; and Miss Arethusa just peeped in at the door with her scented handkerchief to her face; whilst Mrs. Hurde kept away altogether, because she said her nerves were so delicate that she couldn't bear the sight of a corpse.

Well, they had decided to have the buttable on the day following; and that night I, and Miss Grace, and Mr. Simon, were to take turns in watching the corpse, which was laid in a coffin the lid being already screwed down. By the old lady's own desire, the funeral was to be a very quiet and plain one, only we and the servants, and a few invited neighbors attending.

Miss Grace had the first watch, and then at ten o'clock it came to my turn. For two hours I sat there watching alone beside the closed coffin, for I didn't care to have any one with me, and then at twelve Mr. Simon came in and whispered that I might now retire, and he would watch till day-break. I asked, "Would he have some one with him?" but he answered, "No;" so I went out, closing the door softly behind me, and left him there alone.

I felt very tired with the exertions of the day, and so thirsty that I thought I would go to the kitchen and get a cup of tea before retiring. There I found the cook sitting up with two or three friends who had dropped in to keep her company.

"Such doing!" exclaimed she, as I made my appearance. "There they all be up stairs in the dining-room, a eating and a drinking of poor missus' best, as if 'twas more a feast than a funeral, and she not yet in her grave. I've been kept a brillin' chickens and makin' wels rabbits for 'em, and that 'ere Capt'n Findley's a tellin' jokes about his regiment, an' settin' 'em all a latin'; and the doctor's more'n half tipsy on missus' old maderly; and if you'll b'lieve me, Miss Thusa and bald-headed, red-faced Podgers are a courtin' on the sofa behind the winder-curtin's! Sich doings no Christian ever seen before. The only well-behaved amongst 'em is Miss Grace, which is gone to bed, as she ought to, and Mr. Simon, which has looked solemn and oneasy all the time. O, my poor old missus!"

When, having taken my cup of tea, I peeped in at the dining-room door, I found it just as the cook had said. They had all taken a late supper, and were still, at half-past twelve lingering over the table; the ladies being still there because Mrs. Hurde was afraid to retire without her husband, and Miss Arethusa wouldn't go up stairs

without Mrs. Hurde. They had half a dozen bottles of the old lady's maderia on the table—wine which had been stored away forty years before by her husband, and which she never produced except a couple of bottles Christmas. And there they all sat, drinking, and laughing at Captain Findley's tipsy jokes, and planning what they were going to do with the property the old lady had left them. Poor old lady! I couldn't help wondering, as I went on to my room, what she would think of all this if she could come back and see it.

I had to pass the door of the room in which lay the corpse, and I trod softly, as people do on such occasions, as if any noise would disturb that last deep slumber! I was just past the door, when it seemed to me I heard some unusual sound in the room. I stopped and listened, and heard it again. It was like the sound of some instrument scraping and grinding, and now and then a slight tap of a hammer. What could Mr. Simon be doing? I went to the door and put my hand on the knob, but found it was locked inside.

The noise had ceased the moment I touched the knob, and then Mr. Simon came to the door, and opened it an inch or two, and in the dim light I saw that his face looked quite pale.

"Who is it? What do you want, Mrs. Hobson?" he said, quickly, and with a sort of tremor in his voice.

"Nothing. I was passing, and thought I would just look in."

"It's all right," he said; and shut the door quickly.

I stopped at the end of the passage, thinking of the strange sound I had heard, and of Mr. Simon's manner, and then I saw him open the door noiselessly and look up and down the hall, and then again the door was closed, and presently I heard the same creaking sound as before. It was like the noise that had been made by the undertaker in driving down the screws of the coffin.

I knew that to the room in which lay the corpse was another door, opening into a partially furnished and unused chamber.—This door was kept always locked; but I remembered that one of the panels was warped and cracked. And I went around, softly as I could, to this chamber, and there, in the darkness, saw the gleam of light shining through this crack from the room in which lay the corpse. I crept up, and cautiously peeped through.

Yes; it was just as I had suspected. I shudder now when I think of it.

In the middle of the room was the coffin which I had seen some hours before carefully screwed down. It was now open. The heavy lid had been twisted around and lay extended across the coffin, and stooping over the head of it was Mr. Simon, his face white and his hands trembling as they fumbled about the dead body within.

I began to tremble, too, as I stood there, breathlessly watching him. I could see the face of the dead woman, exactly opposite, and not five yards from me, raised upon a pillow; and I could even see the dead gleam of her half-closed eyes. And I saw Mr. Simon drawing aside the folds of the shroud and displacing the hands, which were crossed on the heart, take out something bright and glistening, and transfer it to his own breast pocket.

He was robbing the dead!

There were, as I have said, three of the lockets, and when he had found them all, he turned away with them and leaned over the lamp, apparently taking the miniature out of the settings. In doing this his back was turned to the coffin, so that he never saw what I did.

I saw—my blood runs cold to this day when I think of it—I saw the half-closed lids of the corpse upraise themselves, then fall, and quiver, and again unclose. I saw the pale lips move, and the thin, colorless hands tremble and grasp feebly. Then the eyes opened wide, and gazed full and steadily around—at the ceiling, at the white-draped furniture, and then at Mr. Simon.

I knew that it was no apparition, as some folks would have supposed; but a living spirit and a living body before me.—The poor old lady had been in a trance, and was just awakening. I saw, too, that, feeble and bewildered though she was, she yet fully comprehended her situation. Her gaze was fixed upon her nephew, and she watched him with dilated eyes as he roughly and hastily tore the miniatures from the costly settings, and thrust the latter into his breast. And it was in the midst of this occupation that he was aroused by the sound of a hoarse and hollow voice behind him:

"Simon!"  
Mr. Simon gave one convulsive leap as he turned around. There lay the supposed corpse, its head elevated above the edge of the coffin, its bony hands clinging to its sides, its glassy eyes fixed full upon him.—The pictures fell from his hands, and, with a frantic cry, he made one bound to the door. But his trembling hands had no power to turn the key; and then he reeled to a window, and as he reached it, fell swooning on the floor.

I believe that I too swooned, or fainted, for the first and last time in my life, for I remember nothing distinctly until I found myself rising from the floor and making the best of my way to the dining-room. I heard the sound of a smothered burst of laughter as I drew near, and the voice of Captain Findley, as if mimicking some one for the amusement of the company. But when I turned into the passage-way leading to the door, I stopped as if I had been turned into stone. For there, right before me, was the shrouded figure of Madam Vail, slowly and with difficulty, creeping along to the door of the dining-room, directed doubtless by the noise, and supporting herself against the wall as she proceeded.

I say I stood still, for I couldn't have moved another step if my life had depended on it. So two or three minutes passed, as the poor old lady crept painfully onward. I saw her reach the door at last, and stand there, supporting herself with her hands on the two door-posts. And the next minute I heard a shrill shriek from Mrs. Hurde, then a loud yell from Mr. Podgers, followed by such an uproar of screams and oaths, and the crashing of glass and furniture, as were enough to set one's wits distracted.—And presently, as the ghostly figure tottered to a sofa, the doctor and the captain came rushing past me, wild with fright, while I caught a glimpse of the two ladies lying fainting upon the floor, and Mr. Podgers' puffy figure vanishing through a window, where, by-the-by, he was picked up off the flags with a broken leg—which he deserved.

It wasn't long before the people came rushing up stairs; but one look into the dining-room was enough for them, and they fled as if for dear life. Nobody but Miss Grace and I remained. She went to the poor old lady, and supported her in her arms, bathing her forehead and hands; and seeing her do so, I summoned courage to pour out a glass of wine and hold it to her lips.

"Call Dr. Hurde," said Miss Grace to me. "Quick, or she may die!"

But the old lady feebly put out her hand. "No, no," she gasped, "not him—not them. Never, never again!"

"Go for Dr. Lee," said Miss Grace in a low voice.

And I lost no time in sending one of the servants, who returned in a short time with the young doctor. Under his charge, poor madam was presently recovered, and placed in bed, weak and exhausted, but in full possession of her senses and faculties. And the first thing she did was to send for the lawyer, and make another will. You all know what that was; how she left two-thirds of her property to Miss Grace, with her full consent to her marrying Dr. Lee, and the rest to the poor, with a handsome annuity to me, her housekeeper, Martha Hobson—for which goodness, I am, I trust, humbly and dutifully thankful.

And this is the true story of the apparition of Madam Vail, about which people have been relating such marvellous and unheard-of stories. The poor old lady only lived a day or two after her recovery from the trance.