

The Filigree Ball

By

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1. The Moore House?	3
2. I Enter	7
3. I Remain.....	15
4. Signed, Veronica	23
5. Master And Dog	31
6. Gossip	36
7. Sly Work	44
8. Slyer Woes	51
9. Jinny	55
10. Francis Jeffrey.....	58
11. Details.....	68
12. Thrust And Parry	82
13. Chiefly Thrust	90
14. Tallman! Let Us Have Tallman!	96
15. White Bow And Pink	99
16. An Egotist Of The First Water	114
17. A Fresh Start	119
18. In The Grass	127
19. In Tampa.....	131
20. The Colonel's Own.....	135
21. The Heart Of The Puzzle.....	148
22. A Thread In Hand.....	154
23. Words In The Night	162
24. Tantalizing Tactics.....	175
25. Who Will Tell The Man Inside There	180
26. Rudge	190
27. You Have Come! You Rave Sought Me!.....	195

1. The Moore House?

Are You Speaking Of The Moore House?

For a detective whose talents, had not been recognized at headquarters, I possessed an ambition which, fortunately for my standing with the lieutenant of the precinct, had not yet been expressed in words. Though I had small reason for expecting great things of myself, I had always cherished the hope that if a big case came my way I should be found able to do something with it something more, that is, than I had seen accomplished by the police of the District of Columbia since I had had the honor of being one of their number. Therefore, when I found myself plunged, almost without my own volition, into the Jeffrey Moore affair, I believed that the opportunity had come whereby I might distinguish myself.

It had complications, this Jeffrey-Moore affair; greater ones than the public ever knew, keen as the interest in it ran both in and out of Washington. This is why I propose to tell the story of this great tragedy from my own standpoint, even if in so doing I risk the charge of attempting to exploit my own connection with this celebrated case. In its course I encountered as many disappointments as triumphs, and brought out of the affair a heart as sore as it was satisfied; for I am a lover of women and -

But I am keeping you from the story itself.

I was at the station-house the night Uncle David came in. He was always called Uncle David, even by the urchins who followed him in the street; so I am showing him no disrespect, gentleman though he is, by giving him a title which as completely characterized him in those days, as did his moody ways, his quaint attire and the persistence with which he kept at his side his great mastiff, Rudge. I had long since heard of the old gentleman as one of the most interesting residents of the precinct. I had even seen him more than once on the avenue, but I had never before been brought face to face with him, and consequently had much too superficial a knowledge of his countenance to determine offhand whether the uneasy light in his small gray eyes was natural to them, or simply the result of present excitement. But when he began to talk I detected an unmistakable tremor in his tones, and decided that he was in a state of suppressed agitation; though he appeared to have nothing more alarming to impart than the fact that he had seen a light burning in some house presumably empty.

It was all so trivial that I gave him but scant attention till he let a name fall which caused me to prick up my ears and even to put in a word. "The Moore house," he had said.

"The Moore house?" I repeated in amazement. "Are you speaking of the Moore house?"

A thousand recollections came with the name.

"What other?" he grumbled, directing toward me a look as keen as it was impatient. "Do you think that I would bother myself long about a house I had no interest in, or drag Rudge from his warm rug to save some ungrateful neighbor from a possible burglary? No, it is my house which some rogue has chosen to enter. That is," he suavely corrected, as he saw surprise in every eye, "the house which the law will give me, if anything ever happens to that chit of a girl whom my brother left behind him."

Growling some words at the dog, who showed a decided inclination to lie down where he was, the old man made for the door and in another moment would have been in the street, if I had not stepped after him.

"You are a Moore and live in or near that old house?" I asked.

The surprise with which he met this question daunted me a little.

"How long have you been in Washington, I should like to ask?" was his acrid retort.

"Oh, some five months."

His good nature, or what passed for such in this irascible old man, returned in an instant; and he curtly but not unkindly remarked:

"You haven't learned much in that time." Then, with a nod more ceremonious than many another man's bow, he added, with sudden dignity: "I am of the elder branch and live in the cottage fronting the old place. I am the only resident on the block. When you have lived here longer you will know why that especial neighborhood is not a favorite one with those who can not boast of the Moore blood. For the present, let us attribute the bad name that it holds to - malaria." And with a significant hitch of his lean shoulders which set in undulating motion every fold of the old-fashioned cloak he wore, he started again for the door.

But my curiosity was by this time roused to fever heat. I knew more about this house than he gave me credit for. No one who had read the papers of late, much less a man connected with the police, could help being well informed in all the details of its remarkable history. What I had failed to know was his close relationship to the family whose name for the last two weeks had been in every mouth.

"Wait!" I called out. "You say that you live opposite the Moore house. You can then tell me -"

But he had no mind to stop for any gossip.

"It was all in the papers," he called back. "Read them. But first be sure to find out who has struck a light in the house that we all know has not even a caretaker in it."

It was good advice. My duty and my curiosity both led me to follow it.

Perhaps you have heard of the distinguishing feature of this house; if so, you do not need my explanations. But if, for any reason, you are ignorant of the facts which within a very short time have set a final seal of horror upon this old, historic dwelling, then you will be glad to read what has made and will continue to make the Moore house in Washington one to be pointed at in daylight and shunned after dark, not only by superstitious colored folk, but by all who are susceptible to the most ordinary emotions of fear and dread.

It was standing when Washington was a village. It antedates the Capitol and the White House. Built by a man of wealth, it bears to this day the impress of the large ideas and quiet elegance of colonial times; but the shadow which speedily fell across it made it a marked place even in those early days. While it has always escaped the hackneyed epithet of "haunted," families that have moved in have as quickly moved out, giving as their excuse that no happiness was to be found there and that sleep was impossible under its roof. That there was some reason for this lack of rest within walls which were not without their tragic reminiscences, all must acknowledge. Death had often occurred there, and while this fact can be stated in regard to most old houses, it is not often that one can say, as in this case, that it was invariably sudden and invariably of one character. A lifeless man, lying outstretched on a certain hearthstone, might be found once in a house and awaken no special comment; but when this same discovery has been made twice, if not thrice, during the history of a single dwelling, one might surely be pardoned a distrust of its seemingly home-like appointments, and discern in its slowly darkening walls the presence of an evil which if left to itself might perish in the natural decay of the place, but which, if met and challenged, might strike again and make another blot on its thrice-crimsoned hearthstone.

But these are old fables which I should hardly, presume to mention, had it not been for the recent occurrence which has recalled them to all men's minds and given to this long empty and slowly crumbling building an importance which has spread its fame from one end of the country to the other. I refer to the tragedy attending the wedding lately celebrated there.

Veronica Moore, rich, pretty and wilful, had long cherished a strange liking for this frowning old home of her ancestors, and, at the most critical time of her life, conceived the idea of proving to herself and to society at large that no real ban lay upon it save in the imagination of the superstitious. So, being about to marry the choice of her young heart, she caused this house to be opened for the wedding ceremony; with what result, you know.

Though the occasion was a joyous one and accompanied by all that could give cheer to such a function, it had not escaped the old-time shadow. One of the guests straying into the room of ancient and unhallowed memory, the one room which had not been thrown

open to the crowd, had been found within five minutes of the ceremony lying on its dolorous hearthstone, dead; and though the bride was spared a knowledge of the dreadful fact till the holy words were said, a panic had seized the guests and emptied the houses suddenly and completely as though the plague had been discovered there.

This is why I hastened to follow Uncle David when he told me that all was not right in this house of tragic memories.

2. I Enter

Though past seventy, Uncle David was a brisk walker, and on this night in particular he sped along so fast that he was half-way down H Street by the time I had turned the corner at New Hampshire Avenue.

His gaunt but not ungraceful figure, merged in that of the dog trotting closely at his heels, was the only moving object in the dreary vista of this the most desolate block in Washington. As I neared the building, I was so impressed by the surrounding stillness that I was ready to vow that the shadows were denser here than elsewhere and that the few gas lamps, which flickered at intervals down the street, shone with a more feeble ray than in any other equal length of street in Washington.

Meanwhile, the shadow of Uncle David had vanished from the pavement. He had paused beside a fence which, hung with vines, surrounded and nearly hid from sight the little cottage he had mentioned as the only house on the block with the exception of the great Moore place; in other words, his own home.

As I came abreast of him I heard him muttering, not to his dog as was his custom, but to himself. In fact, the dog was not to be seen, and this desertion on the part of his constant companion seemed to add to his disturbance and affect him beyond all reason. I could distinguish these words amongst the many he directed toward the unseen animal:

"You're a knowing one, too knowing! You see that loosened shutter over the way as plainly as I do; but you're a coward to slink away from it. I don't. I face the thing, and what's more, I'll show you yet what I think of a dog that can't stand his ground and help his old master out with some show of courage. Creaks, does it? Well, let it creak! I don't mind its creaking, glad as I should be to know whose hand - Halloo! You've come, have you?" This to me. I had just stepped up to him.

"Yes, I've come. Now what is the matter with the Moore house?"

He must have expected the question, yet his answer was a long time coming. His voice, too, sounded strained, and was pitched quite too high to be natural. But he evidently did not expect me to show surprise at his manner.

"Look at that window over there!" he cried at last. "That one with the slightly open shutter! Watch and you will see that shutter move. There! it creaked; didn't you hear it?"

A growl - it was more like a moan - came from the porch behind us. Instantly the old gentleman turned and with a gesture as fierce as it was instinctive, shouted out:

"Be still there! If you haven't the courage to face a blowing shutter, keep your jaws shut and don't let every fellow who happens along know what a fool you are. I declare," he maundered on, half to himself and half to me, "that dog is getting old. He can't be trusted

any more. He forsakes his master just when -" The rest was lost in his throat which rattled with something more than impatient anger.

Meanwhile I had been attentively scrutinizing the house thus pointedly brought to my notice.

I had seen it many times before, but, as it happened, had never stopped to look at it when the huge trees surrounding it were shrouded in darkness. The black hollow of its disused portal looked out from shadows which acquired some of their somberness from the tragic memories connected with its empty void.

Its aspect was scarcely reassuring. Not that superstition lent its terrors to the lonely scene, but that through the blank panes of the window, alternately appearing and disappearing from view as the shutter pointed out by Uncle David blew to and fro in the wind, I saw, or was persuaded that I saw, a beam of light which argued an unknown presence within walls which had so lately been declared unfit for any man's habitation.

"You are right," I now remarked to the uneasy figure at my side. "Some one is prowling through the house yonder. Can it possibly be Mrs. Jeffrey or her husband?"

"At night and with no gas in the house? Hardly."

The words were natural, but the voice was not. Neither was his manner quite suited to the occasion. Giving him another sly glance, and marking how uneasily he edged away from me in the darkness, I cried out more cheerily than he possibly expected:

"I will summon another officer and we three will just slip across and investigate."

"Not I!" was his violent rejoinder, as he swung open a gate concealed in the vines behind him. "The Jeffreys would resent my intrusion if they ever happened to hear of it."

"Indeed!" I laughed, sounding my whistle; then, soberly enough, for I was more than a little struck by the oddity of his behavior and thought him as well worth investigation as the house in which he showed such an interest: "You shouldn't let that count. Come and see what's up in the house you are so ready to call yours."

But he only drew farther into the shade.

"I have no business over there," he objected. "Veronica and I have never been on good terms. I was not even invited to her wedding though I live within a stone's throw of the door. No; I have done my duty in calling attention to that light, and whether it's the bull's-eye of a burglar - perhaps you don't know that there are rare treasures on the book shelves of the great library - or whether it is the fantastic illumination which frightens fool-folks and some fool-dogs, I'm done with it and done with you, too, for to-night."

As he said this, he mounted to his door and disappeared under the vines, hanging like a shroud over the front of the house. In another moment the rich peal of an organ sounded from within, followed by the prolonged howling of Rudge, who, either from a too keen appreciation of his master's music or in utter disapproval of it, - no one, I believe, has ever been able to make out which, - was accustomed to add this undesirable accompaniment to every strain from the old man's hand. The playing did not cease because of these outrageous discords. On the contrary, it increased in force and volume, causing Rudge's expression of pain or pleasure to increase also. The result can be imagined. As I listened to the intolerable howls of the dog cutting clean through the exquisite harmonies of his master, I wondered if the shadows cast by the frowning structure of the great Moore house were alone to blame for Uncle David's lack of neighbors.

Meantime, Hibbard, who was the first to hear my signal, came running down the block. As he joined me, the light, or what we chose to call a light, appeared again in the window toward which my attention had been directed.

"Some one's in the Moore house!" I declared, in as matter-of-fact tones as I could command.

Hibbard is a big fellow, the biggest fellow on the force, and so far as my own experience with him had gone, as stolid and imperturbable as the best of us. But after a quick glance at the towering walls of the lonely building, he showed decided embarrassment and seemed in no haste to cross the street.

With difficulty I concealed my disgust.

"Come," I cried, stepping down from the curb, "let's go over and investigate. The property is valuable, the furnishings handsome, and there is no end of costly books on the library shelves. You have matches and a revolver?"

He nodded, quietly showing me first the one, then the other; then with a sheepish air which he endeavored to carry off with a laugh, he cried:

"Have you use for 'em? If so, I'm quite willing, to part with 'em for a half-hour."

I was more than amazed at this evidence of weakness in one I had always considered as tough and impenetrable as flint rock. Thrusting back the hand with which he had half drawn into view the weapon I had mentioned, I put on my sternest air and led the way across the street. As I did so, tossed back the words:

"We may come upon a gang. You do not wish me to face some half-dozen men alone?"

"You won't find any half-dozen men there," was his muttered reply. Nevertheless he followed me, though with less spirit than I liked, considering that my own manner was in a measure assumed and that I was not without sympathy - well, let me, say, for a dog who

preferred howling a dismal accompaniment to his master's music, to keeping open watch over a neighborhood dominated by the unhallowed structure I now propose to enter.

The house is too well known for me to attempt a minute description of it. The illustrations which have appeared in all the papers have already acquainted the general public with its simple facade and rows upon rows of shuttered windows. Even the great square porch with its bench for negro attendants has been photographed for the million. Those who have seen the picture in which the wedding-guests are shown flying from its yawning doorway, will not be especially interested in the quiet, almost solemn aspect it presented as I passed up the low steps and laid my hand upon the knob of the old-fashioned front door.

Not that I expected to win an entrance thereby, but because it is my nature to approach everything in a common-sense way. Conceive then my astonishment when at the first touch the door yielded. It was not even latched.

"So! so!" thought I. "This is no fool's job; some one is in the house."

I had provided myself with an ordinary pocket-lantern, and, when I had convinced Hibbard that I fully meant to enter the house and discover for myself who had taken advantage of the popular prejudice against it to make a secret refuge or rendezvous of its decayed old rooms, I took out this lantern and held it in readiness.

"We may strike a hornets' nest," I explained to Hibbard, whose feet seemed very heavy even for a man of his size. "But I'm going in and so are you. Only, let me suggest that we first take off our shoes. We can hide them in these bushes."

"I always catch cold when I walk barefooted," mumbled my brave companion; but receiving no reply he drew off his shoes and dropped them beside mine in the cluster of stark bushes which figure so prominently in the illustrations that I have just mentioned. Then he took out his revolver, and cocking it, stood waiting, while I gave a cautious push to the door.

Darkness! silence!

Rather had I confronted a light and heard some noise, even if it had been the ominous click to which we are so well accustomed. Hibbard seemed to share my feelings, though from an entirely different cause.

"Pistols and lanterns are no good here," he grumbled. "What we want at this blessed minute is a priest with a sprinkling of holy water; and I for one -"

He was actually sliding off.

With a smothered oath I drew him back.

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