

Wet Eyes and Sad Mouth

By Richard Middleton

He loosed his hands away from the bruised throat, and took a short step back to look at the thing he had done.

It was not a pretty sight, though he had to own to himself that there was something attractive about the face. He found himself wondering what it was. Not the mouth, certainly, with its loathsome droop of passive suffering, that still was there, even though the lips were parted in one last automatic effort to sob in breath to the bursting lungs. Nor could it be the eyes, wide open and protruding, and smudged round the lids with grimy marks of tears. The nose was snub, and the chin was weak.

“Ah! that is it,” he said to himself at last. “It is not the picture, it is the frame. It is her hair, the way it clings to the face, the way it plays about her neck. Ah! her neck!”

He looked thoughtfully at the dull blues and blacks on her throat, which looked stringy because the head was thrown back so far.

“I have strong fingers,” he said softly, looking at his hands and wondering to find them unstained. “And I did not let go. Yes, I have strong hands.”

He felt a little proud of his work. In his life he had missed the triumph of making things, but now, his was the strong joy of having broken something.

“I have crushed you, my dear,” he said amiably to the body. “You will not torture me with your wet eyes and your sad mouth any more. You will not smile weakly when I curse you; you will not sob softly to yourself when I strike you. You are dead!”

And pleased with his conceit he struck the face of the corpse a savage blow with his fist.

It was cold and loathsome to the touch, but the bosom did not heave, the eyes did not soften and moisten the dull cheeks with tears, and he was satisfied.

“Dead,” he said. “Dead, my dear.” And he turned his back contemptuously on the corpse and went across the room to the window.

It was a lovely spring morning with a cloudless sky of blue, and a glorious London sun was climbing up the heavens. Among the trees in the square the birds were singing joyfully, he could see the white pinafores of children playing on the grass in the gardens. Something of the joy of spring seized the man, bringing with it a mingled feeling of hope and regret.

“Damn!” he cried. “The years I have wasted—utterly wasted. Well, anyhow, I am free now. Free!” And he laughed lightly and happily.

What it meant! No longer bound to a weak woman, but a strong man free. Free to laugh, free to enjoy the spring, free to marry, if he wanted to. But he would not do that, he would—what was the word?—philander, that was it, flower to flower, like a butterfly. His spirit was free, and it was the time of spring.

He looked cheerfully at the body.

“The first thing I shall do is to clear away this—this mess,” he said, and he strode back to the bedside.

Yes, it was the hair. There was no doubt about it. It would have been awkward if it had been the mouth or the eyes. The thought made him shudder. But that was all nonsense. It was the hair, certainly.

The way it clung to the face.

And yet—

It was a fine spring morning and he was free, free to do what he wished, the whole world through. The best thing to do would be to get away and leave it all. The rooms were taken in her name. Everything was in her name. That was lucky. Of course, there would be a fuss when she was found, but he would be far away by that time. “Over the hills and far away.” He laughed aloud. Far from her eyes and mouth and everything. Oh, but he had forgotten those, anyhow, and she was dead. They would trouble him no more, for it was her hair that had caught him. And now he was free.

He opened his Gladstone bag on the floor by the bedside, and began putting his things in neatly. His packing was one of the little things he was proud of, and as he bustled about the room he sang a song, a nursery rhyme, that the spring had given back to his memory. Oh, he would be young again. It was the spring and a jolly day.

Presently he remembered his pyjamas which were on the pillow under her head. He lifted it not unkindly and drew them out.

“What pretty hair!” he said, and found with a shock that he was not looking at her hair. He dropped her head hastily and took refuge in his packing. There was room for his brown shoes here. Oh, and there was a collar on the floor in the corner and his sponge. It would not do to forget them. He cast a glance round the room to make sure that he had not overlooked anything, but all his things seemed to be safely packed. His glance finally fell back on the corpse.

“Poor thing!” he said with a contemptuous pity. “So dead and it is springtime. She cannot hear it,” and he paused to listen to the birds, and the children singing together out in the square. Presently he found himself saying absently:

“I wonder whether dead people always have wet eyes,” and he flung himself viciously on his knees, and fastened the bag.

He got up from the ground with his spirits a little dashed, and put on his overcoat, looking angrily at the body.

“If you haunt me—!” he cried, shaking his fist at it.

But in a minute he knew this was folly, because it was her hair, and he had forgotten.

So he lit a cigarette and picking up his bag and hat, he stepped firmly to the door.

“Good-bye, my dear!” he said scornfully over his shoulder with his hand on the handle of the door.

“Good-bye, my—dear.”

And a minute later he walked out of the house, as one who is free.

Certainly, he had forgotten.