

"Only a Mistake."

BY CLARENCE MAIKO.



ANY student of Mental Philosophy will tell you that every impression received by our brain cells at any time and under all circumstances, no matter whether we be sober or drunk, on the field of battle or in the region of abstract thought, is recorded on the tablets of memory, and is never lost. Moreover, it is a singular fact that the proper degree of molecular vibration being excited in the brain, no matter by what cause, — and the possible causes are without number, — these thoughts spring into active and conscious reexistence, for they have never been destroyed. Here lies the key to some interesting phenomena.

Have you ever on making a call thought you had hung your hat up on the hall rack, and when leaving sought there vainly for the very hat which perhaps you were holding in your hand? If you have, you know how unpleasantly this little trick of your brain jarred your reason, in spite of your involuntary apology that "it was only a mistake, a trifling, absent-minded mistake, after all."

It was all because of just such a little mistake, on the part of Mrs. Starr, that foolish persons who postulate, "Marriage is a failure," used to point triumphantly at Starr and his wife. All on account of a queer little brain trick, Mrs. Starr blighted her husband's life and her own.

Still, when they harnessed up together for better or for worse, no couple could be more devotedly in love with one another than were they.

This forms a rather sad but, I think, profitable little story.

Now that the principals concerned are dead and gone, the physician who attended Mrs. Starr says I am at liberty to tell the tale. He laughs, as he is entitled to, at the construction I put

upon the facts, — but inconsistently evades sitting in judgment on the case.

Men remember Mrs. Starr as the beautiful Miss Snell, for her face in those days was a face that no man could quite forget. She was the most utterly ruthless coquette of her day. The family means, in her generation, had fallen far below what was necessary to keep up the prestige of the family name.

Her papa and her mamma never ceased to lament that fact, and Miss Snell was dutifully impressed in her early girlhood that her beauty must win back the departed family glories by social achievements. How well it did everybody knows.

By a mere coincidence, among the persons chained by her smiles was a Boy who did not have much of anything but a naval commission, some brass buttons, and a sword.

This business with the Boy was quite unnecessary. Miss Snell had nothing to gain by winning the Boy's love; still, she even went out of her way to do it. The Boy avoided her because he knew she was unobtainable for him, and because the first time he looked into her eyes he knew, with but half a chance, he would love her very badly. Miss Snell knew it, too, but if the Boy had not avoided her, she would not have done what she did.

She was engaged to another man at the time — it was her third, — and she deliberately broke that engagement that she might be free to deal with the Boy. This was most effectually accomplished.

He was a queer mixture of poet and sailor, the Boy was, and Miss Snell was a little shocked at the tempest she invoked within him. There was something in his glorious avowal of love that made former protestations pale into insignificance. It carried her away for the moment, and she gave him her lips and she gave him her promise, knowing very well in her heart of hearts it was the old story of love on one side and submission on the other. But marriage on his pay was impossible, so the Boy went off to his ship, and Miss Snell back to her triumphs in the social whirl of the city.

The letters that came to her from every port the Boy's ship made were rather remarkable. They were of a new breed and species. The writer seemed to have an uncanny divination of

everything the woman he loved did or thought. In spite of that, and most pitiful of all, an immeasurable love breathed forth from every line. No man should write the things he wrote to any living woman. At last a letter came from Honolulu that was so touching in its pathos, so abject in its devotion, and still so marvelously prophetic in its conception of Miss Snell's life, that she felt called upon to write him some truths. This was just about the time she met Starr, and fell a victim herself to the passion she had trifled with so often.

When the Boy received her letter he went down to his quarters in the wardroom, and blew his brains all over the nice white paint that covered the cruiser's armored walls. Out of decency's sake the surgeon called it a pistol-cleaning accident, but he was brutal enough to send back a blood-splashed letter that he found all twisted up in the Boy's hand, to the woman who wrote it far away at home.

The night before the Starr-Snell nuptials Miss Snell did what all other girls would have done, religiously burned all those fantastic, extravagant letters the Boy had written her. It was rather peculiar that she found the red-stained letter which had been the Boy's death-warrant and his last letter to her from Honolulu lying together in her bureau drawer, apart from all the others, heaped carelessly in a compartment of her escritoire. She did not remember putting them away among her laces and her bon-bonnières, but there they were, so she took them over to the fire a little gingerly and tossed them after their fellows into the dancing flames.

Then she sat down and watched them curl and crinkle in the eager, lapping flame, till the draught caught the feathery black ashes and carried them up the sooty chimney flue. Speculation on Miss Snell's thoughts at this time is, I think, entirely problematical.

Popular fancy has it that just before death and just before marriage one's thoughts grow rapt — abstracted, and the faces of old loves and the faces of old friends come to look in on one as they knew one in bygone days. So it is reasonable to suppose that as Miss Snell languidly reposed in the glow of her bedroom hearth, among the faces that chased one another across her mental vision

was the haggard, appealing face of the Boy; this, however, is not given us to know.

The wedding on the following noon was an event of social importance and it came off with great *éclat*. But the crowds, and the music, and the flowers, and even the six charming Watteau shepherdesses with ribboned crooks, who were the bridesmaids, do not concern us here. In fact, my friend, Mrs. Starr's physician, tells me that all I have written so far is rather incidental and almost superfluous. He quite refuses to acknowledge the connection between the past events of Mrs. Starr's life and what happened later. Our premises are so radically divergent that with him it could not be otherwise. But let it be plain there is no question at all about what is to follow.

Hardly had the couple returned from their wedding journey, when Starr called on the doctor and told him "he was worried about the health of his wife. Mrs. Starr," he said, "was in an unaccountably nervous and hysterical condition, and was growing more wan and hollow-eyed as each day went by." The man of medicine went and looked at her, found that this was true, prescribed the usual remedies and continued to visit her occasionally; but he did not learn the cause of her trouble till some time had expired; and, when he did learn, it was from Mrs. Starr's own lips that part of it came, Starr himself not only corroborating in general all she said, but adding a great deal more.

The first evening of their honeymoon, when unpacking her things, Mrs. Starr was rather unnerved to find, all covered up among the dainty feminine belongings in the tray of her trunk, the two identical love letters that she had watched burn to a crisp and fly up the black chimney flue. Unexplainable as their presence was, she could only put it down to a mistaken impression on her part, and she made certain to destroy them this time beyond question or doubt. Into a gas jet she hastily thrust them, and a second time she watched the flame creep over the unwelcome letters, turning them into two charred black curls which fell in broken flakes on the floor, and there were ground into impalpable dust by two angry little heels. That this was not witnessed by her husband is almost unnecessary to add.

When Mrs. Starr found the very same letters in the very same

place a day or so after, a thrill of alarm chilled her through and through. With sickening dread she tore them into a hundred fragments, and threw them fearfully out of her window, into the hurly-burly of a winter storm.

Although she became positively ill from her scare at the supernatural reappearance of the letters, she did not tell her husband about the matter, but, womanlike, tried to pray herself into belief that it was only a mistake, after all,—a mere common, ordinary, every-day mistake. And this was wrong.

In a short time the couple returned to the city, and Mrs. Starr's condition so alarmed her husband that he called on her physician. She kept the cause of her trouble entirely secret, but how often she found and destroyed those two mysterious letters during this time is not known. Physically she rapidly grew worse, though her husband showered on her a wealth of loving care and attention. Her peace of mind and her happiness were fast becoming utterly destroyed.

One night Starr awoke, and in the half light he saw the white-robed figure of his wife on her knees before the open drawer of her bureau. She seemed to be holding something in her hands, which she was regarding with a look of terror.

"What is wrong, sweetheart? Does anything trouble you?" asked Starr soothingly.

At the sound of her husband's voice the woman carried her hands to her face and rose. Then she tottered over towards him repeating mechanically in a low whisper of despair:—

"Oh, my God! Oh, my God!"

When she reached her couch she sank back on the pillows, choking with dry, tearless sobs.

Starr rose and turned on the light, and looked to see what had alarmed his wife; in vain, for there was nothing there. All that a loving man could do to compose and quiet her he did.

In the lull that followed she told him something—not all—of the strange reincarnations of those letters, just enough to startle him and arouse his curiosity immensely; but he was wise enough at the time not to ask to see them or ask anything else about them. Nevertheless he determined to watch very carefully their next manifestation and use caustic remedies for their disposal.

Mrs. Starr had found that attempts to destroy those letters were utterly useless, for they always came back, and, besides, hating and loathing them as she did, they began to exert over her mind a marvelous fascination. Though she quivered when she saw the muddy red blots on her letter, she craved to look into it, and she was no more content with a mere glance at its Honolulu post-mark and at the neat blue letter-head of the other. So she commenced to read them—lingeringly, feeling all the while that with every word she read she was driving another nail into the coffin of her happiness.

This harrowing desire to contemplate those letters came to her most often at night, and then she would rise from her husband's side, steal over to her bureau drawer, and mumble away in the dim yellow light the things the Boy wrote to her before she killed him.

Of course her husband saw her doing this one night, and he went over to her with loving words and caresses, which, strange to say, she recoiled from as if they had been blows.

Perhaps that was why Starr foolishly asked her why she was "standing there muttering those nonsensical things." In answer she held her hands up in front of his face, — just exactly as you would hold a letter for a person to read, and Starr saw there was absolutely nothing in her hands; but he did not say so to her. He asked her quietly to read the letter to him, and thereby wrought his own and her undoing.

Mrs. Starr read the letters to him — both of them, from date to superscription, — in a low, metallic monotone, — for all the world as if the real writing were in her hands.

The letter from the Boy came first, and before two lines were read Starr knew — what only a few people did know — that his wife had given her pledge and her kisses to the Boy long before she gave them to himself.

The Boy said he "went down on his knees in his cabin at night and prayed to his God to do to him the worst if that would only make the happiness of the woman he loved!" Oh, that was not all he said. He wrote things that it is better not to mention or to print. And he told of long, clinging kisses given and taken, "kisses that had taught him why it is the world is sometimes bartered for a woman's kiss."

It was too, too much for poor Starr, — too much for any husband to hear from any wife’s lips; and because it was only a phantom, a memory, that could not be explained away, it seemed ever so much the worse.

When Mrs. Starr finished reading her reply to the Boy’s letter her husband had collapsed, and was only semi-conscious. Then she bent down and electrified him by pointing with her finger to certain round brown splashes, unseen by him, which she whispered were “Blood! Blood!”

Starr gave a great cry and rushed out of the bedroom. A half an hour later, white and shaking, he told the doctor his wife was crazy, and added rather brokenly that he felt he “could never bear to see her again.”

Up to the very last Mrs. Starr continued to find those letters every day. She found them hidden under dainty, fragrant lingerie in her bureau drawer, under her pillow at night, and sometimes even in the very bosom of the dress she wore. In agony she was doomed to read them over and over again, till she could read no more.

There are people who do not know why Starr and his wife drifted away from one another, and who are inclined to call Starr a brute.

My own opinion is that Providence stepped into the lives of Starr and his wife and commenced business a little sooner than is His usual custom.

But the saddest part of it all is this: for Starr’s sake the woman would have gone on her hands and knees through all the world, — so much I know.

