The Haunted Chamber.

BY "THE DUCHESS."

Author of "Monica," "Mona Scully," "Phyllis," etc., etc.

CHAPTER IX.

The night passes; the next day dawns, deepens, grows into noon, and still nothing happens to relieve the terrible anxiety that is felt by all within the castle as to the fate of its missing master. They weary themselves out wondering, idly but incessantly, what can have become of him.

The second day comes and goes, so does the third and the fourth, the fifth and the sixth, and then the seventh dawns.

Florence Delmaine, who has been half-distracted with conflicting fears and emotions, and who has been sitting in her room apart from the others, with her head bent down and resting on her hands, suddenly raising her eyes, sees Dora standing before her.

The widow is looking haggard and hollow-eyed. All her dainty freshness has gone, and she now looks in years what in reality she is, close on thirty-five. Her lips are pale and drooping, her cheeks colorless; her whole air is suggestive of deep depression, the result of sleepless nights and days filled with grief and suspense of the most poignant nature.

"Alas, how well she loves him too!" thinks Florence, contemplating her in silence. Dora, advancing, lays her hand upon the table near Florence, and says, in a hurried impassioned tone—

"Oh, Florence, what has become of him? What has been done to him? I have tried to hide my terrible anxiety for the past two miserable days, but now I feel I must speak to some one or go mad!"

She smites her hands together, and, sinking into a chair, looks as if she is going to faint. Florence, greatly alarmed, rises from her chair, and, running to her, places her arm round her as though to support her. But Dora repulses her almost roughly and motions her away.

"Do not touch me!" she cries hoarsely. "Do not come near me; you, of all people, should be the last to come to my assistance! Besides, I am not here to talk about myself, but of him. Florence, have you any suspicion?"

Dora leans forward and looks scrutinizingly at her cousin, as though fearing, yet hoping to get an answer in the affirmative. But Florence shakes her head.

"I have no suspicion—none," she answers sadly. "If I had should I not act upon it, whatever it might cost me?"

"Would you," asks Dora eagerly, as though impressed by her companion's words—"whatever it might cost you?"

Her manner is so strange that Florence pauses before replying.

"Yes," she says at last. "No earthly consideration should keep me from using any knowledge I might by accident or otherwise become possessed of to lay bare this mystery. Dora," she cries suddenly, "if you know anything, I implore, I entreat you to say so."

"What should I know?" responds the widow, recoiling.

"You loved him too," says Florence piteously, now more than ever convinced that Dora is keeping something hidden from her. "For the sake of that love, disclose anything you may know about this awful matter."

"I dare not speak openly," replies the widow, growing even a shade paler, "because my suspicion is of the barest character, and may be altogether wrong. Yet there are moments when some hidden instinct within my breast whispers to me that I am on the right track."

"If so," murmurs Florence, falling upon her knees before her, "do not hesitate; follow up this instinctive feeling; and who knows but something may come of it! Dora, do not delay. Soon, soon—if not already—it may be too late. Alas," she cries, bursting into bitter tears, "what do I say? Is it not too late even now? What hope can there be after six long days, and no tidings?"

"I will do what I can, I am resolved," declares Dora, rising abruptly to her feet. "If too late to do any good, it may not be too late to wring the truth from him, and bring the murderer to justice."

"From him? From whom — what murderer?" exclaims Florence, in a voice of horror. "Dora, what are you saying?"

"Never mind. Let me go now; and to-night—this evening let me come to you here again, and tell you the result of what I am now about to do."

She quits the room as silently as she entered it, and Florence, sinking back in her chair, gives herself up to the excitement and amazement that are overpowering her. There is something else, too, in her thoughts that is puzzling and perplexing her; in all Dora's manner there was nothing that would lead her to think that she loved Sir Adrian; there was fear, and a desire for revenge in it, but none of the despair of a loving woman who had lost the man to whom she has given her heart.

Florence is still pondering these things, while Dora, going swiftly down stairs, turns into the side hall, glancing into library and rooms as she goes along, plainly in search of something or some one.

At last her search is successful; in a small room she finds Arthur Dynecourt apparently reading, as he sits in a large arm-chair, with his eyes fixed intently upon the book in his hand. Seeing her, he closes the volume, and, throwing it from him, says carelessly:

"Pshaw — what contemptible trash they write nowadays!"

"How can you sit here calmly reading," exclaims Dora vehemently, "when we are all so distressed in mind! But I forgot"—with a meaning glance "you gain by his death; we do not."

"No, you lose," he retorts coolly. "Though, after all, even had things been different, I can't say I think you had much chance at any time."

He smiles insolently at her as he says this. But she pays no heed either to his words or his smile. Her whole soul seems wrapped in one thought, and at last she gives expression to it.

"What have you done with him?" she breaks forth, advancing toward him, as though to compel him to give her an answer to the question that has been torturing her for days past.

"With whom?" he asks coldly. Yet there is a forbidding gleam in his eyes that should have warned her to forbear.

"With Sir Adrian—with your rival, with the man you hate," she cries, her breath coming in little irrepressible gasps. "Dynecourt, I adjure you to speak the truth, and say what has become of him."

"You rave," he says calmly, lifting his eyebrows just a shade, as though in pity for her foolish excitement. "I confess the man was no favorite of mine, and that I can not help being glad of this chance that has presented itself in his extraordianry disappearance of my inheriting his place and title; but really, my dear creature, I know as little of what has become of him, as—I presume—you do yourself."

"You lie!" cries Dora, losing all control over herself. "You have murdered him, to get him out of your path. His death lies at your door."

She points her finger at him as though in condemnation as she utters these words, but still he does not flinch.

"They will take you for a Bedlamite," he says, with a sneering laugh, "if you conduct yourself like this. Where are your proofs that I am the cold-blooded ruffian you think me?"

"I have none"—in a despairing tone. "But I shall make it the business of my life to find them."

"You had better devote your time to some other purpose," he exclaims savagely, laying his hand upon her wrist with an amount of force that leaves a red mark upon the delicate flesh. Do you hear me? You must be mad to go on like this to me. I know nothing of Adrian, but I know a good deal of your designing conduct, and your wild jealousy of Florence Delmaine. All the world saw how devoted he was to her, and—mark what I say—there have been instances of a jealous woman killing the man she loved, rather than see him in the arms of another."

"Demon!" shrieks Dora, recoiling from him. "You would fix the crime on me?"

"Why not? I think the whole case tells terribly against you. Hitherto I have spared you, I have refrained from hinting even at the fact that your jealousy had been aroused of late; but your conduct of to-day, and the wily manner in which you have sought to accuse me of being implicated in this unfortunate mystery connected with my unhappy cousin, have made me forget my forbearance. Be warned in time, cease to persecute me about this matter, or—wretched woman that you are—I shall certainly make it my business to investigate the entire matter, and bring you to justice!"

He speaks with such an air of truth, of thorough belief in her guilt, that Dora is dazed, bewildered, and, falling back from him covers her face with her hands. The fear of publicity, of having her late intrigue brought into the glare of day, fills her with consternation. And then, what will she gain by it? Nothing; she has no evidence on which to convict this man; all is mere supposition. She bitterly feels the weakness of her position, and her inability to follow up her accusation.

"Ah, how like a guilty creature you stand there!" exclaims Dynecourt, regarding her bowed and trembling figure. "I see plainly that this must be looked into. Miserable woman! If you know aught of my cousin, you had better declare it now."

"Traitor!" cries Dora, raising her pale face and looking at him with horror and defiance. "You triumph now, because, as yet, I have no evidence to support my belief; but"—she hesitates.

"Ah, brazen it out to the last!" says Dynecourt insolently. "Defy me while you can. To-day I shall set the bloodhounds of the law upon your track, so beware—beware!"

"You refuse to tell me anything?" exclaims Dora, ignoring his words, and treating them as though they are unheard. "So much the worse for you."

She turns from him, and leaves the room as she finishes speaking; but, though her words have been defiant there is no kindred feeling in her heart to bear her up.

When the door closes between them, the flush dies out of her face, and she looks even more wan and hopeless than she did before seeking his presence. She can not deny to herself that her mission has been a failure. He has openly scoffed at her threats, and she is aware that she has not a shred of actual evidence wherewith to support her suspicion; the bravado with which he has sought to turn the tables upon herself both frightens and disheartens her, and now she confesses to herself that she knows not where to turn for counsel.

CHAPTER X.

In the meantime the daylight dwindles, and twilight descends. Even that too departs, and now darkness falls upon the distressed household, and still there is no news of Sir Adrian.

Arthur Dynecourt, who is already beginning to be treated with due respect as the next heir to the baronetcy, has quietly hinted to old Lady FitzAlmont that perhaps it will be as well, in the extraordinary circumstances, if they all take their departure. This the old lady, though strongly disinclined to quit the castle, is debating in her own mind, and, being swayed by Lady Gertrude, who is secretly rather bored by the dullness that has ensued on the strange absence of their host, decides to leave on the morrow, to the great distress of both Dora and Florence Delmaine, who shrink from deserting the castle while its master's fate is undecided. But they are also sensible that, to remain the only female guests, would be to outrage the conventionalities.

Henry Villiers, Ethel's father, is also of opinion that they should all quit the castle without delay. He is a hunting man, an M. F. H. in his own county, and is naturally anxious to get back to his own quarters some time before the hunting-season commences. Some others have already gone, and altogether it seems to Florence that there is no other course open to her but to pack up and desert him, whom she loves, in the hour of his direst need. For there are moments even now when she tells herself that he is still living, and only waiting for a saving hand to drag him into smooth waters once again.

A silence has fallen upon the house more melancholy than the loudest expression of grief. The servants are conversing over their supper in frightened whispers, and conjecturing moodily as to the fate of their late master. To them Sir Adrian is indeed dead, if not buried.

In the servants' corridor a strange dull light is being flung upon the polished boards by a hanging-lamp that is burning dimly, as though oppressed by the dire evil that has fallen upon the old castle. No sound is to be heard here in this spot, remote from the rest of the house, where the servants seldom come except to go to bed, and never indeed without an inward shudder as they pass the door that leads to the haunted chamber.

Just now, being at their supper, there is no fear that any of them will be about, and so the dimly lighted corridor is wrapped in an unbroken silence. Not quite unbroken, however. What is this that strikes upon the ear? What sound comes to break the unearthly stillness? A creeping footstep, a cautious tread, a slinking, halting, uncertain motion, belonging surely to some one who sees an enemy, a spy in every flitting shadow. Nearer and nearer it comes now into the fuller glare of the lamp-light, and stops short at the door so dreaded by the castle servants.

Looking uneasily around him, Arthur Dynecourt—for it is he—unfastens the door, and, entering hastily, closes it firmly behind him, and ascends the staircase within. There is no halting in his footsteps now, no uncertainty, no caution, only a haste that betokens a desire to get his errand over as quick as possible.

Having gained the first landing, he walks slowly and on tiptoe again, and, creeping up the stone stairs, crouches down so as to bring his ear on a level with the lower chink of the door.

Alas, all is still; no faintest groan can be heard! The silence of Death is all around. In spite of his hardihood, the cold sweat of fear breaks out upon Dynecourt's brow; and yet he tells himself that now he is satisfied, all is well, his victim is secure, is beyond the power of words or kindly search to recall him to life. He may be discovered now as soon as they like. Who can fix the fact of his death upon him? There is no blow, no mark of violence to criminate any one. He is safe, and all the wealth he had so coveted is at last his own!

There is something fiendish in the look of exultation that lights Arthur Dynecourt's face. He has a small dull lantern with him, and now it reveals the vile glance of triumph that fires his eyes. He would fain have entered to gaze upon his victim, to assure himself of his victory, but he refrains. A deadly fear that he may not yet be quite dead keeps him back, and, with a frown, he prepares to descend once more.

Again he listens, but the sullen roar of the rising night wind is all that can be heard. His hand shakes, his face assumes a livid hue, yet he tells himself that surely this deadly silence is better than he listened to last night. Then a ghostly moaning, almost incessant and unearthly in sound, had pierced his brain. It was more like the cry of a dying brute than that of a man. Sir Adrian slowly starved to death! In his own mind Arthur can see him now, worn, emaciated, lost to all likeness of anything fair or comely. Have the rats attacked him yet? As this grewsome thought presents itself, Dynecourt rises quickly from his crouching position, and, flying down the steps, does not stop running until he arrives in the corridor below again.

He dashes into this like one possessed; but, finding himself in the light of the hanging lamp, collects himself by a violent effort, and looks around.

Yes, all is still. No living form but his is near. The corridor, as he glances affrightedly up and down, is empty. He can see nothing but his own shadow, at sight of which he starts and turns pale and shudders.

The next moment he recovers himself, and, muttering an anathema upon his cowardice, he moves noiselessly toward his room and the brandy-bottle that has been his constant companion of late.

Yet, here in his own room, he can not rest. The hours go by with laggard steps. Midnight has struck, and still he paces his floor from wall to wall, half-maddened by his thoughts. Not that he relents. No feelings of repentance stirs him, there is only a nervous dread of the hour when it will be necessary to produce the dead body, if only to prove his claim to the title so dearly and so infamously purchased.

Is he indeed dead—gone past recall? Is this house, this place, the old title, the chance of winning the woman he would have, all his own? Is his hateful rival—hateful to him only because of his fair face and genial manners and lovable disposition, and the esteem with which he filled the hearts of all who knew him—actually swept out of his path?

Again the lurking morbid longing to view the body with his own eyes, the longing that had been his some hours ago when listening at the fatal door, seizes hold of him, and grows in intensity with every passing moment.

At last it conquers him. Lighting a candle, he opens his door and peers out. No one is astir. In all probability every one is abed, and now sleeping the sleep of the just—all except him. Will there ever be any rest or dreamless sleep for him again?

He goes softly down-stairs, and makes his way to the lower door. Meeting no one, he ascends the stairs like one only half conscious, until he finds himself again before the door of the haunted chamber.

Then he wakes into sudden life. An awful terror takes possession of him. He struggles with himself, and presently so far succeeds in regaining some degree of composure that he can lean against the wall and wipe his forehead, and vow to himself that he will never descend until he has accomplished the object of his visit. But the result of this terrible fight with fear and conscience shows itself in the increasing pallor of his brow and the cold perspiration that stands thick upon his forehead.

Nerving himself for a final effort, he lays his hand upon the door and pushes it open. This he does with bowed head and eyes averted, afraid to look upon his terrible work. A silence more horrible to his guilty conscience than the most appalling noises, follows this act; and, again the nameless terror seizing him, he leans against it gladly, as if for support.

And now at last he raises his eyes. Slowly at first and cringingly, as if dreading what they might see. Upon the board at his feet they rest for a moment, and then glide to the next board, and so on, until his coward eyes have covered a considerable portion of the floor.

And now, grown bolder, he lifts his gaze to the wall opposite and searches it carefully. Then his eyes turn again to the floor. His face ghastly, and with his eyes almost darting from their sockets, he compels himself to bring his awful investigation to an end. Avoiding the corners at first, as though there he expects his vile deed will cry aloud to him demanding vengeance, he gazes in a dazed way at the center of the apartment, and dwells upon it stupidly, until he knows he must look further still; and then his dull eyes turn to the corners where the dusky shadows lie, brought thither by the glare of his small lantern. Reluctantly, but carefully, he scans the apartment, no remotest spot escapes his roused attention. But no object, dead or living, attracts his notice! The room is empty!

He staggers. His hold upon the door relaxes. His lamp falls to the ground; the door closes with a soft but deadly thud behind him, and—he is a prisoner in the haunted chamber! As the darkness closes in upon him, and he finds himself alone with what he hardly dares to contemplate, his senses grow confused, his brain reels; a fearful scream issues from his lips, and he falls to the floor insensible.

CHAPTER XI.

Dora, after her interview with Arthur Dynecourt, feels indeed that all is lost. Hope is abandoned—nothing remains but despair; and in this instance despair gains in poignancy by the knowledge that she believes she knows the man who would help them to a solution of their troubles if he ever would or dared. No; clearly he dare not! Therefore, no assistance can be looked for from him.

Dinner at the castle has been a promiscuous sort of entertainment for the past three or four days, so Dora feels no compunction in declining to go to it. In her own room she sits brooding miserably over her inability to be of any use in the present crisis, when she suddenly remembers that she had promised in the afternoon when with Florence to give her, later on, an account of her effort to obtain the truth about this mystery which is harrowing them.

It is now eleven o'clock and Dora decides that she must see Florence at once. Rising, wearily, she is about to cross the corridor to her cousin's room, when, the door opening, she sees Florence, with a pale face and agitated, coming toward her.

"You, Florence!" she exclaims. "I was just going to you, to tell you that my hopes of this afternoon are all—"

"Let me speak," interrupts Florence breathlessly. "I must, or—" She sinks into a chair, her eyes close, and involuntarily she lays her hand upon her heart as if to allay its tumultuous beating.

Dora, really alarmed, rushing to her dressing-case, seizes upon a flask of eau-de-Cologne, and flings some of its contents freely over the fainting girl. Florence, with a sigh, rouses herself, and sits upright.

"There is no time to lose," she says confusedly. "Oh, Dora!" Here she breaks down and bursts into tears.

"Try to compose yourself," entreats Dora, seeing the girl has some important news to impart, but is so nervous and unstrung as to be almost incapable of speaking with any coherence. But presently Florence grows calmer, and then, her voice becoming clear and full, she is able to unburden her heart.

"All this day I have been oppressed by a curious restlessness," she says to Dora; and, when you left me this afternoon, your vague promises of being able to elucidate the terrible secret that is weighing us down made me even more unsettled. I did not go down to dinner—"

"Neither did I," puts in Mrs. Talbot sympathetically.

"I wandered up and down my room for at least two hours, thinking always, and waiting for the moment when you would return, according to promise, and tell me the success of your hidden enterprise. You did not come, and at half past nine, unable to stay any longer in my own room with only my own thoughts for company, I opened my door, and, listening intently, found by the deep silence that reigned throughout the house that almost every one was gone, if not to bed, at least to their own rooms."

"Lady FitzAlmont and Gertrude passed to their rooms about an hour ago," says Dora. "But some of the men, I think, are still in the smoking-room."

"I did not think of them. I stole from my room; and roamed idly through the halls. Suddenly a great—I can not help thinking now a supernaturally strong—desire to go into the servants' corridor took possession of me. Without allowing myself an instant hesitation, I turned in its direction, and walked on until I reached it."

She pauses here, and draws her breath rapidly.

"Go on," entreats Dora impatiently.

"The lamp was burning dimly. The servants were all down-stairs—at their supper, I suppose—because there was no trace of them anywhere. Not a sound could be heard. The whole place looked melancholy and deserted, and filled me with a sense of awe I could not overcome. Still it attracted me. I lingered there, walking up and down until its very monotony wearied me; even then I was loath to leave it, and, turning into a small sitting-room, I stood staring idly around me. At last, somewhere in the distance I heard a clock strike ten, and, turning, I decided on going back once more to my room."

Again, emotion overcoming her Florence pauses, and leans back in her chair.

"Well, but what is there in all this to terrify you so much?" demands her cousin, somewhat bewildered.

"Ah, give me time! Now I am coming to it," replies Florence quickly "You know the large screen that stands in the corridor just outside the sitting-room I have mentioned—put there, I imagine to break the draught? Well, I had come out of the room and was standing half-hidden by this screen, when I saw something that paralyzed me with fear."

She rises to her feet and grows deadly pale as she says this, as though the sensation of fear she has been describing has come to her again.

"You saw—" prompts Dora, rising too, and trembling violently, as though in expectation of some fatal tidings.

[*To be Continued*]

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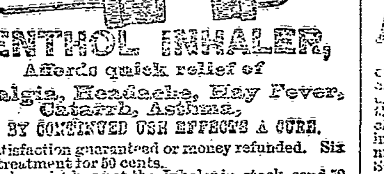

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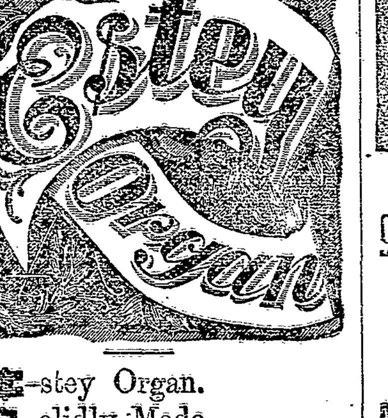

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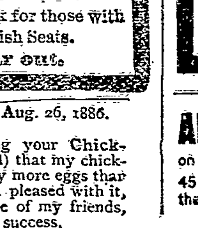
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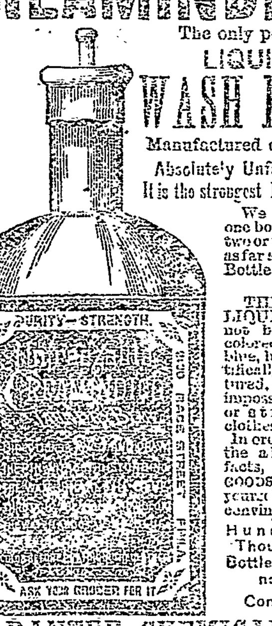

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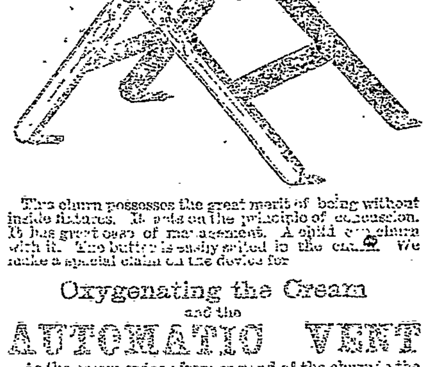
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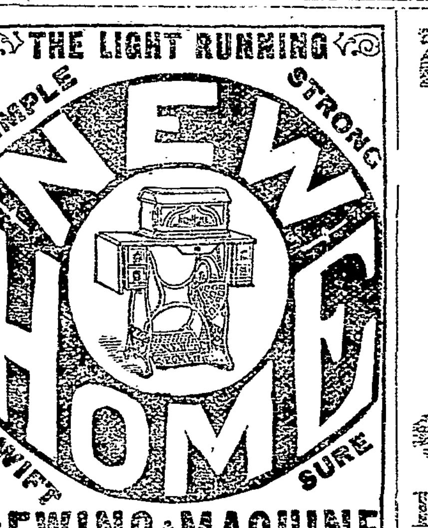

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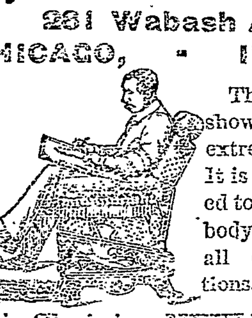
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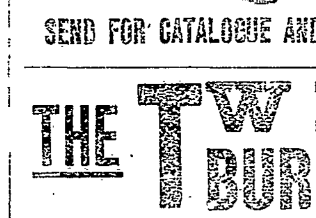
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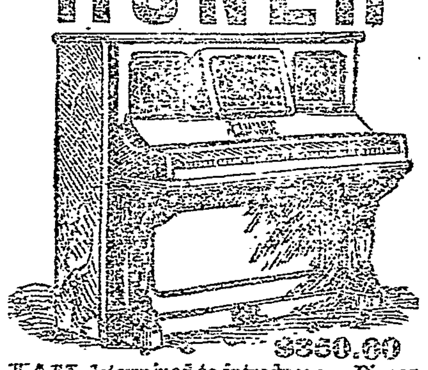
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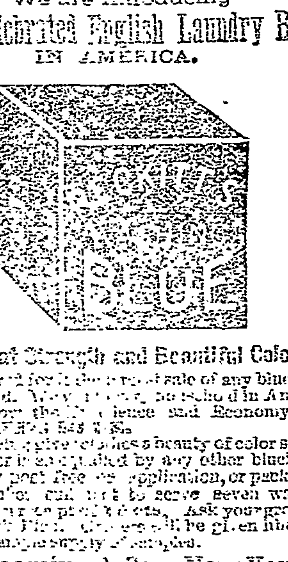
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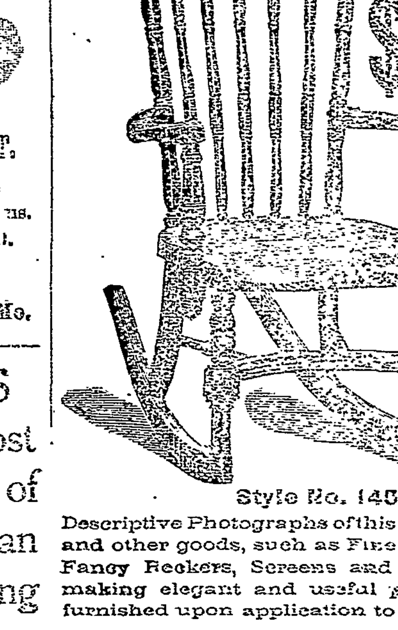
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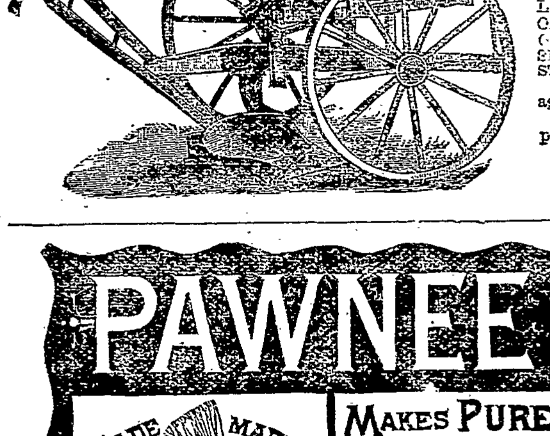
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