

THE MILL MYSTERY

BY ANNA KATHRINE ORREN.

I stood still, not knowing whether to advance or retreat. At the same moment I heard the sound of steps descending the stairs.

"So you think this a better place for decision than the floor above?" exclaimed Guy Pollard, drawing up by my side. "Well, I am not sure but you are right," he added; and I saw by the light of the lantern which his companion now brought down the stairs, the cold glimmer of a smile cross his thin lips and shine for a moment from his implacable eyes.

"Not knowing what he meant, I glanced anxiously about, and shrank with dismay as I discerned the black hole of the vat he had mentioned, yawning within three feet of my side. Was it a dream, my presence in this fearful spot? I looked at the long stretch of arches before me glowing away into the darkness beyond us, and felt the chill of a nameless horror settle upon my spirit.

Whatever it was, I felt the full force of my position, and scarcely cared whether my voice trembled or not as I replied:

"You surely have me in your hands; but that does not mean that it is I who must make a decision. If I understand the situation, it is for you to say whether you will be murderers or not."

"Then you do not intend to put us in possession of my father's will?"

"No," I murmured, and bowed my head for the blow I expected from him.

But he dealt me no blow. Instead of that he eyed me with a look which grew more and more sinister as I met his glance with one which I meant should convey my indubitable resolution. At last he spoke again:

"I think you will reconsider your determination," said he, with a meaning I did not even then fathom, and exchanging a quick glance with the silent figure at his right, he turned towards me and—what happened? For a moment I could not tell, but soon, only too soon, I recognized by my stunned and bleeding body, by the closeness of the air I suddenly breathed, and by the circle of darkness that shut about me, and the still more distinct circle of light that glimmered above, that I had been pushed into the pit whose yawning mouth had but a few short moments before awakened in me such dismay.

Aghast, almost mad with the horror of a fate so much more terrible than any I had anticipated, I strove to utter a cry; but my tongue refused its office, and nothing but an inarticulate murmur rose from my lips. It was not piercing enough to clear the edge of the vat, and my soul sunk with despair as I heard its fruitless gurgle and realized by the sound of departing steps, and the faint and fainter glimmer of the circle of light which at my first glance had shone quite brightly above my hidden prison-house, that I was now utterly alone.

"What an instant it was! To speak, to move, to call, nay, to plead for aid, but the natural outcome of the overwhelming anguish I felt, but the sound of steps had died out into an awful stillness, and the penetrating circle upon which my staring eyes had fastened into a darkness so utter and complete, that had the earth been piled above my head, I could not have been more wholly hidden from the light.

I had fallen on my knees, and desperate as I was, had made no attempt to rise. Not that I thought of prayer, unless my whole dazed and horrified being was a prayer, the consolations which I had offered to others did not seem to meet this case. Here was no death in the presence of friends and under the free light of heaven. This was a horror, the hand of God which could reach every other mortal, whatever their danger or doom, seemed to stop short at this gate of hell. I could not even imagine my soul escaping thence, I was buried and yet I was alive and knew that I must remain alive for days if not for weeks.

I do not suppose that I remained in this frightful condition of absolute hopelessness for more than five minutes, but it seemed to me an eternity. If a drowning man can review his life in an instant, what was there not left for me to think and suffer in the lapse of those five horrible minutes? I was young when the unexpious hand of fate in my daring murder pushed me into this pit; I was old when with a thrill of joy such as passes over the body but once in a lifetime, I heard a voice issue from the darkness, saying severely, "David Barrows, are you prepared for a decision now?" and realized that like the light which now sprang into full brilliance above my head, hope had come again into my life, and that I had to speak but a dozen words to have sunshine and liberty restored to me.

The rush of emotion which this startling change brought was almost too much for my reason. Looking up into the malignant face, I could not discern peering over the edge of the vat, I asked with the frantic impulse that left me no time for thought, if an immediate restoration of freedom would follow my compliance with his wishes, and when he answered, "Yes," I held such a vision of sunshiny fields and a happy, love-lighted home, that my voice almost choked as I responded, "I did not think my father would have shed me to sacrifice my life or force a son of his into the crime of murder for the sake of an inheritance which money could offer. And as I saw the face above me grope impatient, I told in desperate haste where I had concealed the will and how it could be obtained without arousing the suspicions of the neighbors."

He seemed satisfied and hastily withdrew his face; but soon returned and asked for the key of my house. I had it in my pocket and hurriedly picked it up to him, when he again disappeared.

"When shall I be released?" I anxiously called out after him.

But no answer came back, and presently the light began to fade as before, and the sound of steps grew fainter and fainter till

silence and darkness again settled upon my dreadful prison-house. But the time I had hope to brighten me, and shutting my eyes, I waited patiently. But at last as no change came and the silence and darkness remained unbroken, I became violently alarmed and cried to myself: "Am I the victim of their treachery? Have they obtained what they want and now am I to be left here to perish?"

The thought made my hair stand on end and had I not been a God-fearing man I should certainly have raised my voice in curses upon my credulity and lack of courage. But before my passion could reach its height, hope shone again in the shape of returning light. Some one had entered the cellar and drawn near the vat; but though I strained my gaze upward, no face met my view, and presently I heard a voice which was not that of Guy Pollard utter in tones of surprise and apprehension:

"Where is the clergyman? Guy said I should find him here and in good condition!"

The masked figure, who was doubtless the one addressed, must have answered with a gesture towards the hole in which I lay, for I heard him give vent to a horrified exclamation and then say in accents of regret and shame: "Was it necessary?" and afterwards: "Are you sure he is not injured?"

The answer, which I did not hear, seemed to satisfy him, for he said no more, and soon, too soon, walked away again, carrying the light and leaving me, as I now knew, with that ominous black figure for my watch and guardian—a horror that lent a double darkness to the situation which was only relieved now by the thought that Dwight Pollard's humanity was to be relied on, and that he would never wantonly leave me there to perish after the will had been discovered and destroyed.

It was well that I had this confidence, for the time I now had to wait was long. But I lived it through and at last had the joy of hearing footsteps and the voice of Guy saying in a dry and satisfied tone: "It is all right," after which the face of Dwight looked over the edge of the vat and he gave me the help which was needed to life me out.

I was a free man again. I had slipped from the gates of hell, and the world with all its joys and duties lay before me bright and beautiful as love and hope could make it. Yet whether it was the gloom of the cellar in which we still lingered, or the baleful influence that emanated from the three persons in whose presence I once more stood, I felt a strange sinking at my heart and found myself looking back at the pit from which I had just escaped, with a sensation of remorse, as if in its horrid depths I had left or lost something which must create a void within me forever.

My meditations in this regard were interrupted by the voice of Guy.

"David Barrows," said he, "we hold the paper which was given you by my father."

I bowed with a slight intimation of impatience.

"We have looked at it and it is as he said, his will. But it is not such a one as we feared, and to-morrow, or as soon as we can restore the seal, we shall return it to you for such disposition as your judgment suggests."

I bowed with a slight intimation of impatience.

"You will give it back?" I repeated.

"To-morrow," he laconically replied.

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"You say Mr. Pollard gave you this will to hand to me. Do you know the cause of this rather extraordinary proceeding, or have you any suspicion why, in the event of his dearing me to have in charge a paper which ought to be safe enough in his own house, he chooses his pastor for his messenger instead of one of his own sons?"

"Mr. Nicholls," I returned, with inward satisfaction for the opportunity thus given me for reply, "the secrets which are confided to a clergyman are as sacred as those which are entrusted to a lawyer. I could not tell you my suspicions if I had any; I can only state the facts. One thing, however, I will add. This owing to circumstances which I cannot explain, but greatly regret, this paper has been out of my hands for a short time, and in speaking as I did, I wished merely to state that it would be a satisfaction to me to know that no harm has befallen it, and that this is the very will in spirits and detail which you drew up and saw signed by Mr. Pollard."

"Oh," exclaimed the lawyer, "if that is all, I can soon satisfy you." And tearing open the envelope, he ran his eyes over the document and quietly nodded.

"It is the same," he declared. "There has been no meddling here."

And feeling myself greatly relieved, I rose without further conversation and hastily took my leave.

But when I came to think of it all again in my own room, I found my equanimity was not yet fully restored. A doubt of some kind remained, and though, in consideration of the manifold duties that pressed upon me, I reluctantly put it aside, I could not help its lingering in my mind, darkening my pleasures, and throwing a cloud over my work and the operation of my mind.

The slight which I now and then caught of the Pollards did not tend to allay my anxieties. There was satisfaction in their countenances, and in that of Guy, at least, a certain triumphant disdain which could only be partly explained by the victory which he had won over me through my fears. I awaited the proving of the will with anxiety. If there were no seeming reparation made in it, I should certainly doubt its being the expression of Mr. Pollard's wishes.

What was my surprise, then, when the will having been proved, I obtained permission to read it and found that it not only contained mention of reparation, but that this reparation was to be made to Margaret his wife.

"For sums loaned by her to me and lost, I desire to make reparation by an added bequest," so it read; and I found myself nonplussed and thrown entirely out in all my calculations and conjectures. The anxiety he had shown lest the will should fall in this very woman's hands, did not tally with this expression of justice and generosity, nor did the large sums which he had left to his three children show any of that distrust which his countenance had betrayed towards the one who was present with him at the time of his death. Could it be that he had given me the wrong paper or was he, as Mr. Pollard had intimated, not responsible for a actions and language at that time. I began to think the latter conjecture might be true, and was only hindered in the enjoyment of my old tranquility by the remembrance of the fearful ordeal I had been subjected to in the mill, and the considerations which must have existed to make the perpetration of such an outrage possible.

But time, which dalls all things, soon began to affect my memory of that hideous nightmare, and with it my anxiety lest in my unfaithfulness to my trust, I had committed a wrong upon some unknown innocent. Life with its duties and love with its speedy marriage gradually pushed all unpleasant thoughts from my mind, and I was beginning to enjoy the full savor of my happy and honorable position again, when my serenity was again, and this time forever, destroyed by a certain revelation that was accidentally made to me.

The story of it was this. I had taken by mistake with me to a funeral the prayer-book with which Mr. Pollard had presented me. I was listening to the anthem which was being sung, and being in a nervous frame of mind, was restlessly fingering the leaves of the book which I held in my hand, when my eye, ranging over the page that happened to open before me, caught sight of some of the marks with which the text was plentifully bestowed. Mechanically I noticed the words under which they stood, and mechanically I began reading them, when, to my great astonishment and subsequent dismay, I perceived they made sense, in short had a connection which, when carried on from page to page of the book, revealed sentences which promised to extend themselves into a complete communication.

You can also imagine my wonder when by following out the plan I have indicated, the subjoined sentences appeared, which, if somewhat incoherent at times—as could only be expected from the limited means at his command—certainly conveyed a decided meaning, especially after receiving the punctuation and capital letters, which, after long study and some after-knowledge of affairs, I have ventured upon giving them:

"My sin is ever before me.

"Correct, lest thou bring me to nothing.

"Do those things which are requisite and necessary for a pure and humble one, Grace by name, begotten by son, he born of first wife and not obedient to the law abroad, a prisoner.

"Revelation made known in few words the mystery which was made known unto the sons, fellow-heirs of Grace.

"Go and search diligently for the young child.

"The higher powers resist and are a terror to good works.

"Do that which is good and thou shalt have praise, minister of God.

"Wherefore ye must needs be subject for wrath, for they are attending continually upon this thing.

"Render therefore to all their dues; tribute to whom tribute; honor to whom honor.

"Two possessors of devils, exceeding fierce of the household, hope Grace may overcome be cast away.

"They murmur against the good man of the house, and do not agree to mercifully defend against perils in the city an honest and good heart.

"My will leave(s) heritage to Grace.

"The devil is against me.

"Behold a woman grievously vexed with lust sleep of the house.

"Then came she, saying: 'It is not meet to take the children's bread and to cast it to the dogs. Be unto us an offering named as becometh saints. For this ye know, that no unclean person hath any inheritance because of disobedience and fellowship with works of darkness. For it is a shame to speak of those things which are done of them in secret.'"

"Beelzebub, the chief of devils, and some cast out men; takeeth from him all wherein he trusteth and divideth the spoils against me."

"To purge consciences, the new testament means redemption of the transgressions under first testament."

"Said a devil: 'Father, ye do dishonor me. Say ye know him not, thy son, and suffer that a notable prisoner, his wife and child, were not called by thy name.' I will, said I. But I deny all here. My soul is sorrowful unto death, as I bear false witness against them."

"The hand that betrayeth me is with me. I appoint you to sift as wheat."

"This must be accomplished, for the things concerning me have an end."

"Words sent to me out of prison, said: 'Daughter weep! Beseech thee graciously to fetch home to thee my child in tribulation. For lo, the ungodly bend their bow and make ready their arrows within the quiver, that they may privily shoot at them which are true of heart. Show thy marvelous loving-kindness unto an undefiled soul forsaken on every side of mother and friendly neighbors. Make haste to deliver and save. I am clean forgotten, as a dead man out of mind. I am become as a broken vessel.'"

"Whilst I held my tongue, my bones consumed away daily."

"I will inform thee and teach thee in the way wherein thou shalt go."

"Blessed are folk chosen to inheritance; the children of them that dwell under the king."

"Poor Grace! come over the sea (sea), unaware that I were sick."

"Deliver my darling from the lions, so will I give thee thanks."

"O let them that are mine enemies triumph that hate me."

"They imagine deceitful words against them that are quiet in the land."

"Child in thy land."

"Look after daughter among honorable women. House in City of the East Wind."

"—C-H-A-R-L-E-S-T-R-E-E-T."

"Child I have looked upon not."

"I promised with my lips and spake with my mouth, but God turned his mercy upon me, and upon health has sent forth his voice, yea, and that a mighty voice."

"I sink, and the deep waters drown me. Mine adversaries hath broken my heart."

"Let the things that should have been for them be for the poor prisoner's posterity."

"Break down the carved work and search out my will."

"Number omitted for obvious reasons."

"Walk to table under northwest borders of room, take the wood that hath in it operations of the law and cleave."

"For my days are gone like a shadow, and I am withered as grass."

CHAPTER XXIII

TOO LATE.

What fear is this, which startles in our ears? —ROMEO AND JULIET.

The conclusions which I drew from these sentences after a close and repeated perusal of them was to this effect:

That Mr. Pollard instead of possessing only two sons, as was generally supposed, had in reality been the father of three. That the eldest, born in all probability before Mr. Pollard's removal to this country (he was an Englishman by birth), had, by some act of violence or fraud, incurred the penalty of the law, and was even now serving out a term of imprisonment in his native land. That this son had a daughter innocent and virtuous, whom he desired to commit to the care of her grandfather; that he had even sent her over here for that purpose, but that Mr. Pollard, taken down with the illness which afterwards ended in death, had not only failed to be on hand to receive her, but that she, surrounded and watched by his wife and some, who, in their selfish pride, were determined to ignore all claims of kinship on the part of one they despised, he had not even had the chance to take such measures for her safety and happiness as his love would suggest for her lonely and desolate position regard to demand. That the will whose concealment in his desk he had managed to describe, had been in recompense for this neglect, and that by it she would receive that competence and acknowledgment of her rights which the hatred of her unscrupulous relatives would otherwise deny her.

And this was the will I had weakly given up, and it was upon the head of this innocent child that the results of my weakness must fall.

When I first recognized this fact I felt stupefied. That I, David Barrows, should be cause of misery and loss to a guileless and pure soul! I could not realize it, nor believe that consequences so serious and irremediable could follow upon an act into which I had been betrayed by mere cowardice. But soon, too soon, the matter became plain to me. I saw what I had done and was overwhelmed, for I could no longer doubt that the real will had been destroyed and that the one which had been returned to me was a substituted one, perhaps the very same, which I had seen among the papers of Mr. Pollard's desk.

The result of my remorse was an immediate determination on my part to search out the young girl, left in this remarkable manner to my care, and by my efforts in her behalf do what I could to remedy the great evil which, through my instrumentality, had befallen her.

The purpose was no sooner taken than I prepared to carry it out. I could hold no duty for me now paramount to this. I was a father and my child lingered solitary and unloved for in a strange place. I took the first train the next morning for the "city of the east-wind."

The hour at which I arrived at number—Charles Street, was one of deep agitation to me, I had thought so continually upon my journey of the young girl I was seeking. Would she be the embodiment of ingenuousness which her grandfather had evidently believed her to be? Should I find her forgiving and tractable; or were the expectations I had formed false in her character and

[To be continued.]

founded rather upon Mr. Pollard's wishes than any knowledge he had of her disposition and acquirements?

The house was, as far as I could judge from the exterior, of a most respectable character, and the lady who answered my somewhat impatient summons was one of those neat and intelligent-looking persons who inspire confidence at first glance. To my inquiries as to whether there was living in her house a young English lady by the name of Grace—I did not like to venture upon that of Pollard, there being some phrases in the communication I have shown you which led me to think that Mr. Pollard had changed his name on coming to this country,—she gave me a look of such trouble and anxiety that I was instantly struck with dismay.

"Miss Merriam?" she exclaimed; then, as I bowed with seeming acquiescence, continued in a tone that conveyed still more disquiet than her face, "She was here; but she is gone, sir; a woman took her away."

A woman I must have grown pale, for she swung wide the door and asked me to come in.

"We can talk better in the hall," she remarked, and pointed to a chair into which I half fell.

"I have a great interest in this young lady," I observed; "in short, I am her guardian. Can you tell me the name of the person with whom she went away, or where she can be found now?"

"No, sir," she answered, with the same expression of trouble. "The woman gave us no name nor address, and the young lady seemed too much frightened to speak. We have felt anxious ever since she went, sir, for the letter she showed us from the captain of the ship which brought her over, told us to take great care of her. We did not know she had a guardian or we should not have let her go. The woman seemed very pleasant, and paid all the bills, but—"

"But what?" I cried, too anxious to bear a moment's delay.

"She did not lift her veil, and this seemed to me a suspicious circumstance."

Torn with apprehension and doubt, I staggered to my feet.

"Tell me all about this woman, I demanded. Give me every detail you can remember. I have a dreadful fear that it is some one who should never have seen this child."

"What day?" I interrupted her to ask.

"Thursday," she replied, "a week ago yesterday."

The very day after the will was returned to me, if she were the woman I feared, she had evidently left no time.

"She asked for Miss Merriam," the lady before me pursued, evidently greatly pitying my distress, "and as we now no longer have visitors, we immediately proceeded to call her down. But the woman, with a muttered excuse, said she would not trouble us; that she knew the child well, and would go right up to her room if we would only tell her where it was. This we did and should have thought no more about it, if in a little while she had not reappeared in the hall, and inquiring the way to my room, told me that Miss Merriam had decided to leave my house; that she had offered her a home with her, and that they were to go immediately."

"I was somewhat taken back by this, and inquired if I could not see Miss Merriam. She answered 'What for?' and when I hinted that money was owing me for her board, she drew out her pocket-book and paid me on the spot. I could say nothing after this, but she, my relative, mamma, to which her quick and angry negative, hidden, however, next moment, by a suave acknowledgment of friendship, gave me my first feeling of alarm. But I did not dare to ask her any further questions, much as I desired to know who she was and where she was going to take the young girl. There was something in her manner that overawed me, at the same time it filled me with dread. But if I could not speak to her I meant to have some words with Miss Merriam before she left the house. This the woman seemed to wish to prevent, for she stood close by me when the young girl came down, and when I stepped forward to say good-by, pushed me somewhat rudely aside and took Miss Merriam by the arm. 'Come, my dear,' she cried and would have hurried her out without a word. But I would not have that. The sorrow and pity which in Miss Merriam's face were too marked for me to let her depart in silence. So I persisted in speaking, and after saying how sorry I was to have her go, asked her if she would not leave her new address with me in case any letters should come for her. 'I have told you,' said she, 'that Miss Merriam goes home with me. It is not likely she will have any letters, but if she should, you can send them to the place mentioned on this card,' and she pulled a visiting card from her bag and gave it to me, after which she immediately went away, dragging Miss Merriam after her."

"And you have that card?" I cried.

"Why did you not show it to me at once?"

"O, sir," she responded with a sorrowful shake of her head, "it was a fraud, a deception. The card was not hers but another person's, and its owner don't even know Miss Merriam."

"How do you know this?" I asked.

"Have you seen this person?"

"Yes, sir, I had occasion to, for a letter did come for Miss Merriam only a short time after she left. So thinking it a good opportunity to see where she had gone, I carried it to the address which was on the card given me, and found as I have told you that it was not the same lady at all who lived there, and that there was not only no Miss Merriam in the house but that her name was not even known there."

"And you saw the lady herself?"

"Yes, sir."

"And are you sure it was not the same as the one who was here?"

"Oh yes; she was short and stout and had a frank way of speaking, totally unlike that of the veiled woman."

"And the latter? How was she shaped? You have not told me."

I asked this in trembling tones. Though I was sure that the answer would be, I dreaded to have my fears confirmed.

"Well, sir, she was tall and had a full commanding figure, very handsome to look at. She was dressed all in gray and had a way of holding her head that made an ordinary sized woman like myself feel very small and insignificant. Yet she was not agreeable in her appearance; and I am sure that if I could have seen her face I should have discovered her."

[To be continued.]

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