

THE MILL MYSTERY

BY ANNA KATHRINE GREEN.

and going to one of the many windows that opened before me, I looked out and found I was at the very back of the mill, and in full sight of the dark and silent street that in front of me was the great wheel and the mill machinery.

The light of a flight of stairs descending at my right into the hollow darkness beneath intensified my emotion. I seemed to be in direct communication with that scene of death; and the thought struck me that here, if anywhere in the whole building, must be found the mysterious hiding-place for which I was in search.

It was therefore with extra care that I directed my glance along the uneven floorings, and I was scarcely surprised when, after a short examination of the various loose boards that rattled beneath me, I discovered one that could be shifted without difficulty. But scarcely had I stooped to raise it when an emotion of fear seized me, and I started back after and listening, though I was unconscious of having heard any thing more than the ordinary swish of the water beneath the windows and the beating of my own overbeating heart.

And thus I stood, like a pallid automaton, when the instant came for him to change his position, and he saw me. The cry that rose to his lips but did not escape them, the reel which his figure gave before it stiffened into marble, testified to the shock he had received, and also to the sense of unreality with which my appearance in this wise must have impressed him.

But presently this feeling of incongruity gave way to one of hideous dread. If Dwight Pollard could explain the presence of a domino and mask in this spot, then what sort of a man was Dwight Pollard, and what sort of a crime could it have been that needed for its perpetration such adjuncts as these? The highwayman of olden times, with their "Stand and deliver!" seemed out of place in this quiet New England town; not was the character of any of the parties involved, of a nature to make the association of this masquerade gear with the tragedy gone by seem either possible or even probable.

So impressed was I at last by this thought that I broke the spell which bound me, and began to restore the articles to their place. I was just engaged in throwing the mask into the hole, when the low but unmistakable sound of an approaching foot fall broke upon my ears, startling me more than a thunder-clap would have done, and filling me with a fear that almost paralyzed my movements.

"One who out of revenge," I proceeded, "might be induced to attach your name to suspicious calculations to rob you of honor, if not life."

"Do not," he said, "do not think. Let me weigh the situation and see where I stand, in your eyes at least. Tell me what mine enemy has said." I demanded, his face, his very form, flashing with a terrible rage that seemed to have as much indignation as fear in it.

"Your enemy," I replied, in the steady voice of despair, "accuses you in so many words of murder."

"Accuse me?" he muttered; and it is not in language to express the scorn he infused into the words.

listening. I had a conviction that he was taking the articles out of their place of concealment, but I could not be sure; and in a manner like this, certainty was indispensable. I resolved to risk all and took another step, clinging faintly to the first support that offered. It was well I had the presence of mind to do this, or I might have had a serious fall. For no sooner had I raised my head above the level of the floor than my eyes fell upon the well-known form of him I desired least of all men to see in this place—my lover, if you may call him so—Dwight Pollard.

CHAPTER XII

DWIGHT POLLARD.

Oh, 'tis too true! how smart! A lash that speech doth give my conscience!—HAMLET.

He was standing with his back to me, and to all appearance was unconscious that he was under the surveillance of any eye. I had thus a moment in which to collect my energies and subdue my emotions; and I availed myself of it to such good purpose that by the time he had put the board back into its place I was ready to face him.

He did not turn round, however; so, after a moment of silent suspense, I mounted the last step, and thinking of nothing, stood waiting, with my eyes fixed on the domino he was now rapidly taking into smaller compass.

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"I do not know what I expected when, a few minutes later, I pulled the garment out of the hole in which it lay buried, and spread it out before me. Not what I discovered, I am sure; for when I had given it a glance, and found it was nothing more or less than a domino, such as is worn by masqueraders, I experienced a shock that the mask, which fell out of its folds, scarcely served to allay. It was like the introduction of force into a gentle tragedy; and as I stood in a maze and surveyed the garment before me till its black outline swam before my eyes, I remembered thinking of the effect which had been produced, at certain times, I had heard of, by the prisoner suddenly bursting into a grin when the sentence of death was pronounced.

"By the same chance," I rejoined, "which appears to have brought you here. The desire to make sure if what I heard about the mill having been used as a secret place for certain mysterious articles, was true."

"Then it was your hand," he impetuously began.

"Which disturbed these garments before you? Yes. And I shall make no apology for the action," I continued, "since it was done in the hope of proving false certain insinuations which had been made to me in your regard."

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returned, almost as much agitated as himself. "It is a woman who is your accuser, a woman who seems to feel that she has a right to make you suffer, possibly because she has suffered so much herself."

"A woman?" he asked; "a woman?" turning pale enough now, God knows.

"Have you no enemies among the women?" I asked, wearing to the soul with the position in which my cruel fate had forced me.

"I begin to think I have," he answered, giving me a look that somehow broke down the barriers of ice between us and made my next words come in a flattering tone.

"And could you stop to bestow a thought upon a man while a woman held your secret? Did you think our sex was so long-suffering, or this special woman so generous?"

"I did not go on, for he had leaped the gap which separated us and had me gently but firmly by the arm.

"Of whom are you speaking?" he demanded. "What woman has my secret—if secret I have? Let me hear her name, now, at once."

"Is it possible," I murmured, "that you do not know?"

"The name? the name?" he reiterated, his eyes ablaze, his hand shaking where it grasped my arm.

"Rhoda Colwell," I returned, looking him steadily in the eye.

"Whom do I mean?" he asked. "Whom should I mean but the base and unnatural wretch who, for purposes of his own, has made you the arbitrator of his destiny and the avenger of his sin—my brother, my vile, wicked brother, whom my Heaven willed?"

"Stop! Your brother has had nothing to do with this. Do you suppose I would stoop to take information from him? What I know I know because my eyes have seen it, Dwight Pollard! And now what do you think of the clutch I hold upon your life?"

"It was a threat, a warning, or a danger for which he was wholly unprepared. He started at me for a moment from his lowly position on the floor, then slowly rose and mechanically put his hand to his throat, as if he felt himself choking.

"I thank you for your frankness," he murmured, in almost inaudible tones. "It is no more than I ought to have expected; and yet—"

"I am evidently in a worse situation than I imagined," he continued, after a momentary pausing of the floor. "I thought only my position in your eyes was assailed; I see now that I may have to defend myself before the world."

"I told him no, and felt my heart grow cold with new and undefined fears as he turned his face toward the front of the building, and cried, in a suppressed tone, full of ire and menace:

"I could have come but in one way; I am to be made a victim if—"

"He turned upon me with a wild look in which there was something personal. 'Are you worth the penalty which my good name must suffer?' he loudly cried. 'For I swear that to you and you only I owe the position in which I now stand.'

"God help me then!" I murmured, dazed and confounded by this unexpected reproach.

"Had you been less beautiful, less alluring in your dignity and grace, by brother—"

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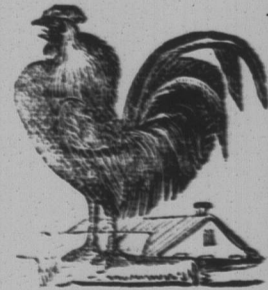
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