

THE MILL MYSTERY

BY ANNA KATHARINE GREEN.

Innocent for your parents. Yours, CONSTANCE STERLING.

Mr. DWIGHT POLLARD. For two weeks I have been too ill to cross my room, which must account for this note and the weakness I have displayed in writing it. You assert that you know nothing of the cause of my death, a certain catastrophe, I believe you, and hope some day to have more than a letter, viz., a survey of its truth founded on absolute evidence.

All that time comes to me as several ways, seem to be the thought that the steadfast mind cannot itself lose its sting when met by an earnest purpose to be and do only what is honest and upright.

CHAPTER XV.

This something settled matter in his heart, whereon his brains still beating, puts him thus from fashion of himself.

HAMLEY.

I had not taken this tone with both my correspondents without a secret hope of being able to do something myself towards the establishment of Mr. Pollard's innocence. Now, I could not very plainly perceive that day or the next, but sometime elapsed and my brain cleared and my judgement returned. I at last saw the way to an effort which might not be without consequences of a satisfactory nature. What that effort was you may perhaps conjecture from the fact that the first walk that I took was in the direction of the cottage where Mr. Barrows had formerly lived. The rooms which he had occupied were for rent, and my comfortable friend had been to hire them. The real motive of my visit, however, was to learn something more of the deceased clergyman's life and ways than I then knew; it happily out of some hitherto unnoticed event in his late history I might receive a hint which should ultimately lead me to the solution of the mystery which was involving my happiness.

I was not an unsuccessful in this attempt as one might anticipate. The lady of the house was a gossip, and the subject of Mr. Barrows' death was an inexhaustible topic of interest to her. I had but to mention his name, and straightway a tide of words flowed from her lips, which, if mostly words, contained here and there intimations of certain facts which I felt it was well enough for me to know, even if they did not amount to anything like an explanation of the tragedy. Among these was one which only my fear of showing myself too much interested in her theme prevented me from probing to the bottom. This was, that for a month at least before his death Mr. Barrows had seemed to her like a changed man. A month—that was about the interval which had elapsed between his first visit to the mill and his last; and the evidence that she showed an alteration of demeanour in that time might have its value and might not. I resolved to cultivate Mrs. Simpson's acquaintance, and sometime put her a question or two that would satisfy me upon this point.

This determination was all the easier to make in that I found the rooms I had come to see sufficiently to my liking to warrant me in taking them. Not that I should have hesitated to do this had they been as unpleasant as they were pleasant. It was not their agreeableness that won me, but the fact that Mr. Barrows' personal belongings had not yet been moved, and that for a short time at least I should find myself in possession of his library, and face to face with the same articles of taste and study which had surrounded him in his lifetime, and helped to mould, if not to make, his mind. I should thus obtain a knowledge of his character, and some day, who knows, might flash upon his secret. For that he possessed one, and was by no means the plainest of characters I had been led to believe, was apparent to me from the first glimpse I had of these rooms; there being in every little object that marked his taste a certain individuality and purpose that betrayed a stern and mystic soul; one that could hide itself, perhaps, beneath a practical exterior, but which, in ways like this, must speak, and speak loudly too, of its own inward promptings and tendency.

The evening when I first brought these objects under a close and conscientious scrutiny, was a memorable one to me. I had moved in early that day, and with a woman's unreasoning aptitude had felt for me from the most curious glance around, being content to see that all was as I left it at my first visit, and that neither desk or library had been disturbed. But when supper was over, and I could set myself with a free mind to a contemplation of my new surroundings, I found that my curiosity could no longer delay the careful work of inspection to which I felt myself invited by the freshness and beauty of the pictures, and one or two of the statuettes which adorned the walls about me. One painting in especial attracted me, and made me choose for my first contemplation that side of the room on which it hung. It was a copy of some French painting, and represented the contemplation of a certain saint. A curious choice of subject, you may think, to adorn a Protestant clergyman's wall, but if you could have seen me, struggling on the face of the temple one who, with eyes shut, and hands clenching till it bent the cross of Gethsemane in the crevices of the rock beneath which he writhed, waited for the victory over self that was just beginning to cast its light upon his brow, you would have felt that it was good to have before the eyes of any one in whom conflict of any kind was raging. Upon me the effect was instantaneous, and great that I have never been able to think of that moment without a sense of awe and trembling of the heart. Human passion assumed a new significance in my mind, and the will and faith of a strong man suffering from his power, yet withdrawing it to the very last gasp, yet helping of his trust in God, rose to such an exalted position in my mind, that I felt then, as I feel now whenever I remember this picture, that my whole moral nature

had received, from the contemplation, an impetus towards religion and self-denial. While I was still absorbed in gazing at it, my landlady entered the room, and seeing me peered behind the picture, quite sympathetically exclaimed: "Isn't that a dreadful painting, Miss Sterling, to have in any one's room? I don't wonder Mr. Barrows wanted to cover it up."

"Cover it up?" I repeated, turning hastily in my surprise.

"Yes," she replied, going to the drawer in his desk and taking out a small engraving, which she brought me. "For nearly a month before his death he had this picture stuck up over the other with pine. You can see the pin-holes now, if you look; they went right through the canvas. I thought it a very sensible thing to do, myself; but when I spoke of it to him one day, remarking that I had always thought the picture unfit for any one to see, he gave me such a look that I thought then he must be crazy. But no one else saw anything amiss in it, and, as I did not want to lose a good lodger, I let him stay on, though my mind did sometimes misgive me."

The engraving she had handed me was almost as suggestive as the painting it had been used to conceal; but at this remarkable statement from Mrs. Simpson's lips I felt it quickly dawn.

"You think he was crazy?" I asked.

"I think he committed suicide," she affirmed.

I turned to the engraving again, and took it up. What a change had come over me that a statement against which I had once so honestly rebelled for Ada's sake should now arouse something like a sensation of joy in my breast!

Mrs. Simpson, too much interested in her theme to notice me, went confidently on: "You see, folks that live in the same house with a person, learn to know them as other folks can't. Not that Mr. Barrows ever talked to me; he was a deal too much absorbed in his studies for that; but he ate at my table, and went in and out of my front door, and if a woman cannot learn something about a man under these circumstances, then she is no good, that is all I have got to say about her."

I was amused and slightly smiled, but she needed no encouragement to proceed.

"The way he would drop into a brown study over his meat and potatoes was a caution to my mind. A minister that don't eat is an anomaly," she burst out.

"I have boarded them before, and I know they like the good things of life as well as anybody. But Mr. Barrows, lastly, he never seemed to see what was on the table before him, but ate because his plate of food was there, and had to be disposed of some way. One day, I remember in particular, I had baked dumplings, for he used to be very fond of them, and would eat two without any urging; but this day he either did not put enough sauce on them, or else his whole appetite had changed; for he suddenly looked at his plate and shuddered, almost as if he were in a chill, and, getting up, was going away, when I summoned up courage to ask if the dumplings were not as good as usual. He turned at the door—

"I can see him now,—and mechanically shaking his head, seemed to be trying to utter some apology. But he presently stopped in that attempt, and his pointing stopped at the table, and, in his agonized tones: 'You need not make me any more desserts, Mrs. Simpson, I shall not indulge in them in the future'; and went out, without saying whether he was sick or what. And that was the end of the dumplings, and of many a good thing besides."

"And that all?" I began; but she broke in before the words were half out of my mouth.

"But the strangest thing I ever seen in him was this: I have not said much about it, for the people that went to his church are a high and mighty lot, and would 'er bear a word said against 'er sanity, even by one as had more opportunities than they of knowing him. But you are a stranger in town, and can't have much of a foolish tongue-tied person that is nothing to you; so I will just tell you all about it. You see, when he had visitors,—and off and on a good many he came,—I used to seat them in the parlor below, till I was sure he was ready to receive them. This had happened one evening, and I had gone up to his door to notify him that a stranger was downstairs, when I heard such a peculiar noise issuing from his room, that I just stood stock-still on the door-mat to listen."

"It was a swishing sound, followed by a—Miss Sterling," she suddenly broke in, in a half-awakened, half-frightened tone, "did you ever hear any one whipped? If you have, you will know why I stood shuddering at that door half two minutes before I dared to lift my hand and knock. Not that I could believe Mr. Barrows was whipping any body, but the sound was as if he were, and I was so certain besides that I heard something like a smothered cry follow it, that nothing short of the most imperative necessity would have given me the courage to call him; my imagination filling the room with all sorts of frightful images; images that did not fade away in a hurry, he went on, with a look of shrinking terror about her which I am not sure was not reflected in my own face, when, after the longest waiting I ever had at his door, he slowly came across the room and opened it, showing me a face as white as a sheet, and a hand that trembled so that he dropped the card I gave him and tried to pick it up. Had there been a child there?"

"But there wasn't!" I interrupted, shocked and forced to defend him in spite of myself.

"No, nor anybody else. For when he went down-stairs, I looked in and there was no one there; and not nothing uncommon about the room, except that I thought his book-cases looked as if it had been moved. And it did not need sweeping, but one can't wait long to satisfy their curiosity,—I felt I could not let it go, and what do you think I found? A strap—a regular leather strap—just such—"

"And what?" I interrupted: "You do not think he had been using it when you were at the door?"

"No," she said. "I think he had a few of something like inanity upon him, and had been swinging that strap. Well, I will not say again what for. For I do not know, but might it not have been against the furniture and gotten with what every people some-

times believe they are surrounded?"

"Possibly," I answered, though my tone could not have been one of any strong conviction.

"I have persons sometimes do strange things," she continued; "and that he did not show himself violent before folks is no sign he did not for himself out sometimes when he was alone. The very fact that he restrained himself when he went into the parlor and visited among his friends, may have made him wilder when he got all by himself. I am sure I remember having heard of a case where a man lived for ten years in a town without a single neighbor suspecting him of insanity; yet his wife suffered constantly from his fits, and finally fell a victim to his violence."

"But Mr. Barrows was such a brilliant man," I objected. "His sermons up to the last were models of eloquence."

"Oh, he could preach," she assented. "Seeing that she was not to be moved in her convictions, I ventured upon a few questions."

"Have you ever thought," I asked, "what it was that caused such a change in him? You say you noticed it for a month before his death; could any thing have happened to disturb him at that time?"

"Not that I know of," she answered, with great readiness. "I was away for a week in August, and it was when I first came back that I observed how different he was to what he had been before. I thought at first it was the heat, but best not make one'sself needless and unfit to sit quiet in one's chair. Nor does it drive a man to work as if the very evil one was in him, keeping the light burning sometimes till two in the morning, while he wrote and walked, and walked and wrote, till I thought my head would burst with sympathy for him."

"He was finishing a book, was he not?" I asked. "I think I have heard he left a complete manuscript behind him?"

"Yes; and don't you think it very singular that the last word should have been written, and the whole parcel done up and sent away to his publisher, two days before his death, if he did not know what was going to happen to him?"

"And was it?" I inquired.

"Yes, it was; for I was in the room when he signed his name to it, and heard his slight relief, and saw him, too, when, a little while afterwards, he took the bundle out to the post-office. I remember thinking, 'Well, now for some rest nights' little imagining what rest was in store for him poor soul!"

"Did you know that Mr. Barrows was engaged?" I suddenly asked, unable to restrain my impatience any longer.

"No, I did not," she rather sharply replied, as if her lack of knowledge on that subject had been rather a sore point with her. "I may have suspected there was some one he was interested in, as being the one poor girl, she must have thought a heap of him to die in that way."

"She looked at me as she said this, anticipating, perhaps, a return of the confidences she had made me. But I could not talk of Ada to her, and after a moment of silent waiting she went eagerly on:

"Perhaps a lover's quarrel lay at the bottom of the whole matter," she suggested. "Miss Reynolds was a sweet girl and loved him very devotedly, of course; but they might have had a tiff for all that, and in a nature as sensitive as his, the least thing will sometimes unhinge the mind."

"But I could only shake my head at this; the supposition was at once too painful and absurd."

"Well, well," the garrulous woman went on, in wise shushed, "there are some things that come easy and some things that come hard. Why Mr. Barrows went the way he did is one of the hard things to understand, but that he did go, and that of his own free will, I am as sure as that two and two make four, and four from four leaves nothing."

I thought of all the others who secretly or openly expressed the same opinion, and felt my heart grow lighter. Then I thought of Rhoda Colwell, and then—

"Just what time was it," I asked, "when you were away in August? Was it before the seventeenth, or after? I enquire, because—"

"But evidently she did not care why I inquired."

"It was during that week," she broke in. "I remember because it was on the sixteenth that Mr. Pollard died, and I was not there to attend the funeral. I came back—"

"But it was no matter to me now when she came back. She had not been at home the night when Mr. Barrows was leguited into his first visit to the mill, and had mentioned a name I had long been eager to have introduced into the conversation."

"You know Mr. Pollard?" I therefore interposed without ceremony. "He was a very rich man, was he not?"

"Yes," she assented. "I suppose the children will have the whole property, now that the old lady is gone. I hope Mr. Harrington will be satisfied. He just carried that girl for her money. That, I am sure, you will hear everybody say."

"Yet she is exceedingly pretty," I suggested.

"Oh, yes, too pretty; she makes one think of a rose doll. But those English lords don't care for beauty without there is a deal of hard cash to back it; and if Agnes Pollard had been as poor as—what other beauty have we in town?"

"There is a girl called Rhoda Colwell," I ventured.

"Rhoda Colwell! Do you call her a beauty? I know some folks think she is—well, then, let us say as Rhoda Colwell, he would have made her any proposal sooner than that of his kind."

"And is Mr. Harrington a lord?" I asked, feeling that I was lighting upon some very strange truths.

"He is the next to one. A nephew, I believe, or else a cousin. I cannot keep track of all these fine distinctions in people's names."

"They were married privately and right after Mr. Pollard's death, I have heard."

"Yes; and for another entirely reason that one ever heard of that to have it settled and done; for Mr. Harrington did not take away his wife from the country; nor does he intend to do so for as long as he lives. Everybody thought it a very strange proceeding, and now too respectful to Mr. Pollard's memory either."

"I thought of all I had heard and seen in that house and wondered."

"Mr. Pollard was such a nice man, too," she pursued, in a musing tone. "Not a commanding person, like his wife, but so good and kind and attentive to poor folks like me. I never liked a man more than I did Mr. Pollard, and I have always thought that if he had had a different kind of mother for his children—but what is the use of criticizing the poor woman now. She died and so is he, and the children will do very well now with all that money to back them in any career they may have."

"You seem to know them well," I remarked, fearful she would observe the emotion I could not quite keep out of my face.

"No," she returned, with an assumption of grimaces, which was evidently meant for sarcasm, "not well. Everyone knows the Pollards, but I never heard any one say they knew them well."

"Didn't Mr. Barrows?" I tremulously inquired, anxious for her reply, yet fearful of connecting those two names.

"Not that I ever saw," she returned, showing no special interest in the question, or in the fact that it was seemingly of some importance to me.

"Didn't they use to come here to see him?" I proceeded, emboldened by her evident lack of perspicacity. "None of them?" I added, seeing her about to shake her head.

"Oh, Dwight or Gay would come here if they had any business with him," she allowed. "But that isn't intimacy; the Pollards are intimate with nobody."

She seemed to be rather proud of it, and as I did not see my way just then to acquire any further information, I sank with a weary air into a chair, turning the conversation as I did so upon other and totally irrelevant topics. But no topic was of much interest to her, that did not in some way involve Mr. Barrows; and after a few minutes of desultory chat, she pleaded the excuse of business and hurriedly left the room.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE GREEN ENVELOPE.

Sir, you shall understand what hath befallen, Which, as I think, you know not. Here is a letter. —OTHELLO.

Her departure was a relief to me. First, because I had heard so much, I wanted an opportunity of digesting it; and, secondly, because of my interest in the engraving she had shown me, and the impatience I felt to study it more closely. I took it to my room as she closed the door.

It was the picture of a martyr, and had evidently been cut from some good-sized book. It represented a man clothed in a long white garment, standing with his back to the stake, and his hand held out to the flames, which were slowly consuming it. As a work of art, it was ordinary; as the illustration of some mighty fact, it was full of suggestion. I gazed at it for a long time, and then turned to the bookcase. Was the book from which it had been taken there? I eagerly hoped so. For, ignorant as I may seem to you, I did not know the picture or the incident it represented; and I was anxious to represent it. For Mr. Barrows was not the man to disgrace a work of art by covering it with a coarse print like this, unless he had a motive; and how could even a suspicion of that motive be mine, without a full knowledge of just what this picture implied?

But though I looked from end to end of the various shelves before me, I did not succeed in finding the volume from which this engraving had been taken. Large books were there in plenty, but none of the exact size of the print I held in my hand. I own I was disappointed, and turned away from the bookcase at last with a feeling of having been baffled on the verge of some very interesting discovery.

The theory advanced with so much assurance by Mrs. Simpson had not met with much credence on my part. I believed her facts, but not the conclusions she drew from them. Nothing she had related to me convinced me that Mr. Barrows was in any way insane; nor could I imagine for a moment that he could be so without the knowledge of Ada, if not of his associates and friends.

At the same time I was becoming more and more assured in my own mind that his death was the result of his own act, and had not been for the difficulty of imagining a reason for it, could have retired to rest that night with a feeling of real security in the justness of a conclusion that so exonerated her to attend the funeral. I came back—

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"—," made an era in my history. For I had no sooner perceived it than I felt confident of having seen it or its like before; and presently, with almost the force of an electric shock, I recollected the letter which I had brought Ada the afternoon of the day she died, and which, as my startled consciousness now told me, had not only never been given her, but had not been as much as seen by me since, though all her belongings had passed into my hands, and the table where I had hung it had been emptied of its contents more than once. That letter and this empty envelope were, in style, handwriting, and direction, fac-similes. It had, therefore, come from Mr. Barrows; a most significant fact, and one which I had no sooner realized than I was seized by the most intense excitement, and might have done some wild and foolish thing, had not the lateness of the hour restrained me, and kept my passionate hopes and fears within their proper bounds. As it was, I found myself obliged to take several turns up and down the room, and even to open the window for a breath of fresh air, before I could face the subject with any calmness, or ask myself what had become of this letter, with any hope of receiving a rational reply.

That in the startling and tragic events of that day it had been overlooked and forgotten, I did not wonder. But that it should have escaped my notice afterwards, or if mine, that of the landlady who took charge of the room in my absence, was what I could not understand. As far as I could remember, I left the letter lying in plain view on the table. Why, then, had not some one seen and produced it? Could it be that some one more interested than I knew had stolen it? Or was it the landlady of my former home alone to blame for its being lost or mislaid?

Had it been daylight I should have once gone down to my former boarding-place to inquire; but as it was ten o'clock at night, I could only satisfy my impatience by going carefully over the incidents of that memorable day, in the hope of rousing some memory which would lead to an elucidation of this new mystery.

First, then, I distinctly recollected receiving the letter from the postman. I had met him at the foot of the steps as I came home from my unsuccessful search for employment, and he had handed me the letter simply saying: "For Miss Reynolds." I simply looked at it, certainly gave it no second thought, but we had been together but a week, and I had as yet taken no interest in her concerns. So, mechanically, indeed, had her concerns. So, mechanically, indeed, had her concerns. So, mechanically, indeed, had her concerns.

My entrance into my own room, my finding it empty, and the consequent ringing of the letter down on the table, all came back to me with the utmost clearness; even the fact that the letter fell face downwards and that I did not stop to turn it over. But beyond that all was blank to me up to the moment that I found myself confronting Ada standing with her hand on her heart in that sudden spasm of pain which had been the forerunner of her rapidly approaching doom.

But wait! Where was I standing when I first became conscious of her presence in the room? Why, in the window of course. I remembered now just how hot the afternoon sun looked to me as I stared at the white walls of the cottage over the way. And she—where was she?—between me and the table?—Yes; she had, therefore, passed by the letter, and might have picked it up, might even have opened it, and read it before the spell of my reverent washroom, and I turned to find her standing there before my eyes. Her pale, the evident distress under which she was laboring, even the sudden pain which had attacked her heart, might thus be accounted for, and what I had always supposed to be a purely physical attack proved to be the result of a mental and moral shock. But, no. Had she opened and read the letter it would have been found there; or if not there, at least upon her person after death. Besides, her whole conduct between the moment I faced her and that of the alarm in the street below precluded the idea that any thing of importance to her had in her love had occurred to break her faith in the future and the man to whose care she was pledged. Could I not remember the happy smile which accompanied her offer of assistance and home to me? And was there anything but hope and trust in the tone with which she had designated her lover as being the best and noblest man in town? No; if she had read his communication and afterwards disposed of it in some way I did not observe, then it was not of the nature I suspected; but an ordinary letter, similar in character to others she had received, foretelling nothing, and only valuable in the elucidation of the mystery before me from the fact of its offering proof presumptive that he did not anticipate death, or at all events did not meditate it.

As important enough fact to establish, certainly; but it was not the fact in which I had come to believe, and so I found it difficult to give it a place in my mind, or entertain the possibility of Ada's having sent the letter at all. I preferred rather to indulge in all sorts of wild conjectures, having the landlady, the servant, even Dr. Farnham, at their base; and it was not till I was visited by some mad thought of Rhoda Colwell's possible connivance in the disappearance of this important bit of evidence, that I realized the enormity of my selfish folly, and endeavored to put an end to its further indulgence by preparing stoically for bed.

But sleep, which would have been so welcome, did not come; and after a long and weary night, I arose in any thing but a refreshed state, to meet the exigencies of what might possibly prove to be a most important day.

The first thing to be done was undoubtedly to visit my old home and interview the landlady. If nothing came of that, to hunt

[To be continued.]

Sign of the Mill Saw, South side Kent st.

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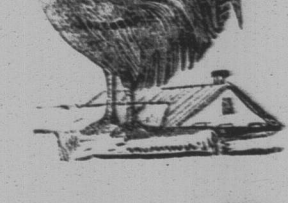
Boots in men's felt and leather, women's and children's at 25 cts. pair. Men's heavy lined overshoes at \$1.20 pair.

Ready made clothing in boys' and men's overcoats, boys' and men's suits, men's pants, overalls, and shirts. Dry goods in towels, blankets, dress goods, gungams, prints, laces, dress trimmings, ornaments, frillings, cloths, shawls, millinery, hats, caps, &c.

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