

The Mill Mystery

by

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1. The Alarm

Life, struck sharp on death,
Makes awful lightning.

--MRS. BROWNING.

I had just come in from the street. I had a letter in my hand. It was for my fellow-lodger, a young girl who taught in the High School, and whom I had persuaded to share my room because of her pretty face and quiet ways. She was not at home, and I flung the letter down on the table, where it fell, address downwards. I thought no more of it; my mind was too full, my heart too heavy with my own trouble.

Going to the window, I leaned my cheek against the pane. Oh, the deep sadness of a solitary woman's life! The sense of helplessness that comes upon her when every effort made, every possibility sounded, she realizes that the world has no place for her, and that she must either stoop to ask the assistance of friends or starve! I have no words for the misery I felt, for I am a proud woman, and----But no lifting of the curtain that shrouds my past. It has fallen for ever, and for you and me and the world I am simply Constance Sterling, a young woman of twenty-five, without home, relatives, or means of support, having in her pocket seventy-five cents of change, and in her breast a heart like lead, so utterly had every hope vanished in the day's rush of disappointments.

How long I stood with my face to the window I cannot say. With eyes dully fixed upon the blank walls of the cottages opposite, I stood oblivious to all about me till the fading sunlight--or was it some stir in the room behind me?--recalled me to myself, and I turned to find my pretty room-mate staring at me with a troubled look that for a moment made me forget my own sorrows and anxieties.

"What is it?" I asked, going towards her with an irresistible impulse of sympathy.

"I don't know," she murmured; "a sudden pain here," laying her hand on her heart.

I advanced still nearer, but her face, which had been quite pale, turned suddenly rosy; and, with a more natural expression, she took me by the hand, and said:

"But you look more than ill, you look unhappy. Would you mind telling me what worries you?"

The gentle tone, the earnest glance of modest yet sincere interest, went to my heart. Clutching her hand convulsively, I burst into tears.

"It is nothing," said I; "only my last resource has failed, and I don't know where to get a meal for to-morrow. Not that this is any thing in itself," I hastened to add, my natural pride reasserting itself; "but the future! the future!--what am I to do with my future?"

She did not answer at first. A gleam--I can scarcely call it a glow--passed over her face, and her eyes took a far-away look that made them very sweet. Then a little flush stole into her cheek, and, pressing my hand, she said:

"Will you trust it to me for a while?"

I must have looked my astonishment, for she hastened to add:

"Your future I have little concern for. With such capabilities as yours, you must find work. Why, look at your face!" and she drew me playfully before the glass. "See the forehead, the mouth, and tell me you read failure there! But your present is what is doubtful, and that I can certainly take care of."

"But----" I protested, with a sensation of warmth in my cheeks.

The loveliest smile stopped me before I could utter a word more.

"As you would take care of mine," she completed, "if our positions were reversed." Then, without waiting for a further demur on my part, she kissed me, and as if the sweet embrace had made us sisters at once, drew me to a chair and sat down at my feet. "You know," she naively murmured, "I am almost rich; I have five hundred dollars laid up in the bank, and----"

I put my hand over her lips; I could not help it. She was such a frail little thing, so white and so ethereal, and her poor five hundred had been earned by such weary, weary work.

"But that is nothing, nothing," I said. "You have a future to provide for, too, and you are not as strong as I am, if you have been more successful."

She laughed, then blushed, then laughed again, and impulsively cried:

"It is, however, more than I need to buy a wedding-dress with, don't you think?" And as I looked up surprised, she flashed out: "Oh, it's my secret; but I am going to be married in a month, and--and then I won't need to count my pennies any more; and, so I say, if you will stay here with me without a care until that day comes, you will make me very happy, and put me at the same time under a real obligation; for I shall want a great many things done, as you can readily conceive."

What did I say--what could I say, with her sweet blue eyes looking so truthfully into mine, but--"Oh, you darling girl!" while my heart filled with tears, which only escaped from overflowing my eyes, because I would not lessen her innocent joy by a hint of my own secret trouble.

"And who is the happy man?" I asked, at last, rising to pull down the curtain across a too inquisitive ray of afternoon sunshine.

"Ah, the noblest, best man in town!" she breathed, with a burst of gentle pride.

"Mr. B----"

She went no further, or if she did, I did not hear her, for just then a hubbub arose in the street, and lifting the window, I looked out.

"What is it?" she cried, coming hastily towards me.

"I don't know," I returned. "The people are all rushing in one direction, but I cannot see what attracts them."

"Come away then!" she murmured; and I saw her hand go to her heart, in the way it did when she first entered the room a half-hour before. But just then a sudden voice exclaimed below: "The clergyman! It is the clergyman!" And giving a smothered shriek, she grasped me by the arm, crying: "What do they say? 'The clergyman'? Do they say 'The clergyman'?"

"Yes," I answered, turning upon her with alarm. But she was already at the door.

"Can it be?" I asked myself, as I hurriedly followed, "that it is Mr. Barrows she is going to marry?"

For in the small town of S---- Mr. Barrows was the only man who could properly be meant by "The clergyman"; for though Mr. Kingston, of the Baptist Church, was a worthy man in his way, and the Congregational minister had an influence with his flock that was not to be despised, Mr. Barrows, alone of all his fraternity, had so won upon the affections and confidence of the people as to merit the appellation of "The clergyman."

"If I am right," thought I, "God grant that no harm has come to him!" and I dashed down the stairs just in time to see the frail form of my room-mate flying out of the front door.

I overtook her at last; but where? Far out of town on that dark and dismal road, where the gaunt chimneys of the deserted mill rise from a growth of pine-trees. But I knew before I reached her what she would find; knew that her short dream of love was over, and that stretched amongst the weeds which choked the entrance to the old mill lay the dead form of the revered young minister, who, by his precept and example, had won not only the heart of this young maiden, but that of the whole community in which he lived and labored.

2. A Fearful Question

Nay, yet there's more in this:

I pray thee, speak to me as to thy thinkings,
As thou dost ruminat; and give thy worst of thoughts
The worst of words.

--OTHELLO.

My room-mate was, as I have intimated, exceedingly frail and unobtrusive in appearance; yet when we came upon this scene, the group of men about the inanimate form of her lover parted involuntarily as if a spirit had come upon them; though I do not think one of them, until that moment, had any suspicion of the relations between her and their young pastor. Being close behind her, I pressed forward too, and so it happened that I stood by her side when her gaze first fell upon her dead lover. Never shall I forget the cry she uttered, or the solemn silence that fell over all, as her hand, rigid and white as that of a ghost's, slowly rose and pointed with awful question at the pallid brow upturned before her. It seemed as if a spell had fallen, enchaining the roughest there from answering, for the truth was terrible, and we knew it; else why those dripping locks and heavily soaked garments oozing, not with the limpid waters of the stream we could faintly hear gurgling in the distance, but with some fearful substance that dyed the forehead blue and left upon the grass a dark stain that floods of rain would scarcely wash away?

"What is it? Oh, what does it mean?" she faintly gasped, shuddering backward with wondering dread as one of those tiny streams of strange blue moisture found its way to her feet.

Still that ominous silence.

"Oh, I must know!" she whispered. "I was his betrothed"; and her eyes wandered for a moment with a wild appeal upon those about her.

Whereupon a kindly voice spoke up. "He has been drowned, miss. The blue----" and there he hesitated.

"The blue is from the remains of some old dye that must have been in the bottom of the vat out of which we drew him," another voice went on.

"The vat!" she repeated. "The vat! Was he found----"

"In the vat? Yes, miss." And there the silence fell again.

It was no wonder. For a man like him, alert, busy, with no time nor inclination for foolish explorations, to have been found drowned in the disused vat of a half-tumbled-down old mill on a lonesome and neglected road meant----But what did it mean? What could it mean? The lowered eyes of those around seemed to decline to express even a conjecture.

My poor friend, so delicate, so tender, reeled in my arms. "In the vat!" she reiterated again and again, as if her mind refused to take in a fact so astounding and unaccountable.

"Yes, miss, and he might never have been discovered," volunteered a voice at last, over my shoulder, "if a parcel of school-children hadn't strayed into the mill this afternoon. It is a dreadful lonesome spot, you see, and----"

"Hush!" I whispered; "hush!" and I pointed to her face, which at these words had changed as if the breath of death had blown across it; and winding my arms still closer about her, I endeavored to lead her away.

But I did not know my room-mate. Pushing me gently aside, she turned to a stalwart man near by, whose face seemed to invite confidence, and said:

"Take me in and show me the vat."

He looked at her amazed; so did we.

"I must see it," she said, simply; and she herself took the first step towards the mill.

There was no alternative but to follow. This we did in terror and pity, for the look with which she led the way was not the look of any common determination, and the power which seemed to force her feeble body on upon its fearful errand was of that strained and unnatural order which might at any moment desert her, and lay her a weak and helpless burden at our feet.

"It must be dark by this time down there," objected the man she had appealed to, as he stepped doubtfully forward.

But she did not seem to heed. Her eyes were fixed upon the ruined walls before her, rising drear and blank against the pale-green evening sky.

"He could have had no errand here," I heard her murmur. "How then be drowned here?--how? how?"

Alas! that was the mystery, dear heart, with which every mind was busy!

The door of the mill had fallen down and rotted away years before, so we had no difficulty in entering. But upon crossing the threshold and making for the steps that led below, we found that the growing twilight was any thing but favorable to a speedy or even safe advance. For the flooring was badly broken in places, and the stairs down which we had to go were not only uneven, but strangely rickety and tottering.

But the sprite that led us paused for nothing, and long before I had passed the first step she had reached the bottom one, and was groping her way towards the single gleam of light that infused itself through the otherwise pitchy darkness.

"Be careful, miss; you may fall into the vat yourself!" exclaimed more than one voice behind her.

But she hurried on, her slight form showing like a spectre against the dim gleam towards which she bent her way, till suddenly she paused and we saw her standing with clasped hands, and bent head, looking down into what? We could readily conjecture.

"She will throw herself in," whispered a voice; but as, profoundly startled, I was about to hasten forward, she hurriedly turned and came towards us.

"I have seen it," she quietly said, and glided by us, and up the stairs, and out of the mill to where that still form lay in its ghostly quietude upon the sodden grass.

For a moment she merely looked at it, then she knelt, and, oblivious to the eyes bent pityingly upon her, kissed the brow and then the cheeks, saying something which I could not hear, but which lent a look of strange peace to her features, that were almost as pallid and set now as his. Then she arose, and holding out her hand to me, was turning away, when a word uttered by some one, I could not tell whom, stopped her, and froze her, as it were, to the spot.

That word was suicide!

I think I see her yet, the pale-green twilight on her forehead, her lips parted, and her eyes fixed in an incredulous stare.

"Do you mean," she cried, "that he deserves any such name as that? That his death here was not one of chance or accident, mysterious, if you will, but still one that leaves no stigma on his name as a man and a clergyman?"

"Indeed, miss," came in reply, "we would not like to say."

"Then, I say, that unless Mr. Barrows was insane, he never premeditated a crime of this nature. He was too much of a Christian. And if that does not strike you as good reasoning, he was too-- happy."

The last word was uttered so low that if it had not been for the faint flush that flitted into her cheek, it would scarcely have been understood. As it was, the furtive looks of the men about showed that they comprehended all that she would say; and, satisfied with the impression made, she laid her hand on my arm, and for the second time turned towards home.

3. ADA

For, in my sense, 't is happiness to die.
--OTHELLO.

There was death in her face; I saw it the moment we reached the refuge of our room. But I was scarcely prepared for the words which she said to me.

"Mr. Barrows and I will be buried in one grave. The waters which drowned him have gone over my head also. But before the moment comes which proves my words true, there is one thing I wish to impress upon you, and that is: That no matter what people may say, or what conjectures they may indulge in, Mr. Barrows never came to his end by any premeditation of his own. And that you may believe me, and uphold his cause in the face of whatever may arise, I will tell you something of his life and mine. Will you listen?"

Would I listen? I could not speak, but I drew up the lounge, and sitting down by her side, pressed my cheek close to hers. She smiled faintly, all unhappiness gone from her look, and in sweet, soft tones, began:

"We are both orphans. As far as I know, neither of us have any nearer relatives than distant cousins; a similarity of condition that has acted as a bond between us since we first knew and loved each other. When I came to S---- he was just settled here, a young man full of zeal and courage. Whatever the experience of his college days had been--and he has often told me that at that time ambition was the mainspring of his existence,--the respect and appreciation which he found here, and the field which daily opened before him for work, had wakened a spirit of earnest trust that ere long developed that latent sweetness in his disposition which more than his mental qualities, perhaps, won him universal confidence and love.

"You have heard him preach, and you know he was not lacking in genius; but you have not heard him speak, eye to eye and hand to hand. It was there his power came in, and there, too, perhaps, his greatest temptation. For he was one for women to love, and it is not always easy to modify a naturally magnetic look and tone because the hand that touches yours is shy and white, and the glance which steals up to meet your own has within it the hint of unconscious worship. Yet what he could do he did; for, unknown, perhaps, to any one here, he was engaged to be married, as so many young ministers are, to a girl he had met while at college.

"I do not mean to go into too many particulars, Constance. He did not love this girl, but he meant to be true to her. He was even contented with the prospect of marrying her, till----Oh, Constance, I almost forget that he is gone, and that my own life is at an end, when I think of that day, six months ago--the day when we first met, and, without knowing it, first loved. And then the weeks which followed when each look was an event, and a passing word the making or the marring of a day. I did not know what it all meant; but he realized only too soon the precipice upon which we stood, and I began to see him less, and find him more reserved when, by any chance, we were thrown together. His cheek grew paler, too, and his health wavered. A struggle was going on in his breast--a struggle of whose

depth and force I had little conception then, for I dared not believe he loved me, though I knew by this time he was bound to another who would never be a suitable companion for him.

"At last he became so ill, he was obliged to quit his work, and for a month I did not see him, though only a short square separated us. He was slowly yielding to an insidious disease, some said; and I had to bear the pain of this uncertainty, as well as the secret agony of my own crushed and broken heart.

"But one morning--shall I ever forget it?--the door opened, and he, he came in where I was, and without saying a word, knelt down by my side, and drew my head forward and laid it on his breast. I thought at first it was a farewell, and trembled with a secret anguish that was yet strangely blissful, for did not the passionate constraint of his arms mean love? But when, after a moment that seemed a lifetime, I drew back and looked into his face, I saw it was not a farewell, but a greeting, he had brought me, and that we had not only got our pastor back to life, but that this pastor was a lover as well, who would marry the woman he loved.

"And I was right. In ten minutes I knew, that a sudden freak on the part of the girl he was engaged to had released him, without fault of his own, and that with this release new life had entered his veins, for the conflict was over and love and duty were now in harmony.

"Constance, I would not have you think he was an absolutely perfect man. He was too sensitively organized for that. A touch, a look that was not in harmony with his thoughts, would make him turn pale at times, and I have seen him put to such suffering by petty physical causes, that I have sometimes wondered where his great soul got its strength to carry him through the exigencies of his somewhat trying calling. But whatever his weaknesses--and they were very few,--he was conscientious in the extreme, and suffered agony where other men would be affected but slightly. You can imagine his joy, then, over this unexpected end to his long pain; and remembering that it is only a month previous to the day set apart by us for our marriage, ask yourself whether he would be likely to seek any means of death, let alone such a horrible and lonesome one as that which has robbed us of him to-day?"

"No!" I burst out, for she waited for my reply. "A thousand times, no, no, no!"

"He has not been so well lately, and I have not seen as much of him as usual; but that is because he had some literary work he wished to finish before the wedding-day. Ah, it will never be finished now! and our wedding-day is to-day! and the bride is almost ready. But!" she suddenly exclaimed, "I must not go yet--not till you have said again that he was no suicide. Tell me," she vehemently continued-- "tell me from your soul that you believe he is not answerable for his death!"

"I do!" I rejoined, alarmed and touched at once by the fire in her cheek and eye.

"And that," she went, "you will hold to this opinion in the face of all opposition! That, whatever attack men may make upon his memory, you will uphold his honor and declare his innocence! Say you will be my deputy in this, and I will love you even in my cold grave, and bless you as perhaps only those who see the face of the Father can bless!"

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