

When I had deposited my small stock of baggage in an apartment at his direction, and had been conducted back to the sitting-room just off the bar, the outer door opened sharply, and a lively, bright-eyed school girl bounced into the room. In a few seconds she was followed by what I afterwards found to be her teacher, a studious-looking young man of about my own age.

In a brusque and indescribably odd, peculiarly-his-own, manner the little landlord introduced to me the new-comers, and the school girl, Jessie Harle, his niece, excusing herself in an easy, graceful manner which surprised me, laid her books upon the mantel shelf, and modestly glancing at her teacher as if expecting reproof, left the room.

Delby left the teacher, Walter Marston, and I alone together shortly after, and we sat and talked till summoned to tea. I talked, at least. He listened and answered. He was a person, evidently, who was thoughtful, ardently earnest and very energetic. Those characteristics, with a great amount of application, I concluded were the chief ingredients of his nature, and as far as I went, my after acquaintance confirmed my conclusions.

During our conversation I questioned Mr. Marston concerning the neighborhood, and using policy, for which I always prided myself, I found out, without arousing my companion's suspicions, some points about which I was deeply interested, in fact which had brought me to Shulton, with regard to an old grist-mill a half-mile distant from the village.

"It's a mysterious place, has a mysterious owner, and I think naturally enough people have decided without grounds, that some horrible mystery is connected with the place and its owner, Sweeman."

My previous talk had aroused his interest and he spoke more verbosely than was his wont, probably because of having often previously pondered and talked upon this subject.

"But," I asked, "isn't the mill running at present? No mystery of any importance could remain unsolved while so many men are employed in the place."

"It's the employees of the mill themselves that suspect something—they hardly know what. But I think it's imagination."

"What stories do they tell?"

"Well there's a boy the miller keeps whom they say he treats like a dog, while he hardly interferes with the men."

"Like plenty of cowardly employers," I suggested.

He signified assent, and as the summons for tea came at this juncture our conversation on the subject ceased.

I had heard a number of men enter the bar and pass through as we talked, and I rightly conjectured, from previously-gained information, that they were the hands employed at Sweeman's mill. They unceremoniously ate at the table with us, and coarse manners with coarser conversation was the general order.

But, the leading feature in my remembrance of that visit to Shulton was Jessie Harle, the bright-eyed, rosy-cheeked, witty, laughing school-girl. And who could blame me, a young man of twenty-one summers, taking particular notice of a beauty of sixteen who was so much more refined, so decidedly beyond comparison with any person or any thing in that little rural village. Why, anyone who had spent their previous life in the city and who was compelled by circumstances to remain in the country a week, and could avoid themselves of such company, must have done as I did, even though —; well I'll have to explain that hereafter.

At any rate I did pay pretty little Jessie considerable attention while at Shulton. We walked together to the old mill and about its picturesque vicinity. We roved about the woods and gathered spring flowers. We talked, joked, and laughed together, and our conduct was anything but pleasing to the young school teacher; or, of course, that may have only been the fruit of my boyish idea of a triumph.

There were times, too, when I thought seriously of Jessie, and pitted her for her very attractions. She seemed so childlike in her simplicity. I might never meet her after this visit, and then her beauty, like many another's might be her ruin. But I could see her again—I could protect her. But that was nonsense, and one minute I thought so, while the next I felt otherwise.

How distinctly I remember that boyish passion! How I love to revel in it now! But it was only a foolish passing fancy of mushroom growth and doomed to suffer the enviable fate of the morning dew, and the river's foam.

CHAPTER II.

"The same old sounds are in my ears
That in those days I heard."

WORDSWORTH.

Almost every living person has at certain periods of their lives meditated on the strangeness of the circumstances surrounding them, and not a few have asked within themselves, can this be really me? Am I a human being? Are the beings that surround me living, or do I imagine them existing only to fulfil my Creator's design in leading me through temptations or in teaching me the lessons of life? Many too in the midst of actual life have pondered, is this a dream? The fact is we pass along seeing strange things, undergoing strange feelings, suffering in strange ways, meeting strange people; and yet we fail to realize that "truth is stranger than fiction." Thus the romantic situations in my life have naturally enough led me to speak generally of them without comment, but my common sense tells me that many a gentle reader, because of not having actually experienced anything similar, would not only not credit my whole narrative, but actually class it, with the great bulk of current literature, as a mass of lies.

My father, Hugh Lawnbrook, had been a widower for eighteen years and was in his grave some months before our story opened, and romantically enough he had left me a mission to perform which I had in my youthful heat, at his death, vowed to make the one chief object of my life until I had accomplished it.

While I was yet a little child my only brother in his sixteenth year had quarrelled with my father, about matters that I have never yet been able to obtain definite information upon, and my stern parent's curse was pronounced upon his wayward boy, who went out into the cruel world so young—with too much of his father's stubbornness to turn back, and too much independence to fail to succeed in obtaining for himself a livelihood.

He had never returned.

No wonder my father, iron-willed as he was, relented; and no wonder in his old and feeble days he should destine me to find my brother "Zhake" (that was the only name I'd known him by) and tell him of his full forgiveness.

Though I sometimes credited this idea to my father's being in his second childhood when he proposed it, my youthful love of romance led me to lay definite plans for a search upon the scanty information that I was in possession of.

Sweeman's mill at Shulton had been Zhake's hiding-place when he first ran away and twice after at intervals of two years' time he had been seen there. I also had formed various indefinite impressions regarding his connection with Sweeman's mill from different stories I had heard about it, and thus on my start out I had determined to spend a week at Shulton.

But I had not started out at once on my father's death for reasons which have delayed many a young fellow, though I found plenty of ostensible excuses that hid from myself the real cause of my delay.

The name of Elson had been almost as familiar to me as my own from childhood, and my father and Mr. Elson being in about equally affluent circumstances, having country residences near together, and having tastes somewhat similar, had been friends for many years. So when Nellie Elson came home from college an accomplished lady, it was not a very remarkable fact that she and I became good friends—perhaps more. But Nellie's mother and I had a mutual aversion to each other, and any young fellow who has been placed in a similar situation knows full well the difficulties he has to encounter, with the plots and devices of a shrewd politic woman against him.

Mr. Elson, who had suffered from consumption for many years, was now lying on a sick-bed, probably on the point of death, and his wife's love could not be seen in her conduct toward him, or rather her lack of love was exhibited in her every act.

He had married before he reached his twentieth birthday, and, which was considered more strange by the gossip-