

# The Mystery of Muriel's Life.

IN TWO INSTALMENTS—PART II.

'You are very lenient,' answered Ramona. 'I heartily reciprocate your good opinion and trust I may not do ought to forfeit it. Now, listen, comrade! Our laws are vile. Iniquity is at the root of them, and bribery and corruption form the stem. I would alter this if I could. I would risk fortune and life to do so. Come amigo ami, and see if I have cause for my indignation. My countrymen shrug their shoulders and smile at the inquiry. You will do neither. No man with feeling could.'

The warden reached the gaol, a gloomy, stone building, and Hugh shuddered as he entered the place.

A warden showed them over it, and, descending to the vaults they passed many a dungeon, where helpless men were immured perhaps for life.

At last they stopped at one of the cells and the warden opened the door, motioning them to enter.

A man was stretched on some straw, and as the warden flashed his lamp upon him, the wretched prisoner lay so still that Hugh imagined he must be dead.

'This one, senior,' exclaimed the gaoler 'is a prisoner awaiting his trial; but, between you and me, he will never be tried.'

'Of what is he accused?' demanded Hugh.

'Treason! His guilt is fully known; but I believe there is not sufficient evidence to convict him. Thus he will wait; but I think he will not wait long. Get up!'

The warden kicked the sleeper, who sat up and revealed a face so full of misery and so wasted with suffering that Hugh felt a thrill of horror.

The prisoner rose to his feet, and his dark eyes stared so fiercely at the brutal warden that the latter half-drew his sword. Suddenly the prisoner sprang forward and dealt the Mexican a blow in the face, that sent him senseless to the floor.

'Perhaps they will take my life now,' he said defiantly. 'I am prepared. Death would be a mercy. Why don't you call the guard?'

'Not I,' answered Hugh, in the best Spanish he could command. 'Nor do I think my friend will. Why not make a bold dash for freedom? You may meet death, but it is your only chance of escaping from the dungeon with my life.'

'My friend speaks truly!' exclaimed Ramona. 'Go! Lock the dungeon door so that we may have an excuse for not following you. Turn to the left, ascend the steps, then trust to chance for the rest.'

'May Heaven bless you for this noble deed,' exclaimed the wretched man fervently, then he sprang to the door, and they heard the key grate in the lock.

Several minutes elapsed ere the warden regained consciousness; then, sitting up, he gazed wildly round the dungeon.

'The rascal had escaped and locked us in,' said Ramona calmly.

'Heavens! Then I am lost,' gasped the terrified man.

'Not at all,' replied Ramona; 'the governor is a friend of mine. I will bear you out that it was thought no fault of yours.'

'I ought to have locked the door, but I thought he was too weak to attempt an escape.'

'They may catch him.'

'True, senior. But, then, also he may escape. There will be no soldiers about at this time, and the warders are at supper.'

'It does not signify. We can easily prove you were not to blame. I suppose we shall soon be released.'

'I hope so, unless that villain has taken the keys with him. It is useless to call for help. No one can hear us here.'

Nearly an hour elapsed, however, before they were released, and when they were before the governor, Hugh was simply astounded at the cool manner in which he treated the prisoner's escape, while he smoked one of Ramona's cigars.

'It's unfortunate,' he remarked, 'but I think the poor wretch was innocent. However, it can't be helped. You had better put another prisoner in that cell, warden.'

'Shall search be made for the escaped one, senior?'

'No, I think not. It would cause a lot of trouble. As it is, no one will miss him. Well good-night, gentlemen.'

## CHAPTER IV.

A few nights later La Estrella was being driven to her home, accompanied by her mother.

As they drew up at the house a man staggered from the doorway, where he had been crouching.

There was something so utterly dejected and feeble in his gait that the beautiful girl's heart was filled with pity.

'My poor fellow!' she said, 'Do you need aid?'

He turned and revealed the features of the escaped prisoner; then he started back with a cry of dismay.

Inez stepped forward, and, with dilated eyes, gazed at his haggard face.

'Am I dreaming?' she cried. 'Oh, speak! My darling, speak!'

'Inez! Dare I hope you love me even as I am now?'

'Jack, they told me you were dead,' sobbed Inez.

'Quick! Come this way,' cried her mother, leading them into the house.

Then, as she left them, Inez was clasped to her loved one's breast.

'Did that man speak falsely in saying

that you had fought a duel? she inquired, when the first transports of joy at this strange meeting were past.

'No, my Inez,' he answered. 'We fought, and he believed that he had killed me. My seconds bore me to a little hut, and even they believed at first that I was dead. For many weeks I lay hovering between life and death. Then, when that miscreant Stanton learnt that I was recovering, he had me arrested on some false charge.'

'What it really was I never know, but ever since then I have been kept in a vile dungeon, and treated worse than some wild beast. Were it not for two brave men, who aided my escape, I should have ended my days in that place. I would have fled, but was penniless. Thank Heaven I did not do so, or we should not have met.'

While the lovers were talking over their future plans, Hugh Allingham's vessel had sailed.

To his surprise he met Stanton on board. Hugh had taken his passage on a sailer, partly for the sake of economy and partly because time was of little object to him.

Hour after hour he would sit on deck, trying in vain to fathom the mystery which separated him from the woman he loved so dearly.

Something told him that Stanton could have revealed it, but they never spoke to each other, and Hugh knew it would be worse than useless to attempt to question him.

One night a storm arose. Wild waves burst upon the vessel, and the fierce wind swept the spray over her.

Through the black heavens the forked lightning darted, and the crashing thunder drowned the tempest's roar.

Hugh stood upon the deck watching the raging storm.

It had no terrors for him, and he dreaded the loneliness of his cabin.

The sailor marvelled, as they hurried to and fro to fulfill their arduous duties, how a man could be so mad as to remain on deck in such a storm when he might be in his berth.

Fiercer and fiercer grew the tempest; then a blinding flash of light filled Hugh's eyes, and a mighty explosion, more awful than anything he had ever heard, burst upon him, while he was hurled to the vessel's deck.

Presently he struggled to his feet. He could hear the crashes of thunder, but he saw nothing now.

From side to side he turned, and stretch ed forth his arms hopelessly.

He was blind.

They got him below, and the ship's doctor did what he could.

'Well, doctor, how is your patient progressing?' inquired the captain the following morning; when the storm had somewhat abated.

'Badly. He is blinded.'

'Blinded, eh?' exclaimed the captain. 'That's bad! He's an artist too. I'm sorry for him.'

The captain would have spoken much the same had a man been washed overboard. He was not a bad-hearted man; but a life at sea makes one somewhat callous.

And Hugh sat in the cabin, helpless and hopeless.

Through storm and sunshine the vessel ploughed her way, and she reached port in safety.

Hugh was desperate.

Blindness was the most awful fate that could have befallen him.

While he had sight he could always earn a good living with his talent; now starvation stared him in the face.

When he landed at the docks he possessed only ten pounds.

He was alone in the great city, with that awful veil of blackness upon him.

A sailor found him a home, and refused to take the money Hugh offered him for his kindness.

The home was but a garret; but what did it signify to the artist in his blindness; He heard the church clock strike six, then he listened for it to chime the quarter, and it seemed that an hour had passed before it did so.

To know that he must spend days, weeks, months, in that misery distracted him.

He felt the blood flush to his brain at the very thought, in a manner that made him believe he was going mad.

At last the landlady knocked at his door. Will you have some tea, sir? she inquired.

'No, thank you.'

'Shall I bring a li—I mean, shall I draw yer blind?'

'If you choose.'

'He seems a surly sort,' she said to her husband, when she returned to that inestimable individual.

'I suppose he'll pay all right?' he answered.

'If he don't be'll soon go! snapped his wife. 'He's given me a week in advance, and his box will pay for another week or more.'

'How do you know? It may be empty.'

'Do you think I'm as blind as he is?'

'snarled the gentle creature. 'I've had a look in it. Do you take me for a fool like yourself?'

'No, I don't.'

'What do you take me for then?'

'Seems to me I took yer for better or worse about it to my mind. I'm going out.'

And this was all the commersion the wretched Hugh received.

Hour after hour passed by. The chiming of that clock was driving him nearly mad.

The footsteps in the street died away, until only the moaning of the wind disturbed the silence of the night.

At last he groped his way to the bed, and threw himself upon it without undressing, and sleep came presently to his relief.

He dreamt that he was once more roaming amongst the Surrey hills with Muriel. Again he could see her golden-brown hair as the light of the setting sun fell upon it, and the sweet sound of chiming bells floated from the old church tower.

He awoke with a start.

He could still hear the chiming bells, for it was Sunday morning; but he could not see the fields and trees, nor Muriel.

Now the thought occurred to him to communicate with his uncle, and he got the landlady to write the letter at his dictation.

In due course an answer came, but it was from a firm of lawyers, and Hugh learnt that the old clergyman had gone to the rest he deserved so well.

He had left only a few hundred pounds, and this was willed to Hugh.

The weary time passed on, and so terrible was the monotony, that the young artist longed for death.

## CHAPTER V.

From the night that Hugh had left Hazlemere Muriel never mentioned his name to her aunt.

The summer passed and the winter storms showed round the old mansion, but neither of the ladies ever complained of its loneliness.

One night as Miss Neal was sitting by herself, she was startled by a tapping at the casement window.

Stepping towards it, she drew the blind aside, then started back, for a man's face was pressed against the glass.

An exclamation of dismay escaped her. She knew that face well, and had good cause to loathe and dread the man.

He was James Stanton.

For some moments the old lady hesitated, then, opening the window, she motioned him to enter the room.

'How dare you come here, James Stanton?' she demanded sternly.

'How dare I?' he sneered. 'Well, that's cool! I have come to see Muriel.'

'Then you shall not,' she answered, fixing her eyes upon him.

'If my information is correct, that is not your house,' said Stanton.

'It is here,' retorted Miss Neal. 'Yet I order you to leave it.'

'What right have you to interfere?'

'I have the right to shield my dear niece from trouble. You promised never to annoy her. Is this how you keep your promise?'

'I have a message for her that will—'

'Give the message to me and I will deliver it, if it is such that she should receive.'

'Not now!' exclaimed Stanton. 'But I give you my word of honor that—'

'Your word of honor!' exclaimed Miss Neal. 'You have already proved too well that your word is not to be relied on. You have no sense of shame or honor about you. You think that you can terrorize helpless women, coward that you are!'

'By heaven! never man spoke to me like that—'

'A man!' cried the old lady, tremulous with indignation. 'If I were a man, you would not dare to venture here, because you would horsewhip you.'

'You will make me forget that you are a woman!' cried Stanton furiously.

Since you have forgotten that you are a man, it would not be very surprising,' retorted the old lady.

'I do not wish to bandy words with you,' said Stanton. 'I came here to see Muriel—and see her I will, even if I cause a scandal in the place. Send her down to me. I will not leave this room until she comes.'

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 'You say you will not go?' cried Miss Neal.
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