

# The Mystery of Muriel's Life.

IN TWO INSTALMENTS—PART II.

## CHAPTER I.

That there was some dark mystery attaching to Muriel Fernly's life was generally admitted as that she was beautiful, charming, and very wealthy.

A year ago she had purchased the old Hazlemere mansion, a low, rambling building, surrounded by some picturesque scenery in the beautiful county of Surrey. And here Muriel lived in solitude with her aunt, Miss Janet Neal, who, to judge by appearances, could not have been very cheerful company.

These two ladies, however, seemed quite content with their lonely lives.

They paid no visits, nor did they receive any with the exception of the vicar's. He, worthy man, was rather a frequent visitor, because the fair young mistress of Hazlemere was ever ready to give liberal aid in the cause of charity.

One day as Muriel was strolling along the lanes, sweet with the Mayflowers' perfume, she met this gentleman in company with his nephew, Hugh Allingham, a young artist, who had already gained some fame.

An introduction followed, and Hugh suddenly discovered that the scenery around Hazlemere was more beautiful than anything he had ever seen, and he craved Muriel's permission to paint the old mansion.

The picture was an utter failure.

Muriel, who was a great admirer of art, came sometimes to see how the young artist progressed, and Hugh found more beauty in her fair face than in all the landscapes of the world.

Almost ere the picture was begun he was in love with her, although he had not seen her a dozen times.

And as the days passed by and he met her more frequently, he felt that life without her love would be too desolate to contemplate.

Hugh was simply a tall, good-looking young Briton, without even a strikingly handsome face; to aid him in his suit, and he was comparatively poor.

Muriel was beautiful and very wealthy while she had not by one glance of her deep blue eyes, nor one word of her silvery voice—which always sent a thrill of joy through his breast—given him the slightest cause to hope.

One day, as he sat dreaming of her, and hoping she would come, he painted her fair face from memory on the canvas where the sky should have gone.

A silvery laugh broke a reverie into which he had fallen, and, turning, he saw the woman who had won his heart looking over his shoulder.

"Why, Mr. Allingham!" Muriel exclaimed, "whatever made you paint my portrait there? I need not ask you how your picture is progressing. You have completely spoilt it!"

"Then it is your beauty that has done so," answered Hugh, rising, and tossing palette and brushes aside. "I worked pretty hard last year, and I made three hundred pounds. I tell you this so that you may know how great is my presumption when I add that I love you. I love you, Muriel, so fervently, that interest in my art is merged in that one strong passion. I know that you will laugh at me; but—"

"Mr. Allingham, you mistake me altogether," answered Muriel. "I should never laugh at anyone who spoke to me in sincerity as you have spoken, and something tells me that you are sincere. But you must forget this fancy."

"Fanc!," he repeated.

"Well, you must forget me," said Muriel, "for your love is hopeless."

"You are only telling me what I already knew," he answered, in a voice so full of despair that it sent a thrill of pity through her breast. "I never had hope, nor should have spoken, but that my love overcame my reason. How could you with all your beauty, with all your goodness and your wealth, care for a man like me?"

"Mr. Allingham, once more you are mistaken," answered Muriel. "You speak as though I were your superior, which is not the case."

"But it is. My uncle has told me what you are, and I know what I am."

"You speak as though you were bad, Mr. Allingham," she answered.

"No worse than other men, I trust," he said. "Yet I can never hope to be as good as you, Muriel," he added, taking her trembling hand in his, and he told her that his suit is hopeless, and I know your words were not lightly spoken. May I ask you to tell me that you believe the words I uttered were spoken from my heart?"

She turned her beautiful blue eyes, now filled with tears, to his, and murmured—

"For all sad words of tongue or pen,  
The saddest are these: 'It might have been.'"

Hugh understood. He saw her bosom heave with the sob she could not check.

He pressed his lips to the small white hand that lay tremblingly in his, and with one last, earnest gaze at her beautiful face, strode quickly down the grassy slope.

Muriel watched him until his tall form disappeared in the distance, then, sinking on the grass, she buried her face in her hands, and wept as though her heart was broken.

"Oh! why did he ever come here?" she murmured. "My burden was heavy enough before, now it is greater than I can bear. Must I bring death and misery to all who love me, and whom I love?"

"What is the matter, Muriel?" inquired

her aunt that evening. "You are eating nothing."

"I am not hungry, aunt."

"Nonsense, child," retorted Miss Neal. "You had no lunch, and now you are eating no dinner. Do you think I am blind and stupid?"

"Dear aunt, I think you are very clever. Don't be angry with me. I am wretched enough already."

"I have no patience with you Muriel!" exclaimed the old lady. "Now, for goodness sake, don't cry!" she added, wiping her own eyes when her niece was not looking. "I detect crying; it is ridiculous!"

Muriel rose from her chair, and, placing her arms round the old lady's neck, kissed her cheek, as she used to do in the years long past, when she was a little child and her own mother had been taken from her.

From that sad day that mother's sister, whose manner was so austere, had never spoken an angry word to the girl.

"Now tell me, Muriel, what has happened?" she said, stroking her niece's golden brown hair as though, not a young lady of twenty-two, but a little girl of three had come to her for comfort, as in the olden time. "This young artist, Mr. Allingham, has spoken to you of love?"

"However did you guess that, dear aunt?"

"Good gracious! do you think that, because I am becoming short-sighted, I am getting blind?" retorted Miss Neal. "Have I not seen the young man hovering about here for the past three months? Painting, he calls it! Why, I could paint better myself! It is only natural that he should fall in love with you, considering how beautiful that is to say, considering you are, by no means plain. Besides, you are wealthy."

"I am certain he thought nothing of that, declared Muriel.

"I, too, am sure he did not," replied Miss Neal. "Otherwise, I should not call on him, as I intend to do this evening."

"But, aunt, you will not tell—you won't—"

"Tut, tut, child! What are you thinking about? I shall simply convince him that his suit is hopeless. I have not spoken many times to Mr. Allingham, but I believe him to be a man of honor. I shall endeavor to extract a promise from him that he will never see you again. Rest assured, dear, your secret is safe with me."

Hugh was not a little surprised at receiving a call from Miss Neal that evening.

"My uncle is out, unfortunately," he said, thinking she had come to see the vicar.

"So much the better, Mr. Allingham," replied the good lady; "because I wish to speak to you alone. I have guessed from my niece's manner and my own observation what occurred this afternoon."

"At least, I trust you will not deem me a fortune-hunter," said Hugh, flushing.

"No; I certainly do not think that. I believe you to be a man of honor. Now, Mr. Allingham, I have come to tell you that it is not a matter of inequality in wealth, but that you must not think you could ever gain Muriel's love."

"It is quite impossible; she can never be your wife. Even if she loved you as you love her, there is an insurmountable barrier between you. I will tell you more. I have much influence over Muriel, and, were it possible, I would use that influence in your behalf, because I believe you are a man who would make the woman who trusted her life to you as happy as lay in your power. When I tell you that she has led a troubled life, and that were you to gain her love, you would only add to her trouble, I hope I do not mistake you in believing that they will give me your promise never to see her again. I know that what I ask must seem cruel to you; but I ask it for her sake—for her sake only."

Hugh rose, and paced the room. His face was white as death, and when at last he spoke, his words were tremulous with emotion.

"Madam," he said, "I trust you as you have trusted me, I will never seek to see Muriel again."

He well remembered the awful significance of his words when he and Muriel next met.

## CHAPTER II.

A year had passed by and it had been a very terrible one to Hugh.

At first he had striven hard to succeed in his profession; but an artist's work is almost as difficult as an author's if the mind be not at rest.

At any rate, Hugh had failed.

"I am a fool!" he cried bitterly. "Life is before me. Shall the beautiful face of a woman, who is infinitely superior to me, wreck my whole existence? Never! I'll learn to be a man. I'll live in a new world and the past shall be forgotten."

Then he left old England and sailed for Mexico; but the past was not obliterated, as he had hoped it would be.

In the evenings, when the fiery sun sank behind the distant mountains, the Junlit Surrey hills rose as in a dream before him and once again he saw Muriel's gentle face upturned to his, with the sorrowful light in those deep-blue eyes.

Then that strange longing for home came over him which has filled the breast of many a weary exile.

One evening he was wandering along the street watching the dark-eyed Mexican

maidens trip gracefully by, when he was startled by being addressed in English.

"May I trouble you for a light, sir?"

"Certainly!" answered Hugh, glancing at the stranger, who was about five and thirty, and of gentlemanly appearance and handsome face, though the expression in his eyes was somewhat cruel; at least, so the young artist thought.

"Nay!" laughed the stranger. "I do not want a light. It was only a ruse, to discover if you were a countryman of mine, as your appearance denotes. My name is James Stanton."

"And mine, Hugh Allingham," the young man said, smiling at this strange introduction.

"Then I hope we shall be friends," continued Stanton. "I assure you I need one in this hole, to which my bad luck has caused me to return, after some years of absence."

"Then you know Mexico?" inquired Hugh.

"Far too well to my liking. When you have drunk your coffee, with its dash of agudiente, smoked your cigarette, heard an undersized Mexican shriek himself into hysterics on the stage, under the erroneous impression that he is acting, you have done Mexico. But, see there! Esta noche cantara La Estrella. Which means, Estrella will sing tonight. Suppose you and I go to hear her. It is true that we strangers, but, if we don't like each other, we never need become friends. Bother ceremony!"

"I quite agree with you, Mr. Stanton, answered the young artist. "We will certainly hear La Estrella. But who is she?"

"I know no more than you, my dear fellow," returned Stanton, who perhaps thought it would be bad form to offer to pay for the theatre tickets; at any rate, he let Hugh have that honour. "Probably some creature with a dab of red on each cheek, blue paint on her eyelids, and a voice like the top note of a penny whistle. There's one consolation, if my experience goes for anything, we are bound to hear her."

The acting was far better than Stanton's words had led Hugh to expect.

He had gained sufficient knowledge of the language to be able to follow, and a glance round the building showed him that the elite of the city were there.

The curtain fell; the applause died away.

Then the voices were hushed as once more the curtain rose.

Presently a murmur ran round the crowded house.

La Estrella stepped upon the stage.

She glanced smilingly around, as a thunder of applause greeted her.

"You are wrong about the paint," said Hugh, looking at his companion, whose face had turned livid. "She is very beautiful!"

"Maldito!" hissed Stanton. "Curse her!"

"You know her?"

"Yes; let us go!"

"No, no!" exclaimed the artist. "I must certainly stay to hear whether you are as wrong about the voice as you were about La Estrella's face. Ah!"

Hugh uttered the exclamation as Stanton rose, for the singer's dark eyes turned to wards the stranger.

The somewhat sad light in them changed a moment to one of fierce hatred and loathing.

Her small hands clenched, and her bosom rose and fell with deep emotion.

The expression on those two faces haunted Hugh.

Admiration, wonder and pity thrilled through his breast.

As in a dream, he saw Stanton leave the building, and Estrella's flashing eyes follow him.

"What a picture!" he murmured. "If I could only reproduce that on canvas my name would be famous. Yet what is fame to me?"

Then on the breathless silence La Estrella's voice arose.

It filled the house, and thrilled through every breast.

Still like one in a dream Hugh listened to the young girl's glorious notes.

But as they died away a cry rang out—an awful cry!

"Fuego! Fuego! (Fire! Fire!)"

Men and women sprang to their feet, to rush wildly from the building.

Yet no danger menaced them.

It was La Estrella who stood in deadly peril.

The footlights had caught her dress, and a mass of flames licked round her.

Hugh seized a cloak, which a lady who was rushing from the theatre had left behind in her terror.

He leapt upon the orchestra rail, then upon the stage, and wrapping the cloak round the beautiful singer, smothered the flames, and carried her half fainting, but practically uninjured, from the stage.

"Hable Vd. Español? (Do you speak Spanish?)" inquired La Estrella faintly.

"But very indifferently, answered the young man in English.

"Ah! I thought you were English," murmured Estrella, in that language. "It was an Englishman's action."

"It would have been a base coward's to leave you to such a death!" replied Hugh.

"Yet you were the only man in the theatre who thought of me," answered Estrella. "Be pleased to wait here for a few minutes. Do you promise?"

"Yes; but—"

"Oh, señor! Never mind that little word 'but,' which is quite English. We call it pero, but it means the same. I have your promise."

Ten minutes or so elapsed, then the artist was shown into a room where the beautiful girl was seated.

She was dressed quite plainly now, and rose to greet her rescuer.

"Sir," she exclaimed, "your bravery has saved me from a terrible death."

"Pshaw! Dona Estrella," replied Hugh, smiling. "Surely you can't call such a simple action bravery. Any man would have done the same."

"Other men were there," answered Estrella.

"They did not think," said the young man.

"Nay," she answered, "they thought too much—of their own danger. But tell me, how can I show my gratitude?"

"By letting me paint your face, though there is no need for gratitude," answered Hugh.

"Well, seeing that I have always refused to paint my face myself," said Estrella, smiling. "I do not see why you should not be allowed to do so. You are an artist, I presume?"

"Yes, and would try to reproduce your expression when you looked at the man who was in the theatre with me."

"You know him?" inquired Estrella.

"I met him for the first time to night. I only know that his name is James Stanton."

"You do not know that he is an unchangeable murderer?" cried Estrella. "Nor that he is the greatest villain that ever walked this earth. Listen, and you shall judge. One of your countrymen asked me to be his bride. I loved him, and it was very easy to answer 'Yes.' We were betrothed, and the world was full of gladness for me—"

"And for him also, I should say," interposed the artist.

"You may think it strange that I should open my heart to you like this," went on Estrella. "But you must not forget that you have just saved me from a fearful death. Well, this man whom I loved quarrelled with James Stanton; I know not what about, but I think Jack struck him. They fought a duel, and—and—Heaven help me!—my loved one was—"

"Say no more, señorita," exclaimed Hugh as the beautiful girl burst into passionate weeping. "Only tell me if I can be of any service to you."

"I will avenge that crime," cried Estrella. "See! his death lies here."

And as she spoke, she drew a dagger from her bosom.

"Nay, señorita!" exclaimed the young man, extending his hand. "Do not let such evil thoughts enter your mind. Right cannot come from wrong."

"You would save that villain's life," cried Estrella fiercely. "If you are his friend, I wish you had let me die rather than that I should owe my life to you!"

"Now you are speaking unwisely, señorita," said Hugh, taking her hand in his. "I have already told you that Stanton and I are comparative strangers. Let me take this weapon from you. It is what your lost lover would have wished."

"Yet I will have vengeance," cried the singer, allowing him to take the weapon from her hand.

"But not such vengeance as that," he said. "Let the law take its course."

"There is no justice in this country," she sobbed. "Oh! why did you save my life?—I should have been at rest now had you but left to die."

"I am deeply grieved for you, señorita," said Hugh. "If I can be of service to you I will."

"You wish to paint my portrait?"

"Indeed I do."

"Then come to that address when you please—my mother and I live there; but do not speak to her of my grief."

"There is one thing I would like to ask you," said the artist. "What was your affianced husband's surname?"

"Fernly."

"Fernly!" cried Hugh, springing to his feet. "Had he a sister named Muriel?"

"Yes; he often spoke of her. I met her once. Do you know her?"

"You have told me your great trouble, señorita," he answered; "and now I will tell you mine. I love Muriel Fernly. It was through my love for her that I came to this country, hoping to forget."

"Surely she has not rejected your suit?" exclaimed Estrella, fixing her brilliant eyes upon his face. "She could not be so unwise."

"You forget that I am but a struggling artist," said the young man, smiling rather sadly, "and that she has wealth and beauty, such as would bring most men to her feet. It is a strange chance that you and I should have met. Perhaps it was fate."

"A lucky fate for me," murmured the beautiful girl.

"And for me also," said Hugh, taking her hand again. "I already feel as if you and I were old friends."

"You must promise me one thing," said Estrella.

"I will gladly do that."

"It is that you will not quarrel with Stanton."

"You mean you want me to promise not to meet him with weapons?"

"Yes. You must shun him. If you quarrelled, he would call you out. Duelling is thought little of in this country. I look upon it as murder when it ends in loss of life."

"So should I," exclaimed Hugh. "But have no concern on my account; nothing would induce me to attempt the life of any man, however vile he were."

"I was thinking of your own danger," she answered. "That man deserves death. His hand is stained with blood. Beware of him!"

"Fear not, I will be on my guard," said Hugh.

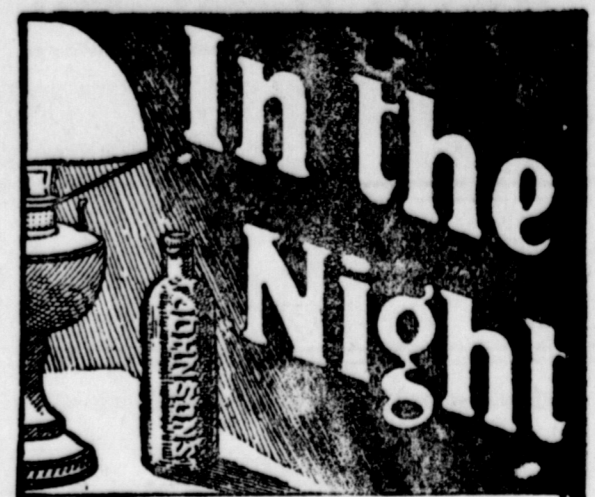
Then he took his leave, and went back to the hotel where he was staying.

He entered the coffee room, where a number of guests were assembled, and amongst them he saw Stanton, who immediately rose and stepped towards him.

"I learnt you were staying here," he said, "so thought I would wait for you, to offer my apologies for conduct which, I fear, may appear somewhat rude. But the fact is, Allingham, in La Estrella I recognized an old flame of mine. I met her some years back, and amused myself by fluttering round the light like any other moth, and, as a result, got my wings badly singed. I was poor in those days, and she well might penniless. Such a marriage would have been absurd, so we separated; but, by George! her beauty nearly bowled me over once again to-night."

"I have listened to you without interrupting, for reasons of my own," retorted Hugh coldly. "But—"

"Pshaw! Are you smitten also?" laughed



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Stanton. "I'll admit Inez Larida—that is her name—is entrancingly beautiful, but I thought you were scarcely the man to be captivated by her. After all, Allingham, there is no need for you and me to fall out. If you are conquered by gazing at La Estrella's charms, you cannot blame me for a stolen kiss or so. This is a land of love, nor are the maidens coy."

"Was jealousy the cause of your murdering the poor girl's affianced?" demanded Hugh.

Stanton's face paled, and an evil light came into his eyes.

"Who told you that?, he cried, in an angry voice.

"What matters? It is sufficient that I know it."

"You have spoken to the girl?"

"I have, and have learnt from her lips what you are," retorted the artist.

"It would be well, young man if you were made aware that I am a very dangerous foe," cried Stanton.

"So I judged from La Estrella's words," said Hugh. "But you should know that any Englishman worthy of the name is not wont to be cowed by the threatening words of a braggart."

"Sir! Do you call me that?"

"It is only part of my estimate of your character."

"Pray give me the rest," sneered Stanton, "though what you have uttered is sufficient for my purpose."

"With pleasure," answered Hugh. "I believe you to be a liar, and know you to be a murderer."

"Gentlemen!" cried Stanton in Spanish. "This man has insulted me. Some of you will know how I shall avenge my honor."

Then, turning to Hugh again, he added—

"At break of day I'll put a bullet through your heart, you jealous cur!"

Hugh was a good-tempered young fellow but he was not proof against such words from such an utter villain.

He seized Stanton by the collar, shook him until his teeth rattled, and sent him reeling from the room, following him up with clenched hands.

He dearly would have liked to knock the false coward down.

And he would have done it, too, had not the villain quitted the hotel with a haste that was the reverse of heroic.

## CHAPTER III.

When Hugh went to bed that night he fell asleep almost immediately, and dreamt once more he was on those dear old Surrey hills, listening to Muriel's silvery voice.

A banging at the door awoke him. It was day.

The sun streamed brightly through the open window, and the rich perfume of flowers was