

Sentenced to Death
by Paul Read

THE following thrilling episode was related to me by a gray-haired old gentleman named Wayne, whose acquaintance I chanced to make a few years ago:

I was just twenty-three years old when the incident I am about to relate took place.

I was residing in the flourishing town of Wilmington, and was book-keeper for Blair & Parker, bankers.

I had a salary of eight hundred a year, and was toiling on, practicing the greatest economy, and hoping for the time I should be able to marry Lillie Worth, to whom I had been engaged for almost a year.

Sweet Lillie Worth, how I loved her!

She was the only child of a widow lady, and was an exquisitely beautiful maiden. Blue-eyed, golden-haired, cherry-lipped, and with a complexion pure and stainless as the lily petal, she seemed to me the embodiment of all that was beautiful and good.

From the moment that my eyes first rested upon her lovely face, I loved her, and my love was fully returned.

We became engaged, and only waited an increase of my salary to be married; and though the time seemed far off, yet we were young and hopeful, and willing to wait.

Jonas Blair, the senior partner of the firm for which I worked, was a man destitute of every generous impulse. Avaricious, passionate, and extremely overbearing to those in his employ, over whom he affected every superiority, he was time-serving and cringing to those whom wealth or position placed above him. Flattery melted him to meanness, and at the slightest offense he would bristle with resentment.

I believe that he had a secret grudge against me, for I could never do anything to please him. I bore with the sneers and insults until flesh and blood could bear no longer. Then we quarreled. He, unprovokedly, insulted me deeply. I answered hotly, and then we had a fiery dispute, which ended by his dismissing me from his employ. I was heated, and left the office, declaring that ere long he would rue his conduct.

Hearing that in a town about four miles from Wilmington a prominent banking firm was in want of a cashier, I walked over on the next day and applied for the situation. I found, however, that they had engaged a man but a few days before, and that at present there was no other vacancy in their establishment. They promised to give me the first situation vacant in their office, and feeling much disappointed, I returned home.

Mrs. Worth, Lillie's mother, resided about half a mile from Wilmington. In the evening I paid them a visit, and informed them of the change in my prospects. They were both very sorry at my losing my situation, for now, our marriage, which we had so long hoped for, was indefinitely put off. But, young hearts are not easily cast down, and hopin, with Mr. Micawber, for something to "turn up" soon, we resigned ourselves to circumstances.

About nine o'clock I bade them good night and started for the village. It was a dull, cloudy night, and the wind was moaning dismally across the fields and through the branches of trees that grew by the roadside. I walked rapidly on, and had nearly reached the outskirts of the village, when, as I was passing through a portion of the road which ran through a thick wood, I suddenly stumbled over something lying in the path, and fell headlong to the ground.

I hastily picked myself up, and turned to ascertain the cause of my fall. At first the darkness was so intense that I could see nothing; but soon my eyes became accustomed to the gloom, and I discovered lying across the road, the body of a man. Greatly alarmed, I stooped down, and found to my horror that he was quite dead. His body was still warm, showing that he had not been long dead.

Inexpressibly shocked and horrified, I bent down and was endeavoring to raise the body up, when the moon issued from behind a cloud which had hitherto veiled it, and shed a bright light over the earth. I gazed into the face of the murdered man, and, to my horror, saw that it was Jonas Blair!

Something on his breast glittered brightly in the moonbeams. It was a dagger hilt protruding from a deep wound in his breast. I drew it forth, and as I did so, a jet of warm blood dashed over my hands and clothing. Unheeding this, I held the knife up in the moonbeams, and was almost paralyzed with horror, at recognizing it as one which belonged to me, and which I had lost but a few days before.

Utterly horror-stricken and voiceless, I gazed upon the crimsoned weapon. For about a minute I sat thus, and then a sense of my terrible situation burst upon me. Suppose [anyone] should see me!

I glanced apprehensively around at the thought, and my eyes rested upon two men who were standing gazing with horror-stricken countenances upon me and the dead man by my side!

With a groan I sank back upon the earth, the unutterable horror I felt rendering me powerless.

"We've caught you at it!" cried the foremost of the men. "Oh, you villain! You cold-blooded villain, to murder a gray-haired old man! You'll hang for this night's work."

"See!" cried the other, "he's got the knife he murdered him with in his hand!"

I was stricken dumb. I saw my position and was hopeless. They seized me and bound me, and one remaining to guard me, the other hurried to the village, from whence he soon returned,

bringing with him several policemen and a large number of the citizens. Amid many cries and execrations, I was taken to the village and put into prison, where I remained all night.

On the next day an inquest was held upon the remains of Jonas Blair, and a verdict of willful murder rendered against me. I was formally committed to prison, there to await my trial, which would take place at the next session of the court.

And there I lay and suffered for three long weary months. God alone knows how much I suffered, both in body and mind. But I had one consolation; a mighty one. Lillie believed me innocent, and her faith in me was never shaken.

During the time which intervened between the murder and my trial, she was my daily visitor, and I believe that had it not been for her love and unceasing devotion to me, I should have sunk and died beneath the accumulation of my miseries.

Well, the day of the trial came. The court-room was thronged, for the murder had created a great excitement in the community, and [everyone] was anxious to hear the trial.

The witnesses were examined, and every word of evidence given there that day seemed to confirm my guilt.

First, the clerks in the banking-house testified to the quarrel between Mr. Blair and I, and to the threatening language which I had used. Then the two men who had discovered me beside the murdered man gave their evidence, and the dagger which had given him his death wound was proven to be mine.

Every link in that terrible chain of circumstantial evidence was perfect, and every circumstance connected with the murder seemed to point unerringly to me as perpetrator.

The efforts of Mr. Forrester, the lawyer who had been engaged to defend me, were worse than useless, and the jury, without retiring from the box, rendered a verdict of "Guilty."

Then the grave old Judge arose, and amid deep silence, pronounced the sentence:

"To be hanged by the neck until you are dead, and may God have mercy on your soul!"

There came a sharp, quick cry from amid the throng that filled the court-room, and Lillie, who, with her mother, had been present during my trial, fell senseless on the floor. The spectators crowded round, and she was taken up and borne from the room.

Quiet was soon restored, and the jailer, tapping me on the shoulder, bade me follow him. I turned to go, when a confused noise arose from the crowd near the door, and arrested my footsteps. The noise and confusion increased.

"Silence!" shouted the crier.

A man holding in his uplifted hand a folded paper vigorously pushed his way through the struggling throng to the Judge's desk.

"Here is a paper for your Honor," said he, handing it to him.

The Judge adjusted his spectacles, opened the letter, and read it. He gave a violent start, and exclaimed:

"Bless my soul! What a strange thing! Detain the prisoner a moment, jailor."

A moment of intense silence followed. Astonishment was depicted on every countenance. The Judge arose and said:

"Gentlemen of the jury, I have here a most extraordinary document. I will read it to you," and in a clear, sonorous voice, that penetrated to the farthest end of the court, he began:

"I, James Farrell, being now upon my death-bed, and wishing to save an innocent man from an ignominious death, solemnly swear that Philip Wayne is guiltless of the murder with which he is charged. It was I who murdered Jonas Blair. He held a mortgage on my farm, which, through sickness and misfortune, I was unable to pay. That night I met him, and asked—nay, begged—for an extension of time in which to pay the money; but he refused to grant my request, and said that unless it was paid at once, he would foreclose the mortgage and seize my farm. I knew that this would ruin me irretrievably, and maddened at the thought of losing all I possessed in the world, I drew the dagger—which I had found but the day before—and buried it in his heart. I took the mortgage from his pocket-book, and hearing footsteps approaching, ran away through the woods.

"I am dying. As a dying man, again I solemnly declare that Philip Wayne is innocent, and I am the murderer of Jonas Blair.

"[Signed] JAMES FARRELL."

"Witnesses, Mark Smith,

"Henry Norton,"

What a cheer arose—a cheer that seemed to shake the court-house to its foundation. The judge came down from his bench, and shook my hand, proffering me his hearty congratulations, while the jury and my friends crowded around me, and expressed their joy at my escape.

But I was impatient to see Lillie. They went to where she was, and cautiously informed her if what had taken place. Then they led me to her. My poor darling, with a glad cry of joy, rushed to my arms and swooned away upon my bosom. But joy seldom kills. Lillie soon recovered consciousness, and we, accompanied by a number of our friends, returned home.

In a month, Lillie and I were married.

By the kindness of friends I was enabled to enter business, and I have been very successful. My wife still lives, and though now our heads are silvered, the love that kept faith through shame and suffering, still flourishes in the sunshine of prosperity with which God has blessed us.

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