

Murder Most Foul

I.

FORTH from the smoke and carnage and thunder of the tremendous third day of Gettysburg there staggered a bewildered fugitive, wounded, fevered and half blinded by pain and blood. His faded, torn and tattered clothing (once, perhaps, a uniform) was blood-stained here and there, and his hatless forehead was marked by a bleeding cut. His left hand, wrapped in bloody bandages, rested in a sling, and he limped as he went with a labored gait. He bore no arms nor knapsack: these had already been flung aside; and now, as he pursued his way, he divested himself hurriedly of all his accoutrements, one after another, and cast them impatiently to the ground. He took no path. He pushed on with unsteady yet rapid strides through bushes, over rocks and fences, straight ahead, with lips compressed in silent agony. His apparently wild and aimless flight had carried him some miles from the actual conflict (which was not yet decided), when his fast diminishing strength was shown in his feebly-tottering steps and in the difficulty with which he kept from plunging headlong to the earth. At this moment he came in view of a farm-house, and the sight stimulated him to renewed effort. Forward he toiled, full of fresh hope, when, half-way between him and the goal of his exertions, there arose a high, broad stone wall. It seemed to him insurmountable, and he groaned in anguish. Nevertheless he essayed to clamber over the obstacle. More than once he fell back from the attempt, but at length, as if with his last expiring energies, he managed to drag himself to the top of the wall. Dizzily he looked about him, as he thought to rest himself a moment; but suddenly all grew blank and he became unconscious.

He fell fainting and insensible to the ground on the inner side of the wall, with a despairing cry for "Water!" He had luckily fallen near a spring-house, and a startled girl, pail in hand, heard his exclamation and beheld his fall. She at once approached him, put water to his lips, and washed the blood from his face. She continued her ministrations until animation began to return to the seemingly lifeless form. He opened his eyes and gazed at her. Smiling faintly, he fondly murmured,

"Indiana!"

His fevered brain evidently mistook her for another. Closing his eyes, he lapsed suddenly into a deep sleep. Taking advantage of this, she hastily proceeded to the farm-house, whence she soon returned with the old farmer and his wife. Spreading a blanket, they placed the wounded soldier upon it and with difficulty bore him to a bed.

"He is a rebel," said the old man.

"But he is a fellow-human," remarked his wife.

“And he is wounded—dying, perhaps, far from home and friends,” added the girl, who was obviously the daughter of the aged couple.

On the fourth day of July it was known to all that Lee was beaten and retreating. That general had fallen back into Virginia when the wounded soldier whose fortunes we are following became aware that he had been left behind in the enemy’s country. He found himself tenderly cared for in the house of Mr. Ordolf, a plain but substantial farmer, whose wife and daughter were assiduous in their humane attentions to the disabled Confederate. They were mother and sister to him in his forlorn condition, and his grateful affection for them grew day by day as he experienced their unselfish kindness. Toward Mary Ordolf, the daughter, his feelings rapidly grew to be of a holier and more tender character. What she was in form and feature would have been sufficient excuse for this; and then her simple daily life, exhibited in all its gentle purity before him and in his behalf, was enough to subdue the most obdurate of masculine hearts. It did not take him long to learn that his love was returned, and before he became strong enough to leave his room he and his fair nurse were “engaged.” Was it a baleful conjunction, this of the “loyal” maiden and the “rebel” lover? We shall see.

As soon as John Randall (such was the young Confederate’s name) was strong enough to march, he felt that he could no longer remain where he was: he had to choose between a Federal prison and an attempt to escape to the Confederacy. He promptly made choice of the latter alternative. Giving his “parole” to the elder Ordolfs and a kiss of eternal fidelity to the weeping Mary, he bade them all farewell and made the venture. He was successful, reaching Richmond safely, and, being shortly declared duly exchanged, took his part in the remainder of the war till the surrender of Lee. In the mean time, however, the Ordolfs heard nothing of him. We leave it to the imagination of her sex to conceive the emotions, ever varying from hope to despair, experienced by Mary Ordolf under these circumstances. On the third of July, 1865, she was sitting on the root of a huge oak which shaded the spring-house, thinking mournfully of that day, two years before, when the fainting Confederate fell at her feet appealing for succor. In the midst of these reminiscences she thought she heard a noise on the stone wall near her. Turning to look, she saw a man in the act of leaping to the ground. She recognized him in an instant.

“Mary!”

“John!”

And the long separated were once more united. Within a fortnight they were married.

Randall did not long remain with his young wife—his business, he said, calling him to Virginia—and he left her with her parents upon the pretext that his home was not quite prepared

for her. He was absent two months, corresponding regularly with her, however. At the end of this period he came again, staying some weeks, and again leaving her on the same plea. These comings and departures were repeated several times, until Mary and her parents began to suspect that Randall, for some reason, was either ashamed or afraid to introduce his wife to his own family. Mary had been shocked to hear the gossiping whisper that her husband had another wife in Virginia, and she had to acknowledge that his conduct was not above suspicion, notwithstanding his plausible assurances. On his last visit the old farmer insisted that Randall should at once decide either to settle down there with his wife or to take her with him. Irritated by the apparent lack of confidence in him, he at once avowed his determination to carry her to Virginia, and making hurried preparations for the journey, they soon went South together. It was during the trip that Mary first found resolution enough to show her husband a letter which she had received some months before from his home in Virginia. It ran as follows:

“MARY: I have chanced to see a letter addressed to Mr. John Randall, Beeville, Virginia, by you, in which you claim that gentleman as your husband. As I am an intimate acquaintance and near relative of his, I am surprised at your pretensions (whether well or ill founded), for he is still considered a single man here, where he was born and reared, and passes himself as such. If he is married to you or anybody else, I assure you that he keeps the matter a secret here, and I am certain that neither his father nor mother knows anything of it. Tell me all about it, and you will oblige INDIANA.”

“That girl is my evil genius!” exclaimed John Randall, excitedly, when he had read the note. “She is my first cousin, and has always loved me from childhood with a sort of fierce passion. When I first saw you, Mary, I was ‘engaged’ to her, and I have never had the courage to announce our marriage to her or to my own family. I have weakly kept the secret, putting off the evil day as long as I could, or until my circumstances would justify me in braving the wrath of my parents and all concerned. But matters have come to a crisis. A day or two will decide whether we are to be repudiated or kindly welcomed.”

“John,” entreated Mary, “let us return to my father’s.”

“And thus confirm the gossips in their slanders? Never! The die is cast. Indiana and her friends will rave: let them. Great God! what a creature she must be! Did you answer her letter?”

“I did, giving her, in self-defence, all the information she asked.”

“And, yet, with her full knowledge of my marriage with you, she has constantly been eager for me to consummate my engagement with her—indirectly urging it by every means at her command!”

It was Saturday evening when they arrived at the depot nearest to Beeville, and stopping at the hotel there that night, next day Randall hired a conveyance (driving himself) and started homeward with his bride.

Monday he returned the horses and vehicle.

Tuesday night he escorted a young lady of Beeville to a party, and there bore himself as gayly, apparently, as the other young men.

His wife had mysteriously disappeared! The public of Beeville and vicinity knew not of her coming, and therefore she was not missed.

Where was she?

II.

TEN days after, the body of an unknown woman was found in the woods a few miles from Beeville. A pistol ball was found buried in her neck; on her throat were the marks of a murderous clutch; and from head to foot she had been beaten and bruised in the most cruel manner. The jury of inquest was not able to identify her, nor was there found any likely clue to lead to the detection of her murderer. Descriptions of the murdered woman and her dress were published, and rewards were offered for the apprehension of her murderer, but all in vain. The body was buried, and within a few weeks the excitement occasioned by the dreadful horror had completely subsided. It seemed a hopeless mystery, for ever impenetrable.

Meanwhile, the Ordolfs heard regularly from Randall. His first letter explained why Mary did not write: "You will understand why Mary employs me as her amanuensis when I inform you that she was so unfortunate as to have her right hand severely bruised by a slamming car door on our way here. She cannot use it at all at present, but we are in hopes that it will soon be well. With this exception we are enjoying ourselves here, and have every prospect of doing well. Mary is delighted with her reception by my relations and friends, and desires me to assure you of her content."

The next letter from Randall still harped upon the injured hand: "Mary has caught cold in the hand that I told you had been hurt, and it is much inflamed, causing her great pain. A doctor has been called in, who expresses fears as to the result unless great care is taken. But he is noted for making a case appear worse than it really is, and we are not alarmed."

There was some delay in the next letter, causing the simple and confiding Ordolfs much uneasiness. At length it came, fulfilling their wildest fears: "May Heaven help you and all of us

to bear it! Our darling Mary is gone: she is dead! Five days ago she was seized with lockjaw, and expired next day, in spite of every effort to relieve her. She was sensible to the last, but speechless. She was buried yesterday. You may faintly imagine my grief and desolation. You have lost a daughter, but I have lost in her all that was dear to me. God help us all!

“I am too unnerved to write now. But I must beg, as a last favor, that you allow my darling’s remains to rest here undisturbed. I will care for them, and water the flowers on her dear grave with my frequent tears. As soon as I have the heart to undertake the task, I will send you all her clothing, etc., reserving to myself only a few mementoes. May Heaven bless you and sustain you!”

The aged couple were heartbroken at the loss of their only child, and mourned with a grief that refused to be comforted. Ah! it was not long before they would have thanked God that their daughter’s fate had been no worse than they at first believed.

The rewards offered for the discovery and apprehension of the murderer of the woman had stimulated one man to a patient and ceaseless investigation. He was a sort of amateur detective, named Tinsley, who had no special fitness for his self-assumed office, except an intense curiosity and a persistent brooding that would sometimes bring form and purpose out of chaos. He haunted the spot where the corpse was found, and meditated upon all the circumstances of the case with the dogged pertinacity of stupidity. A brighter person would have yielded the task in despair, but his very dullness kept him at it, and at length gave him a clue that he slowly but steadily followed up. Near the scene of the murder he one day found a *chignon* of coal-black hair. The dead woman’s hair was auburn, and when found she wore a *chignon* of the same color. Close to the *chignon* lay a piece of muddy paper. It proved to be an old letter, dated “Near Gettysburg, Pa.” It was simply addressed to “My dear husband,” and was signed, “Your affectionate wife, Mary.” Nobody but Tinsley would have attached any importance to these discoveries, but it being his habit of mind to refer everything to the case then in hand, he at once believed that he had found the key to the awful mystery. Yet how easy it was to account for the presence of those things there! Hundreds of both sexes, from far and near, had visited the noted scene, and it was very probable that some of these had lost the *chignon* and the letter. Tinsley, however, was not at all impressed with this view of the matter, and he thought it worth his while to go to Gettysburg and inquire for “Mary.” He did so. It was a weary hunt, and would have seemed a fool’s errand to most people; but at length Tinsley got on the track of “Mary,” and he pursued it till he was welcomed by the Ordolfs as a friend and neighbor of—John Randall! He already knew enough to convince him that John Randall’s wife was the murdered woman found near Beeville, and that John Randall was her murderer. He had already seen the minister who married them, and now he read Randall’s letters written since the hellish deed, and he thrilled with horror at their cold-blooded duplicity and atrociousness. The evidence was appallingly overwhelming. We cast a veil

over the scene that occurred when Tinsley told that old, bereft couple what he believed to be the true story of their daughter's end.

All Beeville and the country around was amazed when it was announced that John Randall had been arrested for the murder. It was incredible. His character was excellent, both as a citizen and soldier, and he was noted for his abstinence not only from the vices but from the follies into which young men commonly fall. Yet when all the damning developments appeared, it seemed impossible to doubt his guilt. As he had once been high in public estimation, so now he fell, like Lucifer. The popular indignation rose against him in a tempest, and he was threatened with the summary vengeance of an excited mob.

On the trial it was positively established by the identification of clothing and ornaments that the dead woman was Mary Randall, once Mary Ordolf; that the prisoner married her in 1865, and had since strangely kept that fact a secret, not only from his acquaintances at Beeville, but from his own family; that, in short, he brought her to Virginia, and was last seen with her in a carriage driving through Beeville on the Sunday we have already noted; that at the hotel, on the Saturday night before, he told his wife that he intended next day to take her to his uncle, whose house she never reached; that he was engaged to be married to Indiana Randall, his cousin; and that he had cruelly duped the Ordolfs into believing that his wife had come to a natural death. There was a cloud of other testimony to the like effect, and though he was eloquently defended, the jury did not hesitate in returning a verdict of "Guilty of murder in the first degree."

When asked if he had anything to say why sentence of death should not be passed upon him, Randall simply answered,

"Nothing!"

His counsel appealed, but in vain – besought executive clemency, but without avail. The day before that set for the execution of the condemned man, the following communication appeared in the *Beeville Gazette*:

"EDITOR GAZETTE: I do not claim to be the only person in town who impartially and critically heard and examined the evidence submitted in the case of Randall, who is so soon to be hanged; but such seems to be the fact. While I must admit that the mass of that testimony appears to bear fatally against the condemned, there are certain odds and ends of it that point away from him to another or others. The man who first found the body said that he saw no tracks of a man near it, only the tracks of a woman or of women. Not distant from the spot was an old well into which the body would have been thrown by the condemned had he killed her: the presumption is that he did not kill her, but that she was killed by some one unable to convey her corpse to that place of concealment. A freedman testified to seeing two females pass that way on the Sunday in

question. Mr. Tinsley found a coal-black *chignon* near the scene, which was not claimed as Mrs. Randall's. A certain young lady witness with raven tresses possessed at least of a motive quite equal to that alleged against Randall, admitted that she knew Randall was married, had seen a letter from his wife to him, had written to her, etc. Is it not barely possible that her information of the marriage may have been derived from the very letter found by Tinsley, dropped there by some one—not Randall?

“These things that I have briefly mentioned are, of course, inconclusive, but they are terribly suggestive, and I could not let John Randall die before bringing them to public notice. JUSTICE.”

On the day of execution Randall's counsel published a card, in which they said:

“The communication in yesterday's *Gazette*, signed 'Justice,' indirectly imputes to us a gross negligence in the defence of our client. We can only say, in self-justification, that the line of argument indicated and the course of investigation suggested by the facts alluded to, were peremptorily objected to by Mr. Randall himself, and were accordingly abandoned by us.”

Randall was hanged in accordance with his sentence—dying without confession or denial.

III.

AFTER the execution the sheriff forwarded to Mr. Ordolf a sealed letter from Randall, written on the eve of his death. We give an extract:

“I did not do it, nor consent to it, nor know of it until the awful deed was done beyond remedy. I would willingly have sacrificed a thousand lives for her, as I now sacrifice life and reputation to screen the one who is really guilty. With Mary perished every desire in me for life. I long for death—even the death of the gallows. But I would not die leaving you for ever under the horrible belief that I am the murderer of our darling. Oh I adjure you to credit me when I swear here, in the presence of God and eternity, that I am innocent. Mary, who knows me guiltless, will meet me joyfully beyond the tomb.”

Indiana Randall was said to be a raving maniac. From the first arrest of John Randall she had exhibited symptoms of a mind unsettled by the weight of sudden and overwhelming grief. Her family gave out that the loss of her lover under such fearful circumstances had temporarily affected her physical and mental health, and friends and acquaintances were requested to forbear their visits until her recovery was announced. She was seen rarely, and then under the closest surveillance. As the day of Randall's execution approached, it was rumored that she grew worse, and on that day it was whispered that she was so violent as to require strong restraint and constant watching. And it was so. She was mad, but there was a terrible method in her madness.

She sought to break from her confinement and rush to the place of execution. She shrieked aloud avowals of her own guilt and declarations of the innocence of John Randall. She prayed to be permitted to rescue him and die in his stead. Alas, poor wretch! she was already beyond the vengeance of law. Could her guilt have been established beyond a doubt, she was now insane, and it was too late to save the condemned.

“I knew,” she cried, “that he had gone to see his wife, perhaps to return with her, and I watched daily for his coming back. Constantly alone in these watches, I managed to get one of John’s pistols from his room, and this I carried with me, but only for self-defence. I met them that Sunday afternoon, and my soul was in a tumult of emotions as John accosted me and introduced me to his wife. His wife! Yes, I knew it was she before he told me. I had known for months of his secret marriage. Suppressing my feelings as much as I was able, I endeavored to be calm. We had met just beyond the path which leaves the main carriage-road and cuts off about a mile of the distance to the house. As we all could not ride, I suggested that she and I should walk through by the path, while John drove around by the road. John strongly objected to this, but she seemed anxious to accompany me, and he at last reluctantly consented.

“I had no idea of hurting her. The wish was strong in my heart that God would strike her dead, but I had no intention of raising my own hand against her. As we proceeded, talking as well as my state of mind would allow, we came to the spot where her body was found. There the path became so narrow that we had to go singly, and it so chanced that she went before. It flashed upon me like lightning from hell! The place was desolate and lonely. There she was, a few feet in front of me, all unconscious and at my mercy. It was a mad impulse, but in a moment I drew the pistol and fired! She fell, but attempted to rise. I sprang upon her in a frenzy of excitement, and kicked, beat, bit and choked her until she lay quite still—dead!”

“My child,” said her pale and trembling father, “these are but the distempered fancies of fever. You have brooded over this unhappy matter until it has quite upset you. Doubtless you wish to save John—so do we all—but it is folly for you, or any of us, to seek to become a substitute for him. My child, take our assurances that all this circumstantial account of your killing that unfortunate woman is the mad work of a disordered mind. Calm yourself. In a few days you will be better, and will have forgotten all this that you now insist on so vehemently.”

“Ah, father,” she exclaimed, “it may suit your purpose to argue that I am mad. Perhaps I am. But I know my guilt, and I will no longer conceal it. You all know it, too. Who, that fatal evening, kneeled to the furious and distracted John and besought him to silence? Whose entreaties prevailed on him to adopt the very course which has brought him to the scaffold? To save me you will allow him to be sacrificed! I have been deceived long, but it is not yet too late. I will proclaim my guilt to the world: I will take his place on the gallows! Loose me!” But her cries and struggles were in vain.

Thus she raved of her real or imaginary part in the horrid tragedy, giving now a coherent version, as plausible as it was astounding, and anon a confused and silly jumble of impossibilities that aroused naught but pity and incredulity.

The scaffold from which John Randall had been launched into eternity was still standing in the jail-yard, when one night, close on the stroke of twelve, the guard beheld with terror the noiseless approach of a form arrayed in white. Awed to silence by the apparition, the guard watched its motions with breathless attention. Entering the yard, it proceeded at once to the scaffold and mounted it. In a few moments the staring guard beheld the figure suddenly sink through the platform to the shoulders, where, after some convulsive motions, it remained stationary. To that guard it was the ghost of Randall, and he fell fainting with alarm. In his fall his musket was discharged, and this bringing the jailer and others on the scene, it was speedily discovered that the ghost was a woman! Eluding her guardians, and providing herself with a cord, Indiana Randall followed the man she loved through the same exit he had taken!

Was he alone guilty?

Or was she alone guilty?

Or were both guilty?

W. C. ELAM

Lippincott's Magazine, Vol. 4, Nov. 1869

The Sumter Watchman, Mar. 23, 1870