

*Did It Pay Him?*  
by Kate Meriden

One autumn evening in an isolated habitation whose gray walls seemed to repel rather than invite the wayward traveler to enter, so barren and bleak was the structure and all its surroundings, in an upper chamber, a woman lay dying. Perhaps some forty winters had passed over her head, yet there still lingered traces of a singular beauty, which neither time, trouble, nor disease had wholly obliterated.

“I am dying Marshal,” she said, starting up from a momentary slumber, and fixing her eyes wildly on the tall mulatto woman who knelt at the foot of her couch. “What is the hour? Look, and come nearer.”

“Just six,” the woman returned, approaching the bedside.

“In one hour he will be here, Marshal,” she continued in a husky tone. “I mean my brother-in-law. He once asked me to become his wife. Do you remember?”

“I remember very well, Mrs. Mourdant. But what of that now,” she returned soothingly.

“It is twenty years since I have seen Philip Mourdant. I wonder if he has forgiven me for rejecting him?”

“Twenty years has elapsed since that period. Philip Mourdant is rich and powerful. Successful men seldom bear malice.”

“Rich and powerful, did you say? Yes; Philip always loved money. It was the curse of the family.”

Yes, my mistress; but that should not trouble you now,” returned the faithful Marshal.

“No; I am growing very weak, and my rest is disturbed with dreams. Last night I thought I saw Harry drowning. I reached out my hand to save him, but Philip Mourdant held me back. Promise me that you will not leave Harry when I am gone.”

“I promise so far as I am able, never to lose sight of Harry!” the mulatto woman returned, in a tremulous tone.

“God bless you, Marshal! God bless you! But hark! That is the whistle. The train is in.”

“Yes, and I would try to get a few moments’ rest before they arrive, or you will not be able to see them.”

The dying woman endeavored to compass herself to slumber. Let us leave her thus.

On the evening of which we write, the attention of out-lookers in the village of W— was arrested by the appearance of a stranger—a man who was evidently directing the attention of his companion, a youth of about twelve years, to some object of interest in the place which they had just entered.

“It is more than twenty years, Harry,” the stranger was saying, “since I have seen the sun set behind yonder old school-house.”

“Yet, why, Uncle Philip,” returned the lad, “have you so long been a stranger to your birthplace? You were born here.”

At that moment Philip Morndant’s countenance would have been a study for any physiognomist, so many emotions were contending for the mastery. At length, an expression, half defiant, half self-satisfied, superseded as he turned to the boy.

“Yes, Harry, it is my birthplace; yet I can only recall turbulent scenes and constant contention with those nearest of kin. I was no favorite with my father, being the only one who ever dared to oppose his iron will. At his death he disinherited me; what wealth he died possessed of went to your father, who was twelve years younger than myself, who, on coming of age, wished to divide the property. But from the parent who had cast me off, I had learnt that wealth was power; and before Harry came of age, had acquired a much larger fortune than he possessed. Your mother, Harry, was the only being who possessed any influence over me; but she feared poverty—for I was then poor—or my ungovernable will and love of power; I know not. Twelve years after she rejected me she married my brother—your father—though she was not aware of the relationship.”

“From that time I have had but one object, to which I have given all my thought, all my energy—namely, the acquiring of wealth; and *it has paid me well*. If I have not love, I have power; and that,” he continued in a severe tone, “has satisfied, if not increased my happiness.”

They had now come to a turn in the road, which brought them within view of the habitation where Philip Mourdant had passed the first sixteen years of his existence; and the silence which ensued was not broken until they had entered the gateway, and met Marshal, who hurried toward them.

“A strange meeting after so many years, Mr. Mourdant,” she said solemnly. “My mistress is sinking rapidly; Mr. Harry had best go immediately to his mother’s room.”

“No, no, Marshal; a woman’s reasoning,” returned Philip Mourdant. “My sister-in-law must not be excited until after I have had an interview with her. After that she can see her son.”

“The same terrible will,” the mulatto woman murmured as she turned away.

An hour had elapsed ere Harry was summoned to his mother’s chamber. He found her pillowed up upon the couch, endeavoring—poor creature—to follow her brother-in-law’s stoical advice, and be calm; but evidently her human nature proved too much for the effort, for, on beholding

her son, she stretched forth her arms, exclaiming “Oh, Harry! My boy! My boy!” and fell senseless upon his bosom.

Hour after hour Harry sat with the hands of his unconscious mother clasped in his own, waiting to hear the first syllable that should fall from her lips. But he watched and waited in vain. For a long time Mrs. Mourdant lay in a deep stupor, until about midnight, when after two or three convulsive shudders, she died.

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Several years had elapsed since Philip Mourdant sat with his nephew in his mother’s chamber, awaiting the approach of her dissolution. On the morning to which we would now turn our attention, he was seated in a low, dingy looking apartment, whose wretched pretension to be considered an office would have made one smile, so dilapidated, mildewed and moth-eaten were its few miserable appointments. Indeed, it seemed only a fitting abode for the river rats, and other vermin which infested the premises. The building was situated on the river wharf, and was known among the boatmen and river hands as Logan’s office. But what the nature or character of Logan’s business was, had never yet been discovered.

As a general rule, rats and vermin were Logan’s only visitors, but on that morning we have said, it boasted another visitor. Philip Mourdant was seated on one end of the rickety table, in close converse with the master of the premises, a short, wiry looking individual, upon whose features cunning and cupidity were marked.

“You say, my dear friend,” said the wiry man, with an elf-like smirk, approaching the table, “that you have been well-nigh—aha! I was going to say ruined, but it is an unpleasant word—before this. That, dabbling in stocks, you have known what it was to make a fortune one day and lose it the next, without the world being any wiser. Excuse me, my dear friend, if I use another unpleasant word, and tell you were gambling. Indeed, my dear friend, to come to the point, we are all gambling, one way or the other. Our statesmen, our merchants, men of law, etc., all, in their own way, trying to overreach one another. Now out way, my dear friend, may not be considered quite so respectable as the one you have hitherto adopted; but it is none the less sure. A man of your powerful will meet with success. You say you will consider the matter, but are now somewhat hurried. Do, my dear friend. Good morning. I wish you well.

Harry Mourdant had been placed at school immediately after his mother’s funeral. He had left her grave with a heavy heart, nor was it sorrow alone which oppressed him; an indignant feeling toward his uncle Philip for depriving him of his mother’s society prior to her death filled his breast. Nor was this feeling lessened by the arbitrary tone of his uncle’s letters; for, as Philip Mourdant became aware of the unsatisfactory state of his temporal affairs, so did his love for power increase.

It was with no pleasant anticipations that Harry prepared to return for the summer vacation, though, for the first few days after his arrival, no actual outbreak took place. It was not far distant, and came in the following manner:

Dinner had been brought in; Philip Mourdant sat with a frown visible on his defiant features.

“Boy,” he said, addressing his nephew, and at the same time pushing several dishes from before him, “call one of the minions from the kitchen. Am I a dog to have such a repast set before me?”

“When does Marshal return, sir?” asked Harry, as he took his hand from the bell-handle.

“Not until it is my will; or, in other words, never. By what authority do you question me, boy?”

“It was my mother’s wish, and an understanding that she should remain.”

“There is no understanding without my will, as you will learn in time, my fine fellow. I have noticed your arrogant and rebellious spirit before this, and now I command you,” he continued, pushing him roughly through the open door, “to go to your own room, and for the rest of the day consider who is master of these premises.”

“O, my dear friend,” said a voice at the hall door, “excuse me for intruding on this little domestic scene, but I was passing and had a word to say to you, so dropped in. Your nephew, I suppose?”

“My nephew, the insolent cur! But I’ll tame him,” returned Philip Mourdant.

“Your family never appreciated you,” continued Logan. “Did you not tell me, my dear friend, that your father disinherited you, in favor of that boy’s father? That your brother married the only woman that had ever cost you a thought? And bless me, now I think of it, the boy himself has stood in your way; for if he had never been born, you would have been the only heir to your brother’s wealth, besides getting back your father’s inheritance, which, I need not tell you, in your present embarrassed condition, would have settled your difficulties, and left a nice fortune at your disposal.”

Philip Mourdant listened attentively, and the shadows deepened on his dark countenance. Long after midnight the precious pair sat closeted together. They might have sat thus till morning, had not a slight noise, like a foot-fall, attracted their attention; then they both sprang up and listened.

“A cat, or something of the sort,” said Logan. “It is time I was going. Good-night, my dear friend.”

Philip Mourdant returned his good-night in a hollow, sepulchral tone, and then crept to bed, shaking like an aspen leaf. For the first time in his life did this strong man feel nervous. He felt like a felon!

Harry’s vacation was drawing to a close, and the lad began to busy himself with preparations for his return. His uncle Philip had maintained a sullen indifference to his presence since the time of the quarrel, and it somewhat surprised him when, two days previous to the one appointed for the journey, he was accosted by him in a friendly manner.

“What do you propose doing this evening, Harry?” he asked, bending over the trunk in which his nephew was endeavoring to store such treasures as a school-boy values.

“I was going a fishing. Did you want me, sir?” asked the lad.

“Tomorrow will do as well. I would not interfere with your pleasure. Who are you going with?”

“An acquaintance that I picked up on the wharf, uncle. He and one of his comrades are going.”

It was past ten o'clock; quiet citizens of temperate habits were wending their way homeward. Along the river wharf the waves came rushing with a hurling sound, which seemed to increase the loneliness of the hour. No being was visible on the shore, if we accept the mad creature known as Black Susan, who, seated on a pile of rubbish, was crooning a wild melody. Presently she started, and rushing down to the water's edge, gazed out on the dark waste before her.

A policeman passing called to her to come away; and as she did not obey him, he came to the spot.

“What are you standing here for?” he asked.

“Listen!” she returned, putting up her hand. “Don't you hear?”

“Hear what, you mad fool?” he asked. Yet scarcely had the words left his lips when a shriek, long and piercing, was borne on the air.

“Great Heavens! There is trouble somewhere!” he exclaimed; and then calling loudly for help, he took his way down the river side several hundred yards, and arrived just in time to see two men, apparently fishermen, emerge from the water and struggle to the shore.

“Hallo there! What is the matter?” called out the officer.

“Matter enough, I should say. You came too late, for the boy is gone!” answered the shorter of the two. “Poor lad! We did what we could to save him; but he couldn't swim an inch, and sunk like a lump of lead.”

“How did it happen?” asked another officer, who had joined the group.

“The lad was fishing with us; somehow he lost his balance and fell overboard. It will be a terrible blow to his uncle. You had better go and tell him, Jim. I wouldn't do it, for a thousand pounds.”

The taller fisherman of the two hurried away; while the crowd, which had by this time collected with lanterns and grappling irons, began to search for the body, which was found two hours after, and borne to Philip Mourdant's residence.

At daybreak the coroner summoned a jury, who, after viewing the body, were called upon for their verdict; when one of their number arose, and turning to the coroner, said that “they all

agreed that Harry Mourdant had come to his death by accidental drowning.” Yet before the echo of his voice had died away, the door opened, and a tall mulatto woman entered, and confronting the jury, said:

“Gentleman, unknowingly you have brought in a false verdict. Harry Mourdant was foully murdered by his uncle, Philip Mourdant.”

“Woman!” said the coroner, “Are you sane?” rebating a scrutinizing gaze upon her. “Do you know the enormity of the charge you bring?”

“Listen to my story, and you shall judge if I speak the truth,” returned Marshal.

“On her death-bed my mistress wished me to promise her that I would watch over her son; and though I have failed to shield him from harm, to the best of my ability I have complied with her request.

“For some time after Harry was sent to school, Philip Mourdant allowed me to remain here, yet he wished me away. He had grown strangely irritable, and very intimate with a person whom I knew would do him no good. I became convinced, also, that he had had severe losses, and spent the evenings abroad, endeavoring to win a fortune at the card-table; and I began to fear for Harry’s money, which is entrusted to his care. And when he finally sent me from the house, I determined, if possible, to discover his intentions.

“One evening,” continued Marshal, “I had come to pay a secret visit to my poor boy, who was to have returned shortly to his school. On coming down stairs, I heard voices in the library, and discovered that Philip Mourdant and his friend were talking about Harry. ‘The boy himself has stood in your way,’ said the friend. I was listening to hear more, but unfortunately, in moving to get nearer the door, attracted their attention, and I was forced to make a hasty escape. Yet I could not rest for thinking about the child; and as soon as dusk the next evening, I repaired to the house.

“‘Harry has not come in yet,’ said the girl who let me in. ‘He has gone a fishing.’ I could not account, gentlemen, for the feeling which came over me. I remember asking the girl if his uncle had gone with him; yet before I received an answer, I rushed up to the library, which was the apartment Philip Mourdant always occupied when at home. The room was deserted; but there; lying on the coals which were soldering in the grate, I found this scorched and rumpled letter, which is still legible;” and she handed it to the coroner, who read as follows:

“I have borrowed the clothes of two fishermen. Be in time, Mourdant, and our plan will work well. You say the boy cannot swim. You have only to hold his head under the water, then, and that will finish the job.

As ever your dear friend.

LOGAN.”

Philip Mourdant was tried, and found guilty of the murder of his nephew; and the wretched Logan, becoming convinced that concealment was useless, confessed his share of the crime, and

was imprisoned for life. Thus did Philip Mourdant, to gratify a love of power and obtain wealth, barter away body and soul. Did it pay him?

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