

The Murder at Cedar Glen

by Amy Randolph

“Goodbye, Amy! Remember, you mustn’t vanish away like a will-o’-the-whisp, or evaporate like a wreath of mist, before tomorrow morning! I can’t believe that so much happiness is really in store for me!”

Amy Bourne’s blue eyes dropped under the bright, ardent gaze of her betrothed husband; but there was a mute answer in the smile that broke over her lips.

“Come, I thought I was to have company part of the way home,” said old Uncle Ryder, good-humoredly. “Are you going to stand there holding little Amy’s hand all night, Tom May?”

Tom laughed and relinquished the soft treasure.

“There, good-bye once more,” he said. “Come, Mr. Ryder, I’m ready.”

Amy stood a moment looking with dreamy, smiling eyes into the bright wood fire that Farmer Bourne liked to enjoy in the chill September evenings, and then went into the other room.

“Where are you going, dear?” asked her mother.

“Only to look at the rosebush, mother. See, there are seven white roses and three buds—just enough to make a beautiful wreath, with the green leaves twisted in!”

“Sure enough—well, that’s what I call providential,” said Mrs. Bourne. “It’ll be a great deal prettier than any artificial fol-de-rols—just the thing to set off my little girl’s rosy cheeks.”

“Oh, mother!” faltered Amy, hiding her face on Mrs. Bourne’s shoulder, “it seems so strange that I am going to be married and leave my dear old home tomorrow.”

“Strange! Not a bit,” said the mother, briskly winking away the telltale tears that obscured her eyes. “It’s perfectly right and natural. Now don’t cry, darling—what do you suppose Tom would say?”

Nevertheless, Amy cried softly on—but they were not unhappy tears.

The autumn sunshine streamed like rivers of amber glory into the little low-ceilinged cottage parlor where Amy Bourne was being dressed in bridal white, her hair catching golden light in the shifting rays and her blue eyes full of deep softness. She looked like some fair, delicate picture framed with sunbeams, and so the proud mother thought as she smoothed down the folds of snowy muslin with a caressing hand.

“Now you are perfect, my darling; stay a minute till I fasten that spray of buds a little higher up. Oh, take care—that start dislodged the finest rose.”

“I heard someone at the door, mother!” faltered Amy, turning from red to white.

“Nonsense, my dear—it’s not time yet for half an hour. Is that your father? Come in and see if our Amy don’t look like a white rose.”

As Eliphalet Bourne crossed the threshold with a slow step Amy’s face blanched to a deadly pallor.

“Father! What is the matter? Oh, father! Don’t look at me so.”

The old man clasped his hands over his eyes.

“Take off those white things, Amy! Oh, my daughter, you will never need them now!”

Mrs. Bourne sank into a chair with an hysterical scream, but Amy stood motionless and calm.

“Is he dead, father? Tell me—I can bear it all!”

“Not dead—not dead!” wailed the old man. “Oh, would to God that he were! He has done a deadly sin, daughter—he is under arrest for the murder of old John Ryder!”

The color came back to Amy’s cheeks in a hot flood,—her lip curled with indignant scorn.

“Father, can you for an instant suspect Tom May—my Tom—of such a deed as that?”

“I didn’t want to believe it, Amy,” moaned the father. “I strove against the tidings while there was a ray of doubt left; but the evidence is too overwhelming. He left our house last night in company with the poor old man; he was seen by several people to take the Cedar Glen road, still in company with Ryder. At eleven they were together—at half past eleven Blake Allen found the old man murdered in that lonely spot where you go down into the ravine.

Amy shuddered.

“Blake Allen is my evil fate,” she murmured.

“You are unjust, my daughter,” said Mr. Bourne, reproachfully. “He was but the unwilling agent of providence’s retributive hand. But I have not told you of the circumstance of all others that gives the blackest dye to this miserable affair. This morning—his wedding morning, remember, when one would suppose him most likely to remain at home—he had gone to the Welmford depot and purchased a ticket for the eight o’clock express! Amy, does this not look like the guilty instinct of flight?”

“He is innocent!” she said, firmly. “I will stake my life on his innocence!”

“He says, in his own justification,” went on Bourne, “that he parted from Ryder at the cross roads, just above, with the intention of going to Welmford in the night train to get a little pearl pin that he was having set for you, Amy; and that, finding himself too late, he went directly home, resolving on taking the eight o’clock morning express, so as to return before the hour set for the wedding.”

“Does anyone dare doubt his statement?” asked Amy, proudly.

Eliphalet Bourne shook his gray head.

“Too many, my child. It is an improbable story—and Welmford is on the direct sea-port route.

“Father,” pleaded the girl, “what possible object could Tom May have had to murder old Mr. Ryder?”

“That no one can tell; but they may have quarreled on the road, and in a fit of sudden passion—”

“Is Tom May the man to quarrel with that poor old creature? Still more to give way to temper in such an unwarrantable manner,” she persisted calmly.

“I should have said not, Amy—but we cannot read all the mysteries of the human heart.”

“He is innocent, father—as innocent as the day,” reiterated Amy. “Oh, surely this be some terrible dream, for which we shall all wake, ere long—a dark mystery, but God’s hand holds the clew!”

“My child, I wish I could comfort you—there is too much reason to fear that Thomas May did the deed.”

He started forward as he spoke, for Amy had fainted with the white roses yet among her brown tresses—a bride worse than widowed.

“I knew you would never believe the story of my guilt, Amy.”

“Not for a moment, Tom!” said the girl, proudly. He smiled and pressed her hand gently.

“But, oh, Tom, to think of you being sentenced to hard labor for life, as if you were a common felon!” she said, with a shuddering sob.

“So I am, in the eyes of the law, Amy!”

“The law is unjust—cruel. I do not see how you can be so composed about it, Tom!”

“Because I have the consciousness of innocence to support me, dearest,” he said, calmly. “It is a strange mystery, I know, but sooner or later it must and will be cleared up; in the next world, if not this!”

Amy burst into tears, although she had resolved to be very calm and collected in the brief interview allowed to her between the sentence and its execution.

“And in the meantime, your life will be sacrificed—your future—your hopes! Oh, Tom, it will break my heart!”

His lip quivered, even though he tried to smile.

“No, Amy, God will give you strength to endure. As for me, I can never be entirely miserable, as long as I am sure of my own innocence and your trusting love!”

“But Tom—”

Her voice broke down—and their parting was without a word.

As she came down the stone steps of the prison, Blake Allen took his place at her side—a tall, sallow looking man, with gray eyes, and a closely compressed mouth half hidden by a sandy moustache.

“You have been to visit the unhappy criminal, Miss Bourne?”

“I have been to visit an innocent man, Mr. Allen.”

He raised his eyebrows.

“As you please—but you will allow me the pleasure of walking home with you.”

Amy Bourne turned upon him with a gesture of angry disdain.

“I thought, Mr. Allen, that I had already given you to understand how disagreeable were your attentions to me.”

“Amy,” he pleaded, “you rejected me once before. Now that you are free—”

“I am not free!”

“Does Mr. May refuse to release you from your promise to be his wife?”

“I have no wish to be released. I love and honor him more at this moment than ever I did before!”

“Miss Bourne!”

She turned away, with angry flushes on her cheeks and walked swiftly down the street, while Blake Allen looked after her, with an evil light in his cold gray eye.

The sunset was glowing in the western sky as she came to the lonely spot by the ravine in Cedar Glen where the murder had been committed—a spot she had never been able to pass without a shudder. Now she sat down, sick and weary at heart, and the very gray boulder at which the dying man's hands had blindly clutched, in the death agony, as had been proven at the inquest, by the moss that clung to the gory fingers.

“If the blood-stained earth could but find a tongue to speak!” she pondered, in wild, shifting fantasies, “if pine-trees could but point their avenging fingers at the man who did the deed! Surely, surely Heaven will not allow the innocent to suffer unjustly!”

As she moved her foot with nervous, unconscious force, a little stone, half the size of a man's hand became detached from its bed of moss, and rolled down the declivity. Amy Bourne's eye followed its motion mechanically—the next instant she sprang up eagerly, with a faint exclamation.

The western sunlight was reflected dimly from a bit of tarnished metal that had lain between the stone and its mossy cavity—and Amy saw that it was an oblong link of gold, darkly stained and corroded.

“It is a piece of Blake Allen's watch chain,” she murmured, pressing one hand to her throbbing head. “My God! The stones have spoken, and this is what they tell me!”

“Why, Miss Amy! who'd ha' thought o seeing you?” ejaculated Mrs. Furman, Blake Allen's old housekeeper, hurriedly wiping the dough from her fingers. “Take a cheer, honey!”

“Thank you Mrs. Furman,” said Amy, calm and self-possessed, though she was very pale, “I only came in to ask if I might look at Mr. Allen's watch chain. My brother is thinking of purchasing, and—”

But here Amy paused: she was not used to fabrication, and the guilty crimson dyed her cheek. Well was it for her that Mrs. Furman was half blind and wholly unsuspecting.

“Bless you, dear, he took it to Welmford yesterday; it wants a new screw, or something, he was saying. He hasn't worn it this long time—says it's getting' old-fashioned.”

“Very well—I will look at Mr. Berry's chain. You—you will not mention it to Mr. Allen that I called.”

“No, dear, of course not,” chuckled [cuckled] the old lady looking after Amy, with a wondrously sly countenance. “Bless her pretty face!” she added mentally; “I ain't goin' to gratify Blake Allen so much; a mean, stingy hunks, that counts every pound o' tea a woman uses!”

“And now for Welmsord,” mused Amy to herself, drawing the green veil down over her white and agitated face. “I shall be in time for the express, if I hasten!”

But here the clew seemed to fail her. From jeweler to jeweler she passed, without learning anything, until at length she came to a dead stand still.

“Is there any other place in the town where a chain of that sort would be likely to be left?” she asked at the last establishment on the outskirts of Welmford.

The man shook his head.

“Stay, tough,” he said, “there’s old Farr’s; though he don’t keep a reg’lar store. He might ha’ took it; he mends and repairs, and resets old jewels!”

“Where is it?”

The man wrote down the address on a bit of paper, and gave it carelessly into Amy’s shaking hand.

Old Farr sat in his seven-by-nine shop, like an old gray rat in its hole, with his eye close to a magnifying-glass. He started a little as Miss Bourne’s shadow darkened the door. She had resolved beforehand what course to pursue, and boldly advanced.

“Mr. Allen’s watch chain was left here to be mended?”

“Yes, ma’am, but it wan’n’t to be called for until next week.”

How Amy’s heart leaped!

“I know it, but I wish to look at it a minute.”

The old man fumbled a moment among his drawers and boxes, while the blood seemed to stand motionless in Amy Bourne’s veins. It gave a great spring through all her pulses, however, as he held out the chain—bright enough at either end, but spotted toward the middle with old blotches of some dark color stains, whose counterpart was strangely familiar.”

“I haven’t had time to clean it yet,” he apologized. “I was calc’latin’ to polish it up this artemnoon—you see it’s badly broke.

“I see. How did it happen?”

“Mr. Allen ‘lows it got jerked in two when he was getting’ over a fence, and—”

“Thank you, that will do.”

The streets seemed to rock around her, as she emerged from the close workshop, yet she rallied, with an effort that surprised herself.

“Courage!” she murmured under her breath, “courage—he shall yet be free! Oh how could I for an instant doubt that Providence would lead us safely through this tangled labyrinth of trial!”

She did not rest until she had placed the tarnished link of gold in the hands of Mr. May’s legal adviser, and told him the story of its discovery. His eyes lighted up as he listened.

“Good!” he exclaimed. “And to think that this silent accuser had been overlooked by the crowd of morbid curiosity-seekers who had thronged the glen!”

“Then you agree with me that—”

“That Blake Allen murdered old John Ryder? I don’t think there’s a shadow of a doubt. But proof is the thing. I must get authority for seeking temporary possession of Mr. Allen’s jewelry, before those bloody witnesses are removed. How sly it was to wait all these weeks before he let the tell-tale go out of his hands. Then we must hunt up an analytical chemist, and then—Be easy, my dear Miss Bourne. Tom May shall be free as air before many days!”

During the brain-fever that followed, Amy Bourne was unconscious of all that occurred—happily free from racking doubt or changing fears. When she recovered sense and reason, Tom May’s bright face was the first upon which her eyes opened.

“Tom—was it all a dream?”

“A fevered, troubled dream, Amy; but the hour of waking has come!”

“Why, did I commit the murder?”

Blake Allen’s dim, uneasy eye wandered restlessly over the crowded courtroom, as he spoke in a dull, mechanical manner, as if rather addressing himself than the audience:

“Why did I commit the murder? There’s no use keeping it to myself any longer—it will be a relief to get it off my mind. I hadn’t anything against old Uncle Ryder—I never meant to kill him. When I struck through the darkness with that ragged stick, I fancied I was dealing death to the man I most hated in the world—Thomas May—the man who openly triumphs in the possession of what I would have given worlds to gain. Never mind what,” he added sullenly, knitting his brows. “Somehow an evil demon seized upon me—I was like one demented—and when the poor old man grasped at me in his death agony, and I wrenched the watch chain from his hands—”

He sank back with a choking gasp, and covered his face with his hands.

“It’s all one, now,” he muttered, “all one! I knew it must come to this—but that it should have been through her hands!”

That was all the convicted murderer said. But there would have been a still keener pang at his heart, could he have known that in that selfsame hour Any Bourne was taking the marriage vows that bound her irrevocably for better, for worse, to his hated rival, Thomas May. Out of the eternal darkness in which he stood, they had passed into sunshine all the sweeter for its temporary eclipse!

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