

Falsely Accused

It was in the beautiful summer time; the trees were clothed in their richest foliage; the birds sang sweetly; the little lambs frisked about merrily in the green fields, everything looked bright and happy.

Prosperity reigned over the little village of Ballyglen which nestles among the hills, in a beautiful valley, in the western part of Ireland, and as the story which I am going to relate happened there, we will ask the reader to accompany us across the three thousand miles of water that intervenes.

Through the center of this village a beautiful river wound its serpentering course, the banks of which, on either side, were interspersed by numerous picturesque mansions, the property of several rich gentlemen, who were masters of all the lands over which the eye roamed.

As our story relates to one of these mansions, or at least the inmates of one of them, we will confine ourselves to it and not mind the rest.

Godfrey Blake was a very wealthy man, his gold could be measured by the bushel, and yet, with all his immense wealth, he possessed none of the arrogance or worldly pride that some men did when favored by such good fortune.

He had a lovely daughter named Mollie—lovely in every sense of the word, a beautiful blonde whose long, wavy tresses of golden hair hung over her finely molded form, almost to the ground, and eyes blue as the summer sky, of her native home, and whose tender-hearted goodness made her a favorite with the rich and poor for miles around.

Now, as may be supposed, there were many admirers who looked with loving eyes on the peerless girl, some of them sons of the richest men of the province, but all to no purpose for her love was bestowed on one, though he was far below her in a worldly point of view. His name was Gerald O’Conor, the only son of a widow, and on him she bestowed all the love of her young heart.

Now, there was another young man in the village who loved, or professed to love, Mollie Blake and tried every means available to blacken the character of young O’Conor.

On the evening when we first introduce them to the reader, the pangs of jealousy had a great cause to arouse the ire of his nature.

They were seated side by side under the branches of an elm tree, her pretty hand was nestled on his shoulder, as she listened to the words of love.

“Mollie, I love you dearly, and it would be the happiest day of my life when I could call you mine; but darling, you know I am poor, and your father may object to my suit.”

“Gerald, don’t you know father better than that? He is not the man to offer any opposition to my happiness when he knows that he whom I love is worthy of the best girl of Ireland.”

“Bless you, my darling! For your words have made me very happy.”

“It is the truth which I have spoken; and as for your being poor, why haven’t I got plenty for us both?”

This was too much for the eavesdropper; he ground his teeth in rage an oath escaped his lips, yet he managed to keep his temper, and waited to hear more of their conversation, for he lay concealed among the shrubbery a few feet from where the lovers were seated and heard every word of their conversation.

For some time longer they remained seated at their conversation and at length when the shadows of approaching night began to steal across the tree tops they arose and separated, Mollie going toward the house, while O’Conor wandered leisurely through the sweet-scented meadow toward the river bank.

No sooner had they parted than Anthony Bell, for such was the listener’s name, arose from his place of concealment, and, shaking his great clenched fist at the retreating form of his successful rival hissed through his clenched teeth:

“Curse you, you low-lived upstart! But I will blacken you in her sight, aye, even if I have to stain my hands in blood to do so!”

And as he ceased to speak he stuffed his hands in his pockets and strode fiercely from the place.

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A month had passed and the shades of tranquility rested over the little village of Ballyglen, when one beautiful autumn evening its slumbering inhabitants were awakened from their blissful repose by the cry of:

“Murder!”

Murder. The terrible word seemed to be echoed from the surrounding hills and filled the hearts of the people with awe.

And too true was the awful tidings; a fiendish murder had been committed and the victim was Godfrey Blake.

And the murderer; he was found bent over the prostrate form of his victim with a blood-stained dagger in his hand—Gerald O’Conor, the lover of his daughter—and was now safely lodged in prison.

Another man was found lying almost dead a little way off from where the crime was committed, with a terrible wound in his head. He was a hand of Mr. Blake’s and was conveyed to his home.

The terror which filled the people when the terrible deed had reached them, had now passed away, and a desire to be avenged on the murderer had taken its place, and the foremost in his indignation was Anthony Bell, who urged them on in their wrath, and were it not that the prisoner was removed to the county jail, the probability is that he would have been hung without trial, judge or jury.

Two weeks after the burial of Mr. Blake the trial was to take place, and the evening before the fixed day, Gerald O’Conor sat in his cell his head resting on his hands.

Only two weeks since his arrest, and what a change had come over him in that short time; every trace of color had left his cheeks, and his eyes were sunk in their sockets.

“Oh, God! What have I ever done to merit this terrible torture that is killing me? I the murderer of Godfrey Blake, the man for whom I would have shed the last drop of my blood to serve. No, no! There is some terrible mistake made; for he was dead when I discovered him, a dagger buried in his heart. And the people all believe that I am guilty of so foul a crime. Poor mother, what agony must she not be suffering; and Mollie, oh heaven! Does she too think me guilty?”

His head sank lower, his chest heaved with emotion, and the great sobs that escaped him depicted the agony which he suffered.

He did not hear the bolt of the cell door shoot back, nor was he aware that any one entered till a hand was laid on his shoulder and a voice said:

“Gerald!”

He raised his head like one awakening from a dream.

“Gerald, don’t you know me?” asked his visitor, as no sign of recognition was evinced from him.

“Yes, Mollie, I do,” he answered in mournful accents, “and do you too believe me guilty of this terrible crime? If so, how came you to seek the presence of one whom you believe to be the murderer of your father?”

“Oh, Gerald! How can you accuse me so? I believe you to be guilty—no! I am sure you never committed the crime of which you stand accused. Trust in Him who knows all and He will not let the innocent suffer for the guilty.”

“Your words lighten the terrible load that lies on my heart and makes it easier to bear; but the evidence is so strong against me that it is mockery to hope. I have made up my mind that I am to be made victim to atone for a crime of which I am falsely accused.”

“Do not give way to despair, for God will not permit you to suffer for the crime of another, and now, as the time is up, and I hear the jailor coming, I must leave you, so good bye for tonight,” and she pressed his cold hand in her own.

“Good night, Mollie, and may God bless you.”

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The morning came calm and beautiful—the morning of the day on which Gerald O’Conor was to be tried for his life—tried for a murder he never committed.

The hour for trial had come, the prisoner was led up the aisle of the court room, and placed in the dock.

The prosecuting attorney opened the case in behalf of the crown, and witnesses were examined.

Anthony Bell was the principal witness for the prosecution; he testified to having found Gerald O’Conor bent over the murdered man with a blood-stained dagger in his hand; saw him plunge it into the murdered man’s breast.

Other witnesses testified to the same with the exception of the stabbing, and the prosecution closed.

The attorney for the defense opened the case in a very eloquent manner, and tried by every available means to prove the innocence of the prisoner, bringing to bear his former good character, etc.

The Judge then charged the jury telling them to think well over the evidence before giving their verdict.

They then retired, and after an hour’s conference returned to the jury box.

Every eye in the crowded court was fixed on the twelve solemn men as they took their places and answered to their names.

“Gentlemen of the jury, have you decided on a verdict? Is the prisoner at the bar guilty or not guilty?”

The stillness of death reigned, every breath was hushed, as the foreman of the jury arose to render the verdict—a verdict which was to be either for life or death to the prisoner.

“Guilty!”

The awful word rang out clearly through the crowded court room and every eye was fixed on the prisoner, who stood pale, yet resolute on the dock.

“Gerald O’Conor!” spoke the judge rising from his seat, “you have been tried by a jury of twelve of your countrymen, and found guilty of the terrible crime murder. Have you anything to say why the sentence of death should not be passed upon you?”

The prisoner gazed around him for a moment, and then in a clear, firm voice said:

“My lord, and gentlemen of the jury: I have been tried and found guilty of a crime I never committed—a crime most foul in the annals of history! On the night on which the deed was committed I was returning from a visit to a neighbor’s when a terrible cry rang in my ears and seemed to issue from a ravine a little way off the path which I followed. Running in the direction from whence the cry came, I saw a sight which chilled the marrow in my bones, and made my blood run cold. I saw my best and dearest friend lying on the earth in a pool of blood with a dagger protruding from his breast, while a little way off lay the body Jack Rape. I stooped over the body of Mr. Blake and drew the dagger from the wound, as I did so the hot blood gushed out and stained my hands. Then I was seized by Anthony Bell and others, accused of being the murderer, taken off to prison, and now have been tried and found guilty. My lord, and gentlemen of the jury I did not commit the horrible deed. I am innocent.”

A profound murmur swelled from the lips of the crowd, it was some time before order was restored.

The judge put on the black cap and arose to pass sentence.

Just then a terrible commotion arose outside the court room, and two men entered, bearing between them the form of a man, whose face was half hidden by a red handkerchief which was tied around his head.

This man was Jack Rape, who had that day recovered his senses, and on hearing that young O’Conor was on trial for the murder of Mr. Blake, requested that he should be brought to the court as he had importance evidence to give in the case.

A policeman advanced toward the bench and whispered to the judge, who ordered two policemen to guard the door, and allow no one to leave the court room.

The invalid was seated in a chair on the witness stand, and, after having been duly sworn, deposed as follows:

“His name was John Rape; on the evening on which the murder was committed, he was walking in a field near where the deed was done; saw Mr. Blake pass by, and when he passed him a little way saw a man with a black mask jump from behind a ditch and attack his master, he ran to his assistance and grappled with the assailant, tore the mask from his face, and as he did so he was struck with some blunt instrument on the head. —The man who assaulted his master and from whose face he tore the mask, was not the prisoner. The man was Anthony Bell!”

A tremendous uproar arose in the court room, and a rush was made toward the door.

Bell, seeing that his game was up, thought to escape, and caused the excitement just spoken of, but he was seized by two trusty policemen and placed in the dock from which O’Conor had been honorably released.

Seeing that all hope was gone he confessed his guilt, and was made to pay the penalty of his crime on the scaffold.

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A year passed by since the above transpired.

Bonfires blazed on the hillside from which the joyous shouts of the peasantry were echoed in the valley below, where nestled the village of Ballyglen.

The marriage bells pealed forth their joyous anthems, as a marriage coterie entered the pretty church and advanced up the flower strewn aisle and stood before the altar.

A very handsome couple they are who are to be joined in wedlock. The bride is dressed in lavender silk and lace, a wreath of flowers decorates her head of golden hair—as pretty a bride as ever a happy groom led from the altar.

And so thought Gerald O’Conor as the minister pronounced Mollie Blake his wedded wife.

And as our story comes to an end we will bid them adieu, hoping that a long life of love and happiness will be theirs.

The Allen County [OH] Democrat, July 1, 1875