

*My Three Mysteries*  
by Rosella Rice

WE were betrothed—William and I. I never called him William before; he never heard my lips speak his name. I called him Teacher. He was educating himself for the law, and, as all poor students do, taught school occasionally to eke out his means.

I was one of his pupils, and don't know how he came to love me—a sunburnt, robust country girl, awkward and motherless, and starving for the books that were out of my poor reach.

He never seemed like other men—he was purer and higher, and his soul was as white as any baby's soul.

I often feel my eyes twinkle with a laugh and catch my breath suddenly as I remember the weeks when, “boarding round,” he was at my home.

In the evenings we would gather around the broad hearth, and sit on the rug and crack nuts, and when weary of that, would fall into the pleasant dreamy pastime of seeing pictures in the embers. He would sit in the shadow of the jamb, and his forehead would gleam out whitely from the coarse gray background.

He would read every night after the family had retired, and I was delighted to sit on a low stool on the other side of the stand and read Childe Harold and Mrs. Hemans' poems. This was an indulgence seldom accorded to me when alone.

When my bed-time came, I went out softly on tip-toe, and I left the teacher reading. There was no good-night kiss; my shy, brown hand never rested a minute among his bright locks: we called ourselves *old-fashioned*, and though we loved each other in a strange, quiet way, we made no demonstrations of it. He used, sometimes, to smooth my hair and call me his little cottage-girl, and joy in the wildwood, twittering songs of mine that found their way into the county papers, and tell me of the beautiful home that in the years to come would be ours in one of the growing young cities of the West.

Once we were talking together seriously of the spirits of our beloved dead, of guardian angels, and the pure companionship that all the time attends us unseen; and this earnest talk ended by a promise that, if we were separated in the hour of death, and it were possible, the spirit of the departing one should visit the other.

It is a long, sad, sweet, pitiful story—this long-ago love of mine; but I started out to tell a bare, strange fact, not the love tale of my girlhood.

In 1849, when the gold excitement was raging in California, some wealthy men prevailed on the young law-student to take charge of twenty of thirty men whom they had hired and were sending with teams across the Plains.

They met with difficulty and disaster on the route, and were delayed weeks longer than they should have been.

Their provisions were nearly gone, they grew low-spirited, and many of them, who were accustomed all their lives to plenty and even luxury, loathed the salt pork and coarse bread, and fell victims to that dreadful disease, the scurvy.

Their leader was one of the number. They made a comfortable place for him to lie in one of the wagons, and, almost driven to frenzy, they hurried on.

Every few hours, beside that cheerless way, in beautiful places, on little knolls, or under drooping trees, they would see lonely graves; sometimes it would be a baby's grave, or the grave of a brave, loving, self-sacrificing wife; but nearly always long and wide, the resting-place of a mad adventurer, driven by poverty to sell himself, for a pittance and a share, to the sharp spectator.

Alas, for the lonely graves that close over such brave, struggling lives!

William died the second night after the company reached the golden land.

That same night, in my quiet country home, I watched beside the sick-bed of my little mother, May—my second mother. About midnight she sank into a sweet sleep, and darkening the room I went upstairs to bed. None of the upper chambers were occupied. My sleep that night was refreshing, and came soon. The door was slightly ajar and the window let down—the room cool and well ventilated.

At one o'clock my eyes opened suddenly, and there, a step or two inside the door, stood William—dressed as men usually are in the summer-time, his face very pale, his hair disordered, and a hurried, excited, out-of-breath manner about him.

I gasped an oh! And put my hands over my face. I noted this strange incident the next morning in a blank-book, and then waited and watched the papers. I had not long to wait. A carriage called one day; a gentleman who was a stranger sprang out, and coming to the door, handed me a package. On taking off the outside envelope, a smaller and closely-sealed package fell into my lap. It was directed: "Private correspondence, to be returned to Miss ——, if I should not live." I groped my darkened way upstairs: the din of Niagara in my ears; the air I breathed was stifling; my eyes stared wide open, but saw nothing—I only felt the little parcel of letters in my hand.

The next day out county paper contained a published letter from one of William's men, and it bore the intelligence that he died the same night in which I saw him.

I sorrowed most because a shadow had come in between us, and we had parted coldly. This was hard to bear. I went back to the loom wearily, but left it, and the dust gathered upon it, and the filmy cobwebs stretched themselves across its corners, and for weeks and weeks it stood silent as a bony skeleton. In the twilight I would sit on the floor beside it, doubled up into a dark little

heap, with my hands locked across my knees, with tearless eyes looking up out of the window into the calm sky, and listening to the willow as it swayed in the winds with a sobbing sound and creaked its one broken limb against the panes.

And this was one mystery and its end.

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THE house in which the spring and the summer of my life were spent, the “old house,” was built three stories high. Unsightly it was, but roomy and airy, and very pleasant after the trees grew and the grape-vines twined about its ill proportions, and draped it in green and made it breeze-wooding and beautiful as the wildwood.

From one of the upper-story corner windows the view was perfectly grand and satisfying to the most enthusiastic lover of Nature.

I called it my “look-out,” and the happiest moments of my life were spent in watching storms from that high window.

I longed for summer, only for the wild storms that came with her—the black sky, the peals of thunder, the vivid lightning and the great swaying, and sometimes crashing, among the tops of the mighty oaks on the densely-wooded, high hill in the front of the house.

It is strange to me now how I loved that window—how in my lonely years I made of it companionship. If lonely, I went there; if despondent, and my way seemed dark and hedged up, I would go there and come away happy and contented. If I read something that I wished to think over and enjoy, I went to that window and leaned out and whispered the beautiful thoughts of another to myself; and with the fine landscape spread out before me nothing was lacking to make me very happy.

One evening in June I stood there and looked at the sunset; saw the tall trees cast their lengthened shadows across the dimpling meadows, the slopes of the hills put on their shadowy frowns, the creek, glinting and quivering in its silvery, sheeny, faint touch of slanting sunbeams, and the outline of the far-away western hills, with the horizon’s edge, pinked and embroidered with the peaked points of the tree-tops.

The fireflies were glimmering and sparkling along the sedgy brook that wound around the hillside, like a trimming of silver cord, before I withdrew from the window.

The whole third story was divided into only two rooms. I turned from the study of that pastoral picture-poem with my usual “Thank God for this beautiful earth!” went out of the door into the other room, and had nearly crossed it on my way to go downstairs, when I stopped suddenly; instantly my soul was brimming over with a feeling of the deepest sorrow; I knew not what.

I heard distinctly the rustling of garments, as though some one was approaching; and there, coming up the winding stairs without an audible footfall, seemed to be the husband of my dearest

friend. He came up slowly, faced me, came toward me. A piercing shriek was on my lips, but I pressed them together and was calm. His eyes were fixed upon me, his face was very sad, and bore evidence of tears. I stood still, my gaze fixed keenly upon him, but I felt as if I should cry aloud. He came to me, his arms extended. I was stricken with terror; I could not have spoken had I tried; instinctively I reached out my arms and gathered the poor little form to my bosom. He seemed to be weeping. I smoothed his hair in a pitying way, as though I was soothing his grief; all the time I kept pressing my lips together, and swallowing as though restraining sobs.

To illustrate this, suppose you, my lady reader, was comforting your brother in the moment of his sorest affliction, just after he had seen his wife or beloved child die; you would do just as I did then; it would be a natural expression of your sympathy, mutely, yet eloquently, given.

We seemed to stand there two or three minutes; he grew calmer and calmer; gently I slipped my arms away, and as gradually he faded and was gone—the shadowy form was not there.

I breathed freer, and almost flew downstairs, and never went to my favorite “lookout” after that time, unless in the glare of daylight, or when one of the children was with me.

The next morning I wrote to my friend, but deferred telling her about her husband until I should hear from her. I had never met him but twice, and my acquaintance was slight, only through her letters, in which he sometimes wrote a page to please her.

Our homes were a few hundreds of miles apart. I had not long to wait for a reply, but when it came I was startled at the scrawling, hurried superscription. Her chirography was faultlessly beautiful. I tore it open—it was in his writing, and the first line was:

“My dear wife is hopelessly insane.” His accomplished wife—the mother of his dear little babes—the sweet minstrel whose songs came to us, a joy and a blessing, had gone out into darkness and chaos; and though she lives, it were better for her that her bed was made under the myrtle and the daisies.

I wrote and told her husband of so strangely seeing him and sharing his sorrow with him, and asked if he could recall that same evening, and if he remembered what he was thinking or doing.

He replied that he spent the evening in his wife’s room, and his grief was overpowering; that he lay on the lounge and wept bitterly over her sad fate and that of her bereft children, and he thought of her sister and her friend, and of the sorrow awaiting them in the sad tidings which would soon reach them.

He said it seemed that life was a burden he could not endure; but the infinite wisdom that “tempers the wind to the shorn lamb” has bestowed largely upon him the most needful of the Christian graces, and, save this one dark shadow he is abundantly blessed, and is one of whom it may be truly said, “He goeth about doing good.” And this is my second mystery and its end.

It was in the year 1864 that one of my neighbors, a poor, illiterate man, was in the service, and his failing health entitled him to a discharge. His wife and six children lived near me, and I felt a special interest in his welfare and anxious for his safe return. His captain was an old schoolmate of mine, and I wrote to Charlie and told him to do all he could for Hazen, to watch over and encourage him, and help him to a discharge, and urge him not to touch strong drink.

The time came in which Hazen received his discharge, and though enfeebled with disease, he started home with a glad, light heart. Charlie's last words as he shook hands with him were, for him not to taste liquor on his journey; that the doctor said the result would be fatal if he did; to stop in Nashville, draw his pay and immediately go home.

Hazen wrung his hand in gratitude and bade him goodbye.

Mrs. Hazen had prepared the old house and made everything unusually tidy, prepared as good victuals as her poor means afforded, and made the children all neat and clean—the baby, a bright-haired little two-year old that Hazen had only looked upon once, and then when it was an animate little bundle of soft flannels and dainty cambric.

They counted the days until he was expected home; then waited patiently days and days, sitting up late nights and rising in the early dawns, and still he came not.

Captain Charlie was written to at Murfreesboro', and he replied that Hazen had started home nearly a month before.

My interest in my old neighbor grew deeper, and I told his wife I would not rest until I learned what had become of him. I sent a letter to Nashville to the proper authorities, and learned that he had drawn his pay at the proper time, and was in good spirits and looked bright and happy.

His next stopping-place after Nashville would be Bowling Green. I [dispatched] a letter there, and they knew nothing of him, but told me where to write and in the meantime they would interest themselves likewise—told me to comfort his wife and children, and have my neighbors assist her if she was in need.

I sent letters to the Soldiers' Home and the Hospital then in Cincinnati, and asked the authorities to search for him or his name. They wrote me very kindly, and said they could find no intelligence of him whatever, and advised me to write to Louisville.

The letter to Louisville was not satisfactory, and though brave and determined to find him dead or alive, my hands fell in my lap and I cried bitterly. It did seem so hard to give up vanquished, and never know any more about my generous, noble old boy-neighbor, who would have laid down his life to have saved mine.

When I went to bed that night I thought this sad thing all over. He might be languishing and dying by inches somewhere, and longing—oh so terribly!—to see his family. I felt like a prisoner with drear, bleak walls all around him, shutting him in with no possible way of escape.

It seemed that I must tear the wall away! I shut my hands tightly and said, "I will find him! I must! Why cannot this light that I so long for come to me in a dream? Oh it ought to! it shall!"

Gradually the tension relaxed; the stern determination softened down, and I fell into a peaceful sleep: all hardness had gone from me then.

I did not awake until the next morning at daybreak, when my father was building a fire. My first thought was "Oh it did not come to me! and I *so* earnestly desired it! It must come! it will!"

While my father was yet making the fire, I fell asleep. He went out to milk the cows, and the room was warm and quiet. I slept. Suddenly in my dream I heard a soft, quick footfall, and, half awake, in the gray twilight of early dawn, a small man, bearing the unmistakable smell of jalap and mingled medicines, came to my bedside, and, bending over until his face was only a hand's length over my pillow, said in a soft, sad, musical voice:

"Rosella, Harrison Hazen died the second day of April, in Cincinnati."

There! it had come to me at last! He was dead, but even this was better than painful uncertainty.

The next day I wrote to the Soldiers' Home and the Hospital, and, without telling them my reasons, said I could trace him no farther than their city—that he surely had died there!

They responded kindly and courteously, but said they could find no word or trace of a soldier bearing that name; they thought I was rather officious; and though I was not willing to yield the point, I let the matter drop; a woman alone, unacquainted with the ways of the world, could do no more. I knew "time, that makes all things even," would unravel this mystery, and full of faith I waited.

The following October we were coming home from church, away out in the delightful country among the picturesque hills and valleys, when a creaking, rickety little wagon, with a quiet old gray horse, driven by a sad-faced woman, halted, with a sudden, *whoa!* beside us, and the driver, Mrs. Hazen, fumbled in the pocket of her black dress, and with a wild, white face handed me a crumpled letter to read.

The Infirmary directors in Cincinnati had written it to the proper authorities at our county-seat, and by this means the truth had come to her at last. The letter ran in this wise:

"Harrison Hazen died the second day of April, at the Infirmary in Cincinnati. He was found in a state of insanity, running around in the night on the streets; and it was not known then that he was a soldier, he was taken temporarily to the Infirmary, where he died that night. Only a trifle of money was found in his pockets, with his discharge and a few old papers and letters that were of no value. Nothing more is known of him, and we exceedingly regret that he had not been taken to a more appropriate place."

His friends supposed that, elated with the thoughts of spending the next night at home with his family, he had yielded to his thirsting and burning desire for strong drink, though his physicians

and his captain had said that it would surely be death. But a remnant of clothing covered him when found, and his baggage was never heard from.

And this ends my third mystery. I know not what they mean.

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