

Was it a Providence?

“I will do all I can, madam,” I said, rising to see my visitor to the door. My tone, I fear, was not very reassuring, for Mrs. Lockhart’s sorrow-worn face had lost none of its despondency when she went away at the end of our lengthened interview.

She had had enough to try her lately, poor woman. Her husband had been the victim of a shocking murder, and her son, an only child by a former marriage, was held in prison to answer for the crime.

“I hope you *will* do all you can, sir,” said Mr. Saunders, a kind old neighbor, who had accompanied Mrs. Lockhart, and now lingered behind to have a few words about the case in private—“I hope you *will* do all you can for the poor lad—he’s barely turned of sixteen—for everybody’s down on him. Even Parson Droner, who can preach charity loud enough when the plate’s to be circulated, couldn’t content himself at the funeral with crackin’ up the virtues of the deceased several per cent above par, but must needs go bully-raggin’ the ‘youthful parricide,’ as he was thoughtless enough to call George Lysle right before his mother, but she, poor body, was too dazed like to heed what was said. ‘Well, if it *is* parricide,’ says I to my Polly, as we walked home, ‘I’m blamed if it’s more ’n parricide in the second degree to put a mean step-father out o’ the way!’”

There’s no telling how long Mr. Saunders might have rattled on if I had not cut him short with a parting shake of the hand, and a repetition of my promise to do all I could.

George Lysle’s father had been dead about three years, when his mother took for a second husband Gideon Lockhart, a man praised by everybody—everybody but Mr. Saunders and a few more, who thought him a little severe on the weaknesses of human nature, and that his stern sense of justice would have been none the worse for a little tempering with mercy.

When Mary Lysle, near the end of her third year of widowhood, ventured on this second match, a more blithesome little body was nowhere to be found. She had grieved passionately for a season over her first husband’s death; but hers was not a nature formed for prolonged sorrow, and long before Mr. Lockhart took her in hand she had relapsed into the same thoughtless, giddy creature she was when Edward Lysle led her to the altar on her seventeenth birthday.

But it was astonishing how quickly she improved under Mr. Lockhart’s guidance. She was soon brought to see that life was a serious, a very serious thing; and before the end of six months, Parson Droner, who had used to shake his head at Mary’s volatility, began to point her out as a model of matronly sobriety.

Little George, too, was brought under the same improving influence. Mr. Lockhart and King Solomon were in perfect harmony as to the most efficient means of eradicating folly from the heart of a child; and half-a-year’s trial of the system wrought as complete a transformation in

little George as had taken place in his mother. From a frolicsome, romping boy, he became as well-behaved— “before company”—as ever Master Blifil was, and, if he wasn't lying about it, found more pleasure in bounding States and doing sums in fractions than in peg-top, prisoner's base, and other like vanities. True, he would backslide now and then, when he got among the other boys; but ten minutes alone with Mr. Lockhart never failed to bring about a state of true repentance.

So things went along till George had passed his sixteenth year. Then he began to grow restive under Mr. Lockhart's treatment. He was getting old enough, he thought, to be exempt from a regimen prescribed by Solomon for children only; and when Mr. Lockhart insisted on keeping it up, George would often exhibit a rebellious temper, and instead of feeling to kiss the rod, many times wished he had the strength to break it over Mr. Lockhart's shoulders.

One day matters came to a crisis between them. A bank-note which Mr. Lockhart remembered leaving on his study table, was missing, and he accused George of stealing it, which the latter vehemently denied, —whereupon Mr. Lockhart found the defendant guilty of the double crime of theft and lying, and straightway proceeded to inflict the highest penalty for both.

George uttered no cry as blow after blow of the heavy whip descended. But his flashing eye and clutched fingers evinced with what alacrity he would have sprung at his tormentor's throat but for the inequality of such a contest.

“I'll get even with you for this!” were the words which two of Mr. Lockhart's friends, who witnessed the occurrence, afterwards swore before the coroner's jury George Lysle hissed through his clenched teeth as he left his step-father's presence.

An hour afterwards Mr. Lockhart found the missing note where he had mislaid it, but he felt it would be in derogation of his dignity to enter into explanation till George had shown a more submissive state of mind.

Next morning the dead body of Mr. Lockhart was found lying on the floor of his study. A deep wound pierced the base of the neck above the right clavicle, and penetrating downward entered the cavity of the chest. In the opinion of the surgical experts, the assassin had approached his victim from behind while the latter was seated in his chair, and reaching forward had inflicted the fatal stab by a downward thrust. George Lysle was missing, and the two friends of Mr. Lockhart already mentioned, who were temporary guests in his house, both testified that at a late hour, while conversing together in an upper chamber, they were startled by a loud moan in the direction of Mr. Lockhart's study, and on stepping into the passage and looking down the stairway, they saw George Lysle coming out of the study door, when, supposing that Mr. Lockhart and his step-son had been holding an interview on the subject of the recent trouble, they thought no more of the matter and went to bed.

Pursuit was immediately made, and young Lysle was found miles away concealed in a thicket,

evidently awaiting the return of darkness to resume his flight. He confessed that he had run away, but said it was to escape from Mr. Lockhart's cruelty, at the same time disclaiming all knowledge of the murder, and denying that he had either been in Mr. Lockhart's study that night, or had used the threat charged against him.—This was the case I was called upon to defend, and black enough it seemed against my young client.

The day set for the trial began sombre and gloomy, and was well in keeping with the feeling of dejection with which I entered on my well-nigh hopeless task.

But little time was consumed in putting in the proofs relating to the cause of death and the prisoner's flight and capture.

“Stephen Batley!” called out the State's Attorney, and one of the two men claiming to have seen George Lysle in the act of leaving the scene of murder, stepped forward and laid his hand on the Bible. The oath to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, was impressively administered.

My heart beat quickly. The words which were to follow, would, in all probability, fasten the halter about my client's neck.

“Did you see the prisoner on the night of the murder?” asked the counsel for the State.

“I did.”

“Under what circumstances?”

A darkness almost as thick as that of night suddenly overcast the heavens. The storm which had been brewing was ready to burst. The witness opened his mouth to answer. That instant a blinding flash dispelled the darkness, accompanied by an explosion which would have drowned the roar of a park of artillery. The spectators were stunned by the shock, and when order was restored, the seared and blackened corpse of Stephen Batley lay where the lightning had stricken him down!

The judge was one of those self-poised men whose equanimity, while in the discharge of official duty, nothing could disturb.

“Have you any other witnesses, Mr. Prosecutor?” he inquired, when the dead man's body had been removed.

“One other,” replied the prosecutor, calling the remaining guest on the fatal night.

As the witness kissed the book another flash, and another terrific peal, appalled the stoutest hearts present.

The witness shook with terror. When he was able to command his voice sufficiently to answer the questions put, his replies, instead of being a repetition of his previous story before the coroner, was a full confession, uttered in broken accents, that the murder had been committed by himself and his companion, the motive being to gain possession of a large sum which they had reason to believe Mr. Lockhart had received that day.

Of course the boy was acquitted. His mother ascribed his deliverance to Providence, and I am half inclined to agree with her. At any rate, there is little doubt that it was the belief that his accomplice had met the fate of Annanias, and that the same was impending over himself, that forced the truth from the mouth of one who has come to bear false witness against his neighbor's life.

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