

A Murder Cleared Up

When Edward Berrian came to live at Barleybrake, he led, for a time, the life of a recluse. He rented a suit[e] of apartments, out of which he seldom ventured except for a solitary stroll now and then, or to go to a neighboring restaurant at which he took his meals. His age was less than thirty, his figure good, and his face handsome, in spite of a tinge of melancholy.

He had not the appearance of an unsocial man, for his look was uncommonly frank and open, and the few with whom he exchanged occasional salutations were charmed with his address and manner.

Nevertheless, on the whole, the people of Barleybrake were far from satisfied with their new townsman.

“How stuck up he is,” sneered Miss Isola Winter.

“Drat his airs!” said Mrs. Trapper, a lively little widow, who managed to keep up an appearance of youth by dint of cosmetics and keeping her son Tommy in short trousers.

But the day Tommy Trapper, in headlong pursuit of a butterfly, darted from the maternal side, and fell into the river, and Edward Berrian appeared providentially on the bank, and, plunging in, rescued the sputtering darling from a watery grave, and restored him, dripping wet, to his mother’s arms, things took a turn.

Mrs. Trapper called a tea-drinking in honor of the occasion, and invited Mr. Berrian to be present, a request which it would have been sheer churlishness to refuse.

This broke the ice, and soon the young stranger was on quite agreeable terms with his neighbors; and when he fell in love with pretty Fannie Pritchard, and rumors of their engagement became current, Mr. Berrian was looked upon as having a stake in the community, and his popularity rose accordingly—it would have risen still higher but for a latent jealousy on the part of Miss Winter, Mrs. Trapper, and some others of like ilk.

It was at this stage of affairs that Mr. Berrian came to my office one morning.

“Mr. Bryson, I wish to consult you confidentially,” he said.

I led the way to my private office. After closing the door, and when we were both seated, I invited him to proceed.

“I am likely to be exposed to a serious accusation,” he began, “and one, I fear, against which I have no defense to offer.”

“Indeed!”

“Two years ago,” he resumed, “occasion called me to the far West. Business completed, I went still further for pleasure, for I had a strong desire to penetrate to the wild forest, and try my hand as a buffalo-hunter.

“I took as my guides and companions two men whom I fell in with on the border. One of these, I soon discovered, possessed an ungovernable, domineering temper. He seemed to take an unaccountable dislike to me. I bore his humors without appearing to notice them, till at length, they reached the pitch of downright insult. I then calmly remonstrated.

“This made him furious. He taunted me with every conceivable opprobrious epithet; challenged me to fight him; dared me to draw my knife and meet him like a man.

“My silence only exasperated him the more, and advancing he struck me in the face.

“‘Will *that* make you fight?’ he growled through his clenched teeth.

“‘It will!’ was my quick reply, for the hot blood rushed to my brain, and reason, for the time, was vanquished.

“For a moment we stood face to face, weapon in hand. He made a furious thrust at my breast, but I had been trained in the art of defense, and warded off the blow at the expense of a deep gash in my left arm. Quick as thought, before he could recover himself, my knife was buried in his breast, and he sank helpless at my feet.

“Flinging aside the deadly instrument, I stooped over my prostrate foe, and raising him with the assistance of our companion, who had remained a passive spectator of the encounter, my only feeling was one of remorse coupled with an anxious desire to alleviate the suffering of the wounded man.

“He revived a little, and the first vision that met his sight was that of my face bent over him.

“‘Curse you!’ he exclaimed, grinding his teeth fiercely.

“‘Go!—go!’ urged our companion; ‘you can do nothing and your presence only aggravates him. I will do everything that is possible, and it is best for all concerned that you go your own way.’

“I hurried away, feeling as Cain must have felt with his brother’s blood still reeking on his hands.

“A month afterwards I was met by the man who had witnessed the affair. He informed me of the death of my victim, and demanded money as the price of his silence. I gave it; and time and again he repeated the demand, and I could do nothing but yield.

“At last I sought refuge in this secluded spot, which, till now, has proved a safe asylum; but last night my persecutor came again—this time with a requirement with which it was beyond my

power to comply. I explained this, but the relentless villain had the audacity to say that I was about to marry a wife out of whose portion I would find it easy to raise the amount.

“I shall, today, write a note to the lady whose name this wretch has dared to profane, releasing her from her engagement.”

“And probably break her heart,” I interrupted.

“Better that than bring her dishonor!” he replied.

“Don’t write your letter yet,” I said.

“Why not?”

“Because there’s a link in this case that looks weak.”

“What’s that?”

“The wounded man may not be dead.”

“But the only witness who saw it all says he is.”

“He has blackmailed you, and that makes me give little credence to his word.”

“But the wound itself—”

“Pshaw!—did you never hear of the man who had the crowbar blown through his head, and yet survived?—Don’t write your letter yet,” I repeated, “and don’t pay this scoundrel any more money, or even consent to see him for a few days, and when I telegraph you, come to me at once.”

“I went by the first train to the city, and took into my confidence an experienced detective. Between us we concocted a “personal” for the “Morning ——” by which it was given out that Ahab Barker (the supposed murdered man), nephew of one Simeon Barker (who, we had ascertained, was a rich uncle of his, whose death we left him to infer), would hear something to his advantage by calling immediately on Tobias Bryson, Esq., at a given address.

In two days a man claiming to be Ahab Barker, the nephew of the rich uncle, whose decease, he took it for granted, had left him a princely fortune, put himself in communication with me. I took his statement, and fixed a day for giving him a final answer, and then telegraphed to Edward Berrian. The result was, that on the day appointed, the supposed murderer and his victim stood face to face.

I explained to Mr. Ahab Barker, that although his wealthy uncle was still alive and in good health, it would redound *very much* to the advantage of both himself and his friend to desist from any further acts in furtherance of their wicked conspiracy.

Edward Berrian didn't write his contemplated letter to Fanny Pritchard, and he is now a married man and mayor of Barleybrake.

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