

The Storyteller.

THE MYSTERY OF TRESSALLEN HALL.

(From the *Ave Maria*.)

(Conclusion).

II.

WHEN Mark returned from his walk he found that the house had been locked for the night. Early hours were the rule at Tressallen Hall; and the old butler who saw to the fastenings of the doors and windows had probably thought that Mark was in his own room.

When a boy Mark had often found a means of admitting himself into the house from the ruins; and, after a moment's reflection, he sought a small door that led into the habitable part of the mansion, and tried to open it by pressing a secret spring. The door did not yield to his touch.

'My grandmother has possibly had it securely fastened,' said Mark. 'There's nothing to do but ring them up.'

He was about to seek the front door again when a faint sound made him pause and draw back into the shadow. The next moment the cloaked figure he had seen the previous night entered the ruins and passed by him so closely that he might have touched the heavy cloak by which the figure was shrouded. The form passed on toward one of the walls and vanished.

Mark stood transfixed for some seconds; but his reason told him it was no ghostly figure he had seen, and he walked to the place where it had disappeared.

'I shall have a look at the place to-morrow,' he said to himself. Tressallen Hall stood at a short distance from the sea, and Mark recalled many of the strange stories of smugglers and their doings that he had loved to listen to when a boy.

A vigorous knock brought the old butler to the door, and Mark entered the house with a smiling protest against the early hours kept at the Hall. The next morning he took an opportunity of examining the spot where the figure had vanished on the previous night. The enclosure in which he stood had evidently been the great hall of the ancient building, and was flagged by large, square stones. The grass was growing luxuriantly through the interstices between them, but Mark noticed that none grew around the one on which he stood. He was also certain that a stamp of his foot produced but a hollow sound; yet all his efforts to move the flag were fruitless for a considerable time. Finally, a vigorous push on one side caused the stone to move inward, and Mark had a momentary glimpse of a flight of steps before the stone returned to its position. He gave an exclamation and looked round him.

'I am on the brink of a discovery!' he said aloud. 'I wish I had some one I could trust to inquire with me into this. Frank Carlyon is the man!' he cried, as the thought struck him.

It did not take Mark long to find Father Carlyon's nephew. He was spending a holiday with the priest, and listened to Mark's story with undisguised wonder.

'Wait!' he said, as Mark was turning hastily away. 'We had better get a lantern; and I may as well take one from here, as you don't wish to make a fuss at the Hall.'

The two young men were soon standing on the steps beneath the stone. Frank Carlyon was the cooler of the two, and it was he who suggested a means of keeping the stone in a perpendicular position.

'We may as well leave ourselves a mode of exit,' he said; 'and now for our adventures. We may, perchance, find a treasure-trove. Did any of your ancestors store jewels or gold away?'

Mark made a negative reply. They were descending a narrow, tortuous flight of steps, and the light from above soon became dimmed. Suddenly Mark, who was in front, paused.

'Did you hear anything?' he asked.

'What?'

'A moan.'

'Oh, nonsense! The twilight gloom is making you nervous,' Carlyon replied, with a laugh.

'No indeed. Hark! There is the noise again. Didn't you hear it?'

This time the sound was audible to Carlyon, and he stopped for a second and lit the lantern in his hand.

'We may as well have a full view of whatever we have to encounter,' he said, cheerfully.

The object that met their sight when they descended a half dozen steps farther was by no means alarming. A man, whose continual moans testified to the pain he was enduring, lay in a huddled-up heap in the dungeon. Mark bent over him.

'It is Griffith Dunstable!' he cried.

'Griffith, is it?' Carlyon said. 'What unholy task has he been engaged in?'

Mark did not reply. Griffith Dunstable was a well-known character in the neighbourhood. What his means of living were was a problem. He was variously accused of being a smuggler, a coiner, and a burglar on a small scale. What was known was that he lived well without any apparent employment; that his blow was ready and his tongue bitter. It was also understood that his parents had been Catholics, though he himself professed no religious belief. Father Carlyon had visited him on several occasions, and had been met with a demeanour sufficiently repellent to leave him doubtful of Griffith's belief in his ministry.

'Are you hurt?' Mark inquired.

The man muttered some incoherent words in reply.

'What are we to do with him?' he questioned, turning to Carlyon. 'We could scarcely carry him up the steps.'

'No,' replied Carlyon. 'But see! he is trying to say something.'

The injured man was making efforts to speak, and Carlyon bent his head and tried to distinguish the muttered words.

'I fancy he is saying there is another way,' he remarked, with a glance round the chamber in which they were. It was easy to guess, from the casks and boxes lying about, that it had been used as a storehouse for smuggled goods.

'Yes,' said Mark; 'but where?'

'We'll see,' replied Carlyon.

The young man made the round of the chamber, and behind a pile of old lumber an opening was revealed that led to a wide passage.

'Here's the way, I don't doubt,' he said. 'However, I'll push on myself for a bit and see where it leads to.'

'It was a considerable time before he returned—or so it seemed to Mark, as he listened to Griffith's moans.

'The passage leads on to the rocks by the sea,' Carlyon explained when he re-entered the chamber. 'I did not go the whole way, but I'm sure it does. Hadn't we better make a stretcher and carry the poor fellow out?'

Mark assented; and an oaken board that seemed to have served as a table was improvised as a stretcher, on which Griffith was laid. It was a work of great difficulty to carry him along the rough passage; but once he felt the breath of the fresh morning air, he revived a little. A side gate gave admittance to the grounds of the mansion, and soon the suffering man was established in a comfortable bed in the Hall, with the dispensary doctor standing by his side.

'Recover!' the medical man said in reply to Mark's question. 'I doubt it. His term of life is almost spent. He has evidently fallen from a considerable height, and is injured internally. Besides, he is suffering from heart disease.'

'Send—send for—' Griffith paused. He had heard the doctor's words.

'For whom?' the doctor asked.

'For the priest,' the man at length said; and Frank Carlyon, who had remained with Mark, went off without further bidding for his uncle.

When Father Carlyon arrived Griffith Dunstable was propped up in bed. A powerful stimulant had given him a fictitious strength, and he was able to speak clearly and distinctly when the priest took a chair by his bedside.

'You wish me to hear your confession, my son?' the priest asked.

Griffith nodded toward the doctor.

'He says I am dying,—I fell down the steps.'

'Yes,' the priest said, gently.

'And I want you to make me ready for death,' Griffith went on, fearfully; and the other occupants withdrew, leaving the priest and the penitent alone.

A half hour elapsed before Father Carlyon opened the door. Mark, Frank, and the doctor were at the farther end of the long corridor. The priest went up to Mark.

'Bring Mrs. Tressallen to the room where Griffith is, and tell her he has a strange disclosure to make. She knows he is hurt, does she not?'

Mark answered in the affirmative.

'Bring her immediately. Doctor, you will take down the man's statement,' the priest said.

In a few minutes Mrs. Tressallen (who looked very nervous), Mark, Frank, and the doctor were seated near the bed where Griffith Dunstable lay. The ghastly hue of death was on the man's face, and his breath came in thick, short gasps. The priest had taken up his position on the opposite side of the bed.

'Now, Griffith,' he said encouragingly. At the doctor's signal, he held a glass near to the mouth of the dying man.

'I wish to state that I am the person who caused Mr. Tressallen's death,' said Griffith, slowly.

Mrs. Tressallen sprang to her feet with a horrified cry. Frank Carlyon laid his hand on her arm.

'Pray sit down. He has little time to tell his story,' he said gently. And, with an effort, the lady obeyed him.

'It was by accident that we—I don't say who was joined with me, mind!—found out the passage that led from the sea to the vault under the ruins. It served us well; for no one would expect to find smuggled goods at Tressallen Hall. Well, Mr. Tressallen saw me (as I understand his son has seen me) descending from the ruins. He was a bold man, and he dashed after me and seized me on the stone steps. I was the stronger man and I threw him off and he fell.'

Griffith paused to regain his breath.

'He was dead when I went to him,' he continued,—'dead! And I and others removed the body to a smaller vault on the opposite side of the passage, and buried it. You will find it there. There is an iron box in that room also. Mr. Tressallen's watch and papers are in it.'

The doctor had written down the dying man's words, and he read them over when he ceased to speak. It was with some difficulty Griffith Dunstable signed his name for the last time; the necessary signatures of the witnesses present were also affixed to the sheet of paper; and then Mrs. Tressallen, whose agitation was extreme, rose to go.

'Does she forgive me?' the dying man said to Father Carlyon. 'I don't think I really meant to kill her son.'

The priest looked toward the lady with an unspoken entreaty; and, after a natural hesitation, she approached the bed and laid her trembling hand on the dying man's.

'I do forgive you, and I earnestly pray that God may be merciful to you!' she said brokenly, then hurried away.

A fortnight after Griffith Dunstable's burial, Mrs. Tressallen and her grandson were guests in the villa where most of Beatrix Penruddock's life had been spent.

There had come a reply to a letter Mark dispatched to Beatrix on the day when her father's name had been freed from all suspicion. Beatrix invited Mrs. Tressallen and himself to their Southern home. Mr. Penruddock had returned from his wanderings when they