

ALLEN GRAY;

The Mystery of Turley's Point.

Being a Few Romantic Chapters From the Life of a Country Editor.

BY JOHN R. MURKIN.
AUTHOR OF "WALKER BROWNFELD," "HELEN LAKEMAN," "BARNEY OF BEDFORD," AND OTHER STORIES.

"Do you think you have a real remarkable novel, Miss Hopkins?" he asked.

"I know it, I know it! Just let me read a few pages to you."

"Someday, amateurs patronizing country newspapers always insist on reading their own productions to the editor. Like the first-born infant, they are too delicate to entrust to other parental hands. Miss Hopkins begins:

"THE MYSTERY OF THE ROCK HOUSE ON THE HILL."

"THE GHOST'S LAST WALK OF THE BLUFF. A Story of Life and Death, Love and Inspiration."

"You see, I am something like Hawthorne, delving into the supernatural," said Miss Hopkins, with a smile which displayed her false teeth.

"So I observe; please proceed," said the editor, trying very hard to be interested.

"It was a dismal dark night. The winds sighed a mournful requiem through the tree tops, and it was at that bewitching hour when gravestones yawn and phantoms stalk forth—the reader paused to mark the effect on his hearer. He sat unmoved by the startling beginning, and she asked him how he liked it. Very well, he thought, and said 'go on.' She went on. It was a crude story, full of improbable incidents, and gushy over with tear-stained love scenes. The heroine was such a tender-hearted creature, and had such a tendency to burst into tears, that the reader soon became disgusted with such rubbish, and was in constant dread of another explosion. The funny man was a strained character at best. He was constantly at his wit's end to be witty. In fact, the story was flat and insipid, and while the editor would not say so, he had a great delicacy in expressing his real opinion of it."

"What do you think of it, Mr. Gray?" she finally asked.

Allen was at a critical point. There sat the author before him, holding the dearly beloved creature of her imagination in her hands. He would not soon think of giving a scolding mother that her child was ugly as to express his real opinion of this story to Miss Hopkins. She had influential friends, persons of great depth and acumen, who had long since discovered a wonderful embryonic genius in Miss Leathy. To reject her story was to insult her intelligence and influence, while to publish it was to make himself the butt of ridicule by all thinking people. It would require skillful management to steer clear of his many competitors, but Allen was equal to the emergency.

"We couldn't publish a serial story in the Western Republic now, Miss Hopkins," he said. "It wouldn't be better to send it to Harper's?"

The reader may ask what harm the Harper's had done him that he should wish to inflict this punishment on them. But we must remember that Allen was only a human being in a great strait. Drowning men will catch at straws, and Allen, like all other men, was anxious to shift the load he bore upon the shoulders of some one else.

Moving unobtrusively in her seat, Miss Hopkins replied:

"I don't think it worth while to send this to Harper's, Mr. Gray, they are too old foggy to even discover true genius, you know. Like all the established publishers, they have got to go in lines and ruts, which new genius struggles to break away from. One can't do it with these publishers. None of the large magazines ever develop any thing; they are simply able to buy the jewels which some poor miser has dug up. All our successful authors make their start on obscure publications."

"I believe you are mistaken, Miss Hopkins. Harper's would read your manuscript and decide fairly upon it."

"I am sure they would not," she persisted. "If they don't find this out of their rut, they have some special favorite whose manuscript is just ahead of mine, and they'll send it back with a printed acknowledgment of its rejection is not necessary. I lack literary merit, but because they have something like it on hand. Those New York publishers are not in sympathy with new authors."

Miss Hopkins was a woman of literary experience, and was not to be induced to give Harper's the infinite pleasure of rejecting her manuscript.

"I am sorry; but I—I—really have no other story for your story at present, Miss Hopkins," said Allen. Being able to put but one interpretation on his refusal, she asked:

"Are you going to commence one of Mr. Barnes' stories?"

"No, we can not possibly use a serial at present," he answered.

"Why?"

"Because our people think that in order to build up this town all besides the rail should be devoted to it. Besides, the fall election is coming on, and the canvass will necessarily demand a great deal of space."

Miss Hopkins looked very much disappointed, but after a few moments she said:

"Can you use a poem occasionally?"

"I think I can."

This only partially repaired her disappointment. She declared the people of Turley's Point must be very ignorant to refuse such a novel as "The Mystery of the Rock House on the Hill," and bewailed the fate of struggling genius, held down by the iron hand of prejudice.

She took her manuscript and left the office with a look of disappointment and a heavy heart. We concede ourselves that Miss Hopkins is not the only author who has met with disappointments.

Her visit had temporarily led Allen Gray's mind from the subject which had become so painful, but when she was gone he returned with a determination to devote his efforts to doing Bertha, and all his business, were unavailing. That beautiful being who had grown so dear to his heart was always present.

"Oh, Bertha, Bertha! will this crushing weight never be removed?" he asked himself.

His reveries were interrupted by the abrupt opening of his sanctified door. Mr. Tom Simmons, with face inflated with anger, boldly entered.

"See here!" he cried, with the air of an enraged master, "what's this I hear?"

Allen told him that he had no idea what he had heard.

"I hear you going to play me foul!"

Allen asked:

"You're going back on me?"

"In what way?"

"You said you'd support me."

"I heard it. It's the general rumor."

"General rumor is false, then," was the firm answer.

"I want to understand, Mr. Allen Gray," roared the enraged Simmons, bringing his fist down with emphasis on the desk, "that if you go back on me—don't support me, as you promised you would, I'll bring every thing I know in your way. I made you my agent, I'll be damned through the teeth. Yes, sir, I'll take you from within—lived you right up to 't' o' the dirt, and just as 'it' got 'em' made out of 'it, by the Lord 'er' grace, back on me. I won't stand it. Why, if it hadn't a been for me what would you have been—nothing!"

It is not pleasant to be reminded that we are under obligations to some person for our existence and prosperity. Allen Gray was no exception as to become offended. He jumped to his feet, his eyes flashing fire.

had the presumption to deny owing any of his present wealth to the assistance of his benefactor. He was so ungrateful as to threaten to kick his benefactor out of the office if he did not become a civil man.

"I said I would give you my support," he concluded, "and so I will when the proper time comes, unless you exasperate me into breaking my promise; but I am determined not to be driven into making a fool of myself."

"Why don't you show your hand, then, if you are so good?" asked the impatient Simmons.

"It's not time to show my hand yet, I'm entirely too early, and you are making a donkey of yourself by insisting on it."

"Well," growled Simmons, pulling on his soft felt hat, preparatory to going, "when the time comes you've got to show your hand."

CHAPTER VIII. SOMETHING DEMOCRATIC.

"How'd you do to-day, Mr. Gray?" asked Toney Barnes, entering the editor's office a few days after the events in the last chapter.

"Rather tired; be seated," Allen answered, casting a suspicious look at a ponderous roll under Toney's arm.

"I thought I would bring you a story," he said, with a triumphant smile. "I heard you was going to use one of Miss Hopkins' novels, so I thought I'd bring you something worth publishing, if you must have a novel."

Allen assured him that he was in no need of any thing of the kind, and had never for a moment entertained a thought of publishing Miss Hopkins' story.

"Not going to publish it?" cried the amazed Toney. "Why, it's all over the town and country, too, that you intend running her novel as a serial in the Western Republic."

"It is a mistake."

"I thought so. Notin' she writes is fit to be in print," said Toney, somewhat acrimoniously. "Says she used to contribute to Harper, but I guess 'twas to their waste basket."

"The number of waste basket contributors is much greater than those whose papers are published."

"Yes, I suppose so; but no one likes to write for the editor's waste basket; it don't usually pay," returned Toney. "But let me read you a few chapters of 'The Bloody Knife, or the Wild Witch of the Sanctor Border.'"

"It would not be worth while, Toney, for all our space is engaged. Every inch that can be spared from news will be devoted to advertisements."

"Who wants to read advertisements?" said Toney, with a look of disgust.

"They're invaluable to country newspapers. They bring in considerable money, and without them we could hardly exist."

"I suppose it's money and not talent you want," sarcastically returned the author.

Allen smiled, and then in a very calm manner proceeded to explain that this is a very practical world, and one could not conduct business without doing so on business principles. His story might be very good, and just what some other publisher wanted, who was willing to pay a good price for it, but it was useless to him.

"A dealer in dry-goods wants to buy dry-goods, and can not be induced to purchase potatoes, no matter how good the quality or how cheap they may be offered him. No matter how good your serial may be, I can not use it."

Toney's disappointment was considerably alleviated by the knowledge that Miss Hopkins' story had been rejected also. After the political campaign was over, the editor thought he might possibly be able to use a serial, and if he found himself in such a position, would be pleased to look at Toney's manuscript.

Gathering up that ponderous roll, the disappointed author left the office with a sigh. He was not the first, nor will he be the last, author to have signs of disappointment. Oh, you hard-hearted publishers, what a day's account will yours be, when all the sighs and tears of disappointed authors are arrayed against you on that final day!

A day or two later, while Allen was struggling between an article for the up-building of Turley's Point and the mystery of the great stone house on the hill, he heard a noisy step at his side and, looking up, saw Mr. Strong.

"I'm not arguing to stand it," cried Strong, angrily.

"As mildly as he could, the country editor asked for an explanation."

"You're laboring under a grave misapprehension, making a great effort to do your duty. When the time comes for you to make your announcement."

"I understand. Well, if you're going to stand true to me, it's all right, but if you go back on me, I'm agree to knock the props right out from under you, an' let 'em fall hard enough to break yer own neck; now we understand one another, don't we?"

"I think so."

"Very well, good-day."

"Good morning, sir."

Although pledges had been renewed, and the ambitious candidate for sheriff had been reassured, it was evident that he was not fully satisfied. Both himself and Tom Simmons were suspicious; unconsciously judging all men by their own standard, they were suspicious of every body. Each feared that some powerful influence, that great unknown power which politicians carry about with them, would be brought to bear upon the editor to alienate him.

They watched each other with hawk-like eyes, and one never went to the printing office that the other did not notice him, and at once surmise that he had come to buy off the editor. Each had a vague belief that the other was to be an opponent for the office to which he himself aspired. That they should be candidates for different offices never entered into the mind of either.

Allen Gray was not one to give up a mystery unsolved. Having fallen in love with the young lady at the mysterious house, he was fully determined on a solution to the mystery which seemed clouding her life and crushing all her hopes. Notwithstanding she had urged him for his sake and her own to keep away from the stone mansion with Mr. Strong, he would not turn his back before he started, and the moon, which had grown so old it would not shine until late in the night, would give him no aid.

The front part of the house was dark and silent as if it had been deserted for years. This time he ventured up to the great stone steps and gazed through the iron window up the house, which was composed of flat, dressed stones. A fountain was on each side of the path, but there were no signs of a living creature could be discovered, nor from any of those great, deep windows was there to be seen a single ray of light.

"I will go completely around the house," thought Allen, "and more critically examine it than I have ever done."

On the east, west and north sides of the house the walls were black boards standing upright. On his tour around the grounds, Allen frequently halted to peep through

crack in the wall, but could make no new discovery. Slight clouds almost completely obscuring the starlight, the night had already grown very dark. In places where the tall oaks grew close to the wall, it had already become so dark that Allen was forced to grope his way.

At last he reached the rear gate, which was made of thick oak boards, so close together as to be more of a door than a gate. He tried it and found it locked. There was a crack at one side of it, through which he had a good view of the garden, and rear of the house. It looked like some gigantic fortress rising up in the darkness before him, with only a solitary light dimly shining from one of the windows.

Was it a spirit of reckless adventure or some unknown impulse which prompted him to scale the wall? He was active, strong and bold, and the feat required but a moment's time.

When he touched the ground he half believed that he was on enchanted ground. He never stopped to think that he was an intruder who was endangering his life by coming here; though a feeling of superstitious awe, which he fought manfully to resist, kept creeping over him.

For a moment he paused under the very trees where he had seen the object of his affections bathed in tears. To him it was halcyon ground.

"Oh, Bertha, Bertha, are you still miserable?" he asked himself, fixing his eyes on the gleamy old castle-like house. He was inside the wall almost before he knew it, and did not find it very difficult to induce himself to go quite up to the house and try to learn something of its inmates. He followed a path leading through a garden, under some leafy bowers, until he came to the rear of that immense structure, where he had seen the girl bathing in tears.

In one of the basement windows he now saw a second light. It was a very dim light, and could not be seen a few yards from the building. Allen supposed it was a light used by some of the servants engaged in their household duties. Though he listened long and carefully, no sound, not even the ticking of a clock, could be heard. Long he stood gazing through the basement window down into the dimly-lighted room.

His perseverance received its reward at last. A pale, ghostlike form in an iron white robe glided across the room. It made no noise nearer than a feather being wafted across the floor by the breath of a playful child.

Despite his skepticism on supernatural questions, Allen felt cold chills running up his spine, while his hair seemed to almost stand upon its ends. That light became paler and more ghost-like, and he could hardly believe he was not gazing upon beings of another world. Spell-bound he stood gazing at that mystic figure gliding as noiselessly about the room as if it floated upon air. He put his hand upon the window which was half above and half below the surface of the ground, and found it protected by iron bars, effectually preventing ingress or egress.

"The house is a prison," thought Allen. The old battle could not have looked more grim and terrible than that house on this dark night.

He went to another window which he also found barred, but it was so intensely dark within that he could at first see nothing. As his eyes became more accustomed to the gloom, he made out an object, that seemed moving about within. Was it man or beast? Slowly it drew nearer and nearer to the window, until a pair of great hollow eyes seemed gazing into his face. Was it man or monster? Never had he seen such a face, never beheld such blazing eyes, as now gazed at him from the darkness of that mysterious chamber. Frozen with a strange, unknown horror, the adventurer stood gazing at that face.

Suddenly a wild, demoniacal laugh seemed to shake the old building to its foundation stones. The spell which chained Allen was broken, and he started back with a half-suppressed exclamation of terror.

CHAPTER IX. CHANGING THE SCENERY.

Despite all his courage and all his skepticism in ghosts, Allen Gray was so overcome with terror that he shrank from the window. That horrible creature that glared at him through the iron bars could not be human.

He had run across the lawn in the garden before he could collect his senses, and he remembered where he was. He was hastening through the garden when he discovered a figure in white entering a summer house. Allen came to an abrupt halt. On that figure glided until it had disappeared inside the summer house. Then issued therefrom a low, muffled voice, sweeter by far than the fairy's shell, in a plaintive tone. It was the enchanted boatman, he drew nearer to listen. The air was warm to him, and the words being in French, he could not understand them.

The singer scarce spoke above a whisper, yet each note was distinct and clear. His fair voice was in a moment, and he stood thrilled with pleasure at sounds that familiar voice. The fair singer had recognized as Bertha, and he determined not to go away without another attempt, at least, to have an interview with her.

"Oh, Bertha, Bertha! if I could only take you from this prison and make you happy, I should feel that that my work in life was accomplished!"

He reached the summer house, and fearing that an abrupt entrance might frighten her, he went to the rear and halted within a few feet of where the beautiful singer sat. She ceased singing, and a sigh escaping her lips, she turned to him.

"How was it to make himself known? Even while he was pondering on that matter she rose from her seat and came out at the rear door. The clouds which had obscured the faint starlight at this moment rolled away, and the features of both the singer and astonished girl became quickly distinguished.

She stopped and gazed at him for a moment in silent amazement. Any other girl would have shrieked, swooned or fled at his sudden apparition, but Bertha was no ordinary personage.

"Why did you come here?" she asked, in a sad, reproachful manner. "I warned you not to venture under penalty of death into these grounds, under penalty of death: why do you visit in disobeying me?"

Allen was for several moments unable to answer, because he had no reasonable excuse to make. At last he said:

"Do not reproach me, Miss Collins, for I assure you that it was no morbid curiosity that brought me."

"Could you understand the danger in which you place yourself by coming here?" said the pretty girl, taking a few steps toward him, "you would not do so. It is death to us both to be discovered here."

Allen Gray was only deeper plunged into this dark mystery. He was speechless, his brain seemed stupefied, and he was incapable of thinking. He stood dumb, amazed and almost as pallid as the girl before him.

"She came into the room, and she spoke to me in a cautious undertone that could not be heard a dozen paces away, said: 'Go away, Mr. Gray; go at once, and never come near me again if you value your life.'"

"Will you go with me to the gate?" he asked.

"I give you my sacred promise that I will," said Allen, earnestly.

He took the arm of the trembling girl within his own, and in silence they walked to the gate. Here they halted, both casting anxious glances at the great old house which rose up so gloomily before them. The relief of both all was quiet, and there was no one in the yard.

"Go, go," said Bertha, eagerly. Though speaking in a whisper, her voice trembled with passion and fear. "It would be fatal for you to be discovered here; it would be your ruin—death—"

"She became choked with sobs, and for a moment was silent."

"Bertha," said Allen, his voice strangely calm, "you are in great distress—what is it?"

"Oh, do not ask," she answered, continuing to sob. "Leave me to my misery and eternal doom. I am the most wretched of humans, my fate is sealed, and it is useless for others to attempt to aid me. Go away—go away!"

"But I will not leave you alone in this distress. What is it? Tell me that I may help you."

"I can not, dare not tell."

"Bertha, you are miserable here!"

A sob was the only answer.

"Let me take you away from this terrible place."

"No, no, no! not for the world. Do not think of that. I can not leave—I am held here by bands stronger than iron."

"How long have you lived here?"

"Not more than eight months—though it seems so many ages."

Another moment's awful silence followed, and then Allen, becoming desperate, said:

"Bertha, I would aid you if I could—I would give my life if necessary—"

"Hush—hush—" she quickly interrupted, seizing his arm. "Do not tell what you say. Oh, why don't you go! Go in Heaven's name, and let us forget that we ever met. I—I am doomed, and why should you wish to drag both yourself and myself down to ruin?" and, completely overcome, she buried her beautiful face in her hands.

Dazed, bewildered and confused, Allen Gray staggered and caught at the wall for support. What was he to do, how could he remove the burden from this object of his affections? He seemed to realize that she was lost, lost to him forever.

A voice at this moment in the direction of the great old house came both to start, and the beautiful girl again seizing his arm in a grasp that trembled, in a terrified whisper, said:

"Go, go at once, before it is too late. Go, go, or we will both be undone."

Nimbly as an acrobat, Allen leaped the wall, and with his head in a whirl, and a thousand conflicting thoughts swaying his heart, returned to the village.

The mystery surrounding the old stone house and its inmates seemed every moment growing more complicated. Allen Gray had always prided himself on having a great deal of insight into human character, and fancied that he could read people as open books, and here was one who baffled all his skill. Who was this Bertha? Her face and her name were Anglo-Saxon, but her education and manners French. That she spoke the language fluently and might be mistaken for a native Frenchwoman he did not doubt, yet when conversing in English there was not even the slightest foreign accent on her tongue. She was an enigma, and the more he strove to solve the problem, the more difficult it became of solution.

Another sleepless night, another light breakfast, and again at his office with a heavy heart and aching head. He was struggling manfully to fix his mind upon his business before him, when the door softly opened and a farmer entered.

"The editor, ain't he?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I fished up a little piece about our neighborhood for you to print in your paper. If ye use it I think I kin git ye some signers out our way."

"Where do you live?"

"Down on Billy's Creek," answered the farmer.

He was an unpretentious author, wearing his pants in his thick cowhide boots, was in his shirt sleeves, and wore a soft broad-brimmed hat on his head. His "galuses" were home made, and he had all the peculiar characteristics of a demagogue of Billy's Creek.

Allen took the roll of MS., and after much trouble unrolled and smoothed it out so it could be read.

An amateur manuscript may usually be recognized by being rolled so tightly that the editor's patience is exhausted before he can get it in shape to read. Frequently the manuscript is rejected without being read for this very reason. The manuscript contained only a few news items, as follows:

"Mr. Evans has not seen any thing from Jones for two weeks."

"A fine article on the new crop is in the hands of the editor."

"The school committee have decided to hold a school on the 15th."

"The citizens of the village are holding a meeting on the 20th."

"The countryman was gone, and Allen was striving, by toil, to drive away the sweet, sad image of that beautiful face which had made such a wonderful impression on him, when the ambitious politician, Tom Simmons, who had been waiting for an opportunity to enter, entered. No thunder-cloud was over darker than Simmons' countenance.

"Be seated, Mr. Simmons," said the editor, calmly and politely.

"No, sir; I don't want to set down," growled the politician, nervously fingering the newspaper advertising plates that lay on a table near by.

Very well knowing that a storm was coming, Allen determined to meet it boldly, and continued writing away at his desk.

"What a beautiful day!"

"I guess so, if it is not so personal as to give offense to any one."

"Oh, no, no, it's just all a joke, that's all."

"Are you a subscriber for the paper?"

"No, but I believe I'll sign for it. It's one dollar and fifty cents per annum."

"But how much is it for a year?"

"One dollar and fifty cents."

The citizen from Billy's Creek had in only fifty cents, but he promised to bring in the balance next week, and a country editor very seldom refuses credit, especially when he gets one third cash.

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