

THE MILL OWNER

BY E. R. PUNSHON
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SYNOPSIS: Damaris Ellwood, a young Englishwoman, resolves to hide her identity and live for a time among the employes of her large cotton mills in order that she may learn to understand the working people and appreciate the trials they are forced to undergo. She is an orphan, and has for companions at her home an uncle, Joseph Ellwood, and Mrs. Mitchinson, a chaperon. There is a close understanding between the uncle and the chaperon, and while they openly oppose the girl's plans it is evident that they are not averse to her losing herself for a time. Before she goes, however, there is a mysterious burglary, the evident intent of which is to secure some secret family papers which have been closely guarded since the death of Miss Ellwood's father.

Once Miss Ellwood leaves her home her attempt to hide herself is only too successful.

(CONTINUED FROM LAST WEEK.)

CHAPTER XVIII

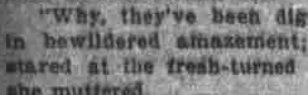
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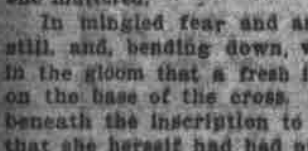
HE accomplished her journey without any trouble, and arrived in due time at her destination. It was only just as she was alighting that it occurred to her that as this was Saturday afternoon the lawyers' offices would be closed. Clifford's advice still weighed with her enough to make her decide she would see Mr. White before appearing at Ardingley House. For one thing, Mr. White would be able to send a maid home for suitable apparel, and Mrs. White would be able to lend her a room to perform her toilet in.



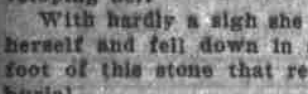
His dearest path to the Whites lay through the churchyard, and as she was crossing it she went a little out of her way so as to pass near the spot in which her father lay buried. The grave only distinguished from those around by the greater beauty of the flowers on it. The marble cross was no more elaborate than those on many other graves around, and there was no elaboration of ornament. For Damaris did not think it seemly to endeavor to outdo into the solemnities of death the trivial human distinctions of wealth and rank. But now, as she approached the grave something strange in its appearance at once struck her.



"Why, they've been digging there," she muttered, in bewildered amazement; "it's been dug up." She stared at the fresh-turned earth. "Why—what—what?" she muttered.



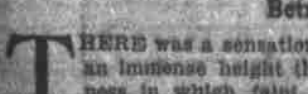
He inhaled fear and amazement she went nearer still, and bending down, was able to make out even in the gloom that a fresh inscription had been chiseled on the base of the cross. This is what she read just beneath the inscription to the memory of her father that she herself had had put there:



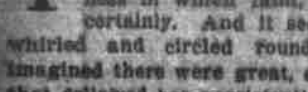
Also lies buried here
DAMARIS ELLWOOD,
Only and beloved daughter of the above, who, lamented by all who knew her, passed away in the flower of her youth at the age of 21, on Thursday, October 14.



And then followed a text that Damaris dashed eyes took in without comprehending.



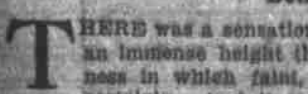
"Thursday, October 14," she muttered. "Six weeks ago! What did I die six weeks ago, then?" and it seemed to her that something cold, like an iron hand, clutched at her heart to stop its beating, and that from the ground a great darkness rose and spread, enveloping her.



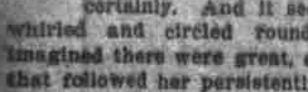
With hardly a sigh she seemed to collapse in upon herself and fell down in a swoon like death at the foot of this stone that recorded her own death and burial.

CHAPTER XIX

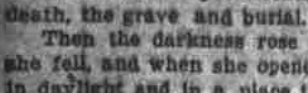
Betrayal



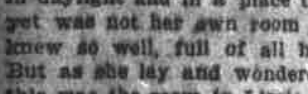
THERE was a sensation of falling, of falling as from an immense height through an interminable darkness in which faint, flickering lights played uncertainly. And it seemed, too, that dark figures whirled and circled round about, so that Damaris imagined there were great, evil birds with flapping wings that followed her persistently and clamored in her ear of death, the grave and burial.



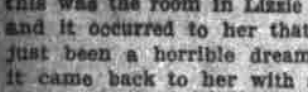
Then the darkness rose again, as if to meet her as she fell, and when she opened her eyes once more it was in daylight and in a place that was familiar to her, and yet was not her room in Ardingley House that she knew so well, full of all her own personal belongings. But as she lay and wondered it came back to her that this was the room in Lizzie Fears' house at Broadmoor, and it occurred to her that all that had happened had just been a horrible dream. Yet, as she remembered, it came back to her with an impression of reality not to be denied, and she seemed to see again that weird and grisly inscription cut on the white marble of the cross above her father's grave.



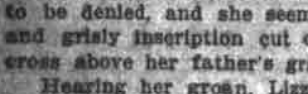
Teaching her groan, Lizzie came to the bedside and looked down at her anxiously.



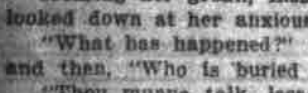
"What has happened?" Damaris murmured faintly, and then, "Who is buried there?" she asked.



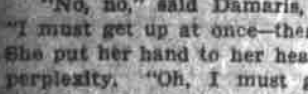
"Thou muona talk, lass," said Lizzie, gently; "thou wert took ill yesterday. But rest today, and maybe to-morrow thou'll be all right again."



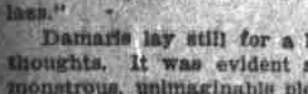
"No, no," said Damaris, with a feverish impatience, "I must get up at once—there are things I must see to."



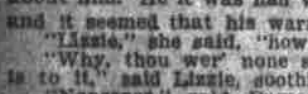
She put her hand to her head with a gesture of fear and perplexity. "Oh, I must get up at once," she murmured, and she thought that a voice whispered in her ear, "Betrayed."



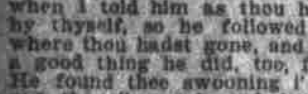
"Tomorrow," said Lizzie, soothingly. "Tomorrow, lass."



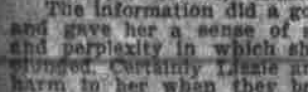
Damaris lay still for a little and tried to collect her thoughts. It was evident she was the victim of some monstrous, unimaginable plot. Who was it that told her she was betrayed? Clifford—a man named Clifford—a man with kind and honest eyes and a look of strength about him. He had been warned her she was betrayed, and it seemed that his warning was true enough.



"Lizzie," she said, "how is it I am back here?"



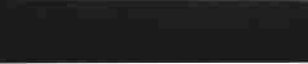
"Why, thou wert none so well, lass, that's all there is to it," said Lizzie, soothingly.



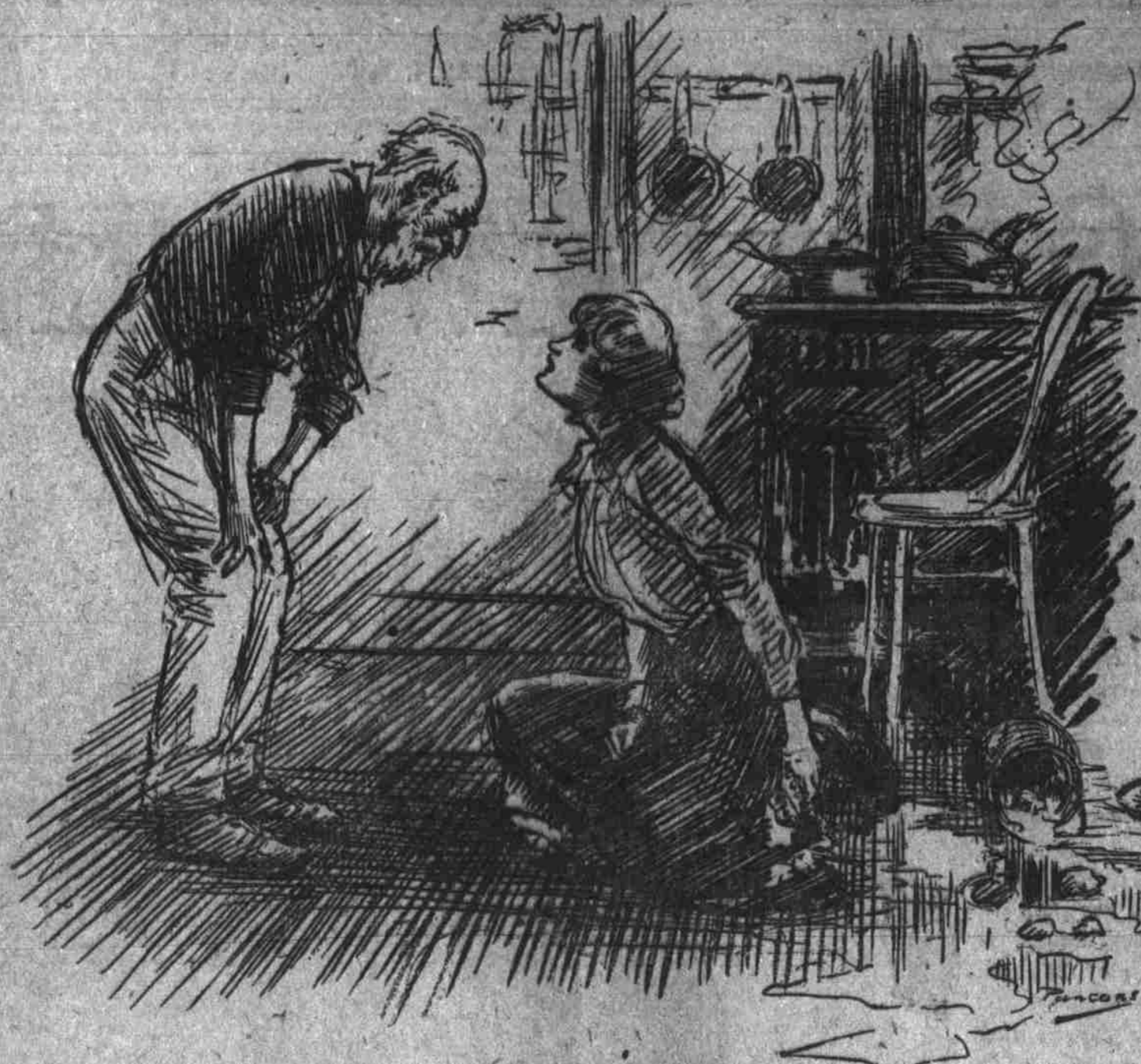
"Nonsense," said Damaris sharply. "I went away, I left Broadmoor. How is it I am back here?"



"Why, Lizzie answered, "neither was proper scared when I told him as thou hadst gone off to Manchester by thyself, as he followed thee there, and found out where thou hadst gone, and he went after thee, lass, and a good thing he did, too, for thou hadst broken down. He found thee swooning in the street, poor lass, as he put thee in a cab and fetched thee home. Thou'rt better soon, doctor says."



"Has the doctor been to see me?" Damaris asked.



"Of course, no one can keep you here against your will."

and from the very beginning fight that terrible inscription over her father's grave. She said:

"Lizzie, there's something I want to tell you."

"Aye," said Lizzie encouragingly, "what is it, lass?"

"Lizzie," said Damaris, "I came here pretending to be your sister, but I am not. I am Damaris Ellwood. You have heard of the Ellwood Mills, perhaps? Well, I am the Miss Ellwood to whom those mills belong."

"Eh, think o' that, now," said Lizzie, pityingly.

"Don't you understand?" asked Damaris sharply.

"Aye, aye, I understand all to recks," answered Lizzie. She approached the bed with a bowl of soup in her hands. "Just thar' sup this," she said, "an' in morn' thou'll feel better, maybe."

"But I mean it," cried Damaris, "it's the truth. I am Miss Ellwood—Damaris Ellwood—of the Ellwood Mills—I only came here pretending to be your sister so as to find out what it's like to be a mill girl, but really I am Miss Ellwood."

"Eh, oh, poor lass," said Lizzie, wiping away a tear. "I allus thought as thou wert a bit queer, but I never dreamed as it would take thee so bad as this way."

"Oh, you are silly," cried Damaris in great exasperation.

"Eh, my dear," said poor Lizzie, very honestly and simply, "I could almost wish I wer, as long as thou weren't."

"But don't you hear what I say?—that I am only pretending to be your sister, so as to find out how mill girls live?"

"Of course, a very nice thing to know, too," said Lizzie soothingly.

Damaris lay back in the bed and looked at Lizzie in considerable perplexity. It had never occurred to her that she could have any difficulty in establishing her identity. It was quite a new idea to her, and by no means a pleasant one. Yet she saw that Lizzie plainly regarded the statement that she was Miss Ellwood as a matter of course, and she added thoughtfully, "The lives of the mill girls are merely a piece of wild delirium. Lizzie probably would never be able to understand why any one would pretend to be a mill girl, but I am a subject so well known to herself. Fortunately, Damaris thought, every one could not be so stupid as poor Lizzie, so that after all she could not meet with much real difficulty. At home, for instance, there were hundreds of people who would know her at once. Yes, it would all be simple enough, and yet she remembered, with a chilly shiver, how Clifford had said to her, "You are a traitor."

For the present she gave up further attempts at arguing with Lizzie, who, after a time, thinking she was asleep, went out of the room. Damaris could hear plainly her shrill whisper at the bottom of the stairs and Mr. Fears' gruff tones in answer.

"Eh, poor lass," Lizzie said as she got to the bottom of the stairs, "if you're not Polly's wanderin' about, I'll be bound to say she's a bit queer."

"Who does she say she is?" came Fears' gruff voice.

"Why, Miss Ellwood, o' all 'th' folk 't' world—Miss Ellwood, o' they great Ellwood Mills."

Damaris sat upright in bed with excitement, and she could hear the door open and the key turned in the lock.

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"Of course, no one can keep you here against your will."

what with the very faulty reproduction and the difference in attire, the likeness was certainly not remarkable. Damaris flung it down impatiently, and went on to read in the next issue a long account of the funeral.

To Damaris it was a grisly and uncanny experience enough to sit there and read the detailed account of her own funeral. She could have imagined that she was, in fact, lying in her grave; she almost could have persuaded herself she felt the earth rattling on her coffin lid. At times the paper in her hand trembled so that she could not read. A weird feeling of unreality enveloped her, so that she almost thought that what the paper recorded must be the fact, and sitting here reading about it the delusion. The account was complete. She read the names of her friends who had attended as mourners, Joseph Ellwood was mentioned as the principal mourner. There was a long list of the flowers that had been sent, including some magnificent wreaths from different groups of those who worked in her mills. With a sensation as though her heart might stop beating at any moment, with a feeling as though a deadly coldness were spreading through her whole body, Damaris read on, and found nothing misleading to make her doubt the reality of this ghastly ceremony. There was even a report of the sermon preached by the vicar, who had known her all her life, with its rather conventional references to the "bright young life cut off in its prime" and "to the sense of loss felt by all alike."

When Damaris found that the text was "It is well with the child," she had to put the paper down and struggle with herself to check a fit of screaming and laughing that had felt was imminent.

"But I mustn't go into hysterics now," she said to herself, and fought hard for her self-control.

"How don't feel, lass?" Lizzie asked anxiously.

"Oh, this is all perfect madness!" Damaris exclaimed.

"Aye, so 'tis, lass," agreed Lizzie, with an air of some relief, "though I ardy' oped thee would come to find it out so soon. But get back into bed, and sleep 'till thou'rt all right, the morn'."

But Damaris did not sleep. Now that she had fought down her temporary inclination to hysteria, she felt that the crisis in which she found herself needed immediate action, and she felt that it was an extraordinary, so utterly unaccountable, stirred her to take immediate steps. And ever she seemed to hear whispering in her ear the words: "You have been betrayed."

"I must go out at once," she said. "Don't talk to me, Lizzie, or try to argue; there is more in this than I think you understand. I must dress and go straight, and I'll be back in an hour."

Lizzie, looking rather frightened, hesitated, and then ran downstairs.

"Fears," she said anxiously, "our Polly's worse than ever. New she's about Miss Ellwood's funeral she says she run go to 't' police about it."

"The police?" exclaimed Mr. Fears. "Poor, creased lass, she's not like stirring as it's suddy, but tell him how had she be."

Damaris heard Lizzie cross the room and go out. A key turned in the lock, more ominous than that of a key turned in the lock.

"But that is nonsense; they cannot keep me here against my will," said Damaris to herself, crushing down her fears that some of the key turned made rise up in her heart.

Slowly she went down the stairs into the kitchen, where she found Mr. Fears alone.

"Mr. Fears," she said, "you at least know perfectly well that I am not Polly Fears or your daughter."

He looked at her without answering, but something ominous and threatening in his eyes filled her with fresh pain.

"Open the door," she said, in a voice all her efforts could not make steady, and crossing to the door she found it, as she had expected, locked and the key removed.

"Best stay here," he said, looking at her darkly. "Keep me against my will, I warn you, you are playing a dangerous game. I shall take care to see that all concerned are properly punished."

"You are my lass, Polly," he said, "and you're on your head."

She was afraid, but she would not show it.

"Open the door," she said, "or I'll smash the window and get out. I'll help you. Are you so foolish as to imagine that you can keep me here against my will?"

"Eh, no," he answered, "of course not. That's quite impossible, I know." He turned and lifted the lid from a pot of potatoes boiling on the fire behind him. "Of course, no one can keep you against your will," he repeated slowly, "but won't you wait 'till doctor comes?"

"No," said Damaris, "I don't want to see the doctor. Open the door at once," and though she could see no possibility of danger, she was yet aware of something deeply threatening in his manner.

"The key's on the mantelpiece. If you will have it," he said, shrugging his shoulders, and then, turning his back to her, he again looked at the potatoes boiling on the fire behind him. "They're nearly done," he remarked.

Damaris came up quickly and took the key from the mantelpiece.

"It's your own fault you know," said Fears, and by a dangerous movement he stepped quickly backward, he managed somehow to upset the whole pan of boiling water and potatoes right on Damaris' foot.

She fell to the ground with a loud cry of pain, and, bending over her, he said, grinning,

"Of course, no one can keep you here against your will."

CHAPTER XX

The Web of Circumstances

THERE was a pain of the heels and the sudden shock of it, added to the weakness from which she had not yet recovered, were too much for Damaris. Once more a great darkness enveloped her, and again she felt her senses leaving her, and again she fell. When she came to herself, she was in bed again, and bending over her was a strange man with a brown

beard and eyeglasses. She looked at him dazedly and became conscious of a pain in her foot, then she murmured faintly:

"Why, where am I now?"

"Eh, she's o'cooming round," said a voice Damaris knew was Lizzie's.

"She's asking where she is," observed the man with the eyeglasses.

"Eh," said Lizzie, "this morn' she wer' worse nor that. When she coom round she wanted to know where she wer' buried. It fair gave me the creeps to listen to 'er."

Damaris half raised herself in the bed.

"Are you the doctor?" she asked.

He nodded.

"How do you feel now?" he asked.

"Never mind that," she said quickly and excitedly. "There is some dreadful conspiracy—I do not understand, but I must see a lawyer immediately and the police. Will you send them to me at once?"

"Oh, you must get better first," said the doctor gently, "and then we will discuss all that."

"But there is no time to lose," exclaimed Damaris in terror. "Why, I might be murdered, I am afraid they have persuaded people I am dead."

"Well, you are not dead, are you?" said the doctor in the same gentle tones; "so you will soon be able to show them what a mistake they were making. And you must not be afraid of being murdered. Your sister here won't let any one murder you, will you, Lizzie?"

"Nay, indeed, 't' poor lass," said Lizzie pityingly.

"Oh," said Damaris, with an impatient movement, "what could she do? Look at my foot—she scolded that on purpose."

"That will do," she said authoritatively. "But one thing I must ask you: How do you account for those letters I asked you to read?"

"Oh, I don't account for them at all," he answered. "My business is to get you all right again; then you will be able to prove your claim to be Miss Ellwood come back to life again."

She looked at him, utterly puzzled. Why did he not believe her? Was her story so extraordinary that no one would believe it? Was every one so satisfied that Damaris Ellwood was dead and in her grave that she would never be able to make people think otherwise? Had this web of circumstances been spun so closely round her that she would never be able to break it? Had she in truth lost utterly her identity as Damaris Ellwood? Was she to be forced to remain as Polly Fears for the rest of her life? She was betrayed, indeed, it seemed to her, as these and a thousand other questions raced through her astonished and bewildered brain. The doctor was looking at her foot again now, and presently she said:

"Did you believe what I told you?" she asked with fierce eyes.

"My poor girl—" he began.

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