

# THE MILL OWLER

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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 SUNDAY.)

## CHAPTER XXI The Plot Thickens



TING listening to the bells calling to evening service, Damaris said to herself that her position was indeed serious and that she must think very carefully what to do next.

These around her were either in the plot against her or else really believed her mad. If she were to shriek for help till she roused the whole neighborhood, as she sometimes thought of doing, she would only be strengthening this notion of her madness. It seemed to her there was nothing for her to do but to lie still and keep as quiet as she could till her foot was better.

It is true that sometimes a fresh fear came over her, a terror of what else her unknown enemies might be planning against her. The man Frears, for instance, who had scolded her foot in his mind, and more desperate expedients in his mind, Damaris told herself these were foolish fears, her common sense showed her that so long as Lizzie was with her and she was being attended by a respectable medical man, no harm could come to her. No doubt Frears had just wanted to prevent her departure, and had taken his own brutal way to that end. Probably advantage was being taken of her absence to rob her in some way, but that Damaris felt she would not care much about. A few thousands stolen would not make much difference to her. Yet she never once asked herself what part in all this her uncle might be taking. The truth is that she dared not.

"Lizzie," she said, for though she tried to persuade herself she was still in no real danger, it was to Lizzie's presence that she trusted as her best safeguard. "Lizzie, you will not leave me, will you, till my foot is better?"

"Nay, lass," Lizzie promised readily, "an' they mun just manage as best they can at th' mill. Only—" she added.

"Only what?" asked Damaris sharply.

"Nay, lass," said Lizzie, "it's nowt but th' money as I'm thinking on."

Like most of her friends and acquaintances, Lizzie was more used to earning and spending than to saving. She made on an average about thirty shillings weekly—no had pay for a single woman—and she spent it as fast as she made it, but only ideas of thrifting being in her mind, she drew out and spent during the weekly "wakes" holiday. She was, therefore, in no position to face with equanimity the sudden and complete disappearance of the whole income of the house.

When Damaris understood this difficulty she was at first simply inclined to be cross and contemptuous. Having always had just as much money as she wanted, she did not quite understand what an obstacle the lack of it can be, nor had her few weeks of playing at poverty given her any real insight into the strange power of money. But one or two remarks Lizzie dropped about the cost of food rather staggered Damaris, who had not hitherto realized that there was much connection between food and money.

Still, though she did perceive the difficulty, she could not take it very seriously when she remembered how much wealth she was really the owner of. She even managed to sleep pretty well until in the middle of the night she was awakened by some sound. She opened her eyes and looked, and saw by the light of a candle he held above his head, staring at her round the open door, the dreadful and ferocious face of that big and powerfully built man, whose countenance she had first seen on the platform of the station on the day of her arrival at Broadmoor, and whose name she had just remembered from one of the two men who had robbed her of her lock.

Loud and piercing rang out Damaris' shriek of terror, and in a moment Lizzie was out of bed, though but before candle and face were alike swiftly withdrawn.

"It was a man, a man," Damaris shrieked, "there was a man looking in at the door."

"Eh, lass," said Lizzie, who had now struck a light, "the door's shut—an' locked," she added, feeling it.

"But I saw him," Damaris persisted, trembling from head to foot.

"Eh, then, I'll go an' look," said Lizzie, "we want none chaps doing the like o' that."

"Oh, no, no," implored Damaris, "don't leave me alone."

"Well," said Lizzie, "I'll call up feyther."

She called him accordingly, and when she had made him understand what was the matter—it seemed he had been too sound asleep to hear Damaris' cry—he went grumblingly to look through the house. It was not a long operation, and he came back in a few minutes.

"Aye, fast," he started, "what dost bother so about a crazed lass' foolish notions?"

Lizzie looked pityingly at Damaris, who was still in a state of extreme terror, and tried to persuade her she had just suffered from some bad dream. But the impression on Damaris' mind was too vivid for that, and yet she saw that the more she declared the truth of her story the more Lizzie believed her mad. Damaris gave up the attempt presently, and Lizzie got back into bed, and was asleep immediately. But for Damaris that was impossible, and yet, even she, when the morning came, wondered if her imagination had not deceived her.

Lizzie got up at the usual time and bustled herself with housework. She brought Damaris some breakfast upstairs, and though the girl could not eat much, she was glad enough of some tea. She was falling into a light doze after it when once again she heard a faint noise—this time a new and terrible face she had seen in the middle of the night.

Terribly rang out her startled scream, and in a moment Lizzie was clattering heavily up the stairs. Clinging to her and sobbing terribly, Damaris stammered out her story, and Lizzie looked equally horrified and distressed as she listened.

"In the middle of the night she was awakened by some sound,"

she protested, "it's clean impossible. I've been about all th' time an' nobody could ha' got past w'out my seeing 'em."

"Then he must have been hiding in the other bedroom," declared Damaris.

"I'll go look," said Lizzie, and came back in a moment. "There's so one there," she said, "an' I looked under th' bed."

"He must have run downstairs then," protested Damaris, "or climbed out of the window."

"Th' window's fast," Lizzie answered, patiently, "an' feyther's sittin' in the kitchen—no chap could ha' scam down stairs w'out him knowin'. Feyther," she shouted down the stairs, "there ain't no chap passed then, has there? Our Polly says as she saw a chap lookin' at her round door."

"Our Polly's clean crazed, an' thout' it little better for listenin' to her so," grumbled Frears, surlily. "Come down, will ye! There's 'aif th' street' are asking what's to do."

This was a slight exaggeration, but there were one or two of the neighbors at the door, wanting to know what was the matter. Damaris could hear scraps of the conversation; words of pity and sympathy, and references to "lunacy" and "madness," and to some one who had recently been "looked away," being the most frequent that reached her ears. When the neighbors had finally departed, she heard Frears say gruffly:

"Summat mun be done about our Polly, Lizzie. She can't stop her shrieking till to scare all the neighbors. Besides, how art thou to manage if thou donna go to mill?"

Lizzie sighed in a very puzzled way, and then went upstairs again. As soon as she entered the room Damaris, who was still in a state of great agitation and distress, and who believed that something more dreadful and terrible than anything she had known yet must be being planned against her, exclaimed:

"Lizzie, you must get me away from here, I am not safe here. I must go at once; I dare not stop here another minute."

"Eh, now," said Lizzie, "th' folk has just been saying as 'ow thou ought to go to Prestwich, but I said as thou shouldst stay here."

"To Prestwich," repeated Damaris, puzzled for the moment.

Then it flashed upon her that Prestwich was where the public lunatic asylum was situated. For a moment she shuddered and felt her blood run cold, while her tongue seemed to go dry and furred and to stick unpleasantly to the roof of her mouth. But as the idea grew more familiar to her she began to see that it offered certain advantages. In a large public institution she would at least be safe from any attempted violence; and she had sufficient faith in her own sanity and strength of will to be certain that, though she were accepted there as a lunatic, she would soon be able to show that she was nothing of the sort. Then it flashed upon her that an old schoolfellow of hers had recently married and gone to live in the neighborhood. This lady, Mrs. Wells now, would be able to testify to her identity. Then, too, Damaris remembered that a curate from their parish at home had only a short time before been appointed to a living just outside Prestwich. Both Mrs. Wells and this clergyman could be summoned at once, and would be able to prove who she was.

"Yes, yes," she said eagerly, "I'll go to Prestwich, but you must go with me, Lizzie—promise me that I dare not go alone or with any one but you—promise you will go with me and not leave me till I am safely there."

"Of course, I'll go w' thee," said Lizzie gently, and then went away and had a long consultation with her father, who urged so many good reasons for "oor Polly," as they both called her, being sent to the asylum to recover, that Lizzie at last agreed to the idea.

Then she went back to Damaris, and told her that the doctor was coming to see her again, and would bring another with him, intent on her new plan, and feeling that she was not safe from moment to moment so long as she remained under this roof, Damaris made no attempt to discuss her sanity with the two medical men when they appeared. The only point she insisted on was that Lizzie must accompany her, and to that every one at once agreed as being the most natural idea possible.

"What is the use of my arguing the point with you when you are so certain I am insane?" Damaris asked the two doctors, as they continued to question her. "Let me go to Prestwich, I suppose they have experts in lunacy there. They will be able to decide."

"But you still persist," said the new doctor, "that you are Miss Damaris Ellwood?"

"Of course I do," said Damaris sharply, "why ask me to repeat the fact when you do not believe it?"

"Well, you see," he remarked, "I attended Miss Ellwood's funeral a short time ago."

"A case of burial alive, then, I think," said Damaris; "surely a medical man should have protested!"

"And you think you see faces in the doorway?" continued the doctor, slightly nettled at the tone of grim contempt in which Damaris spoke.

"No, I don't," retorted Damaris, "but I have seen one man look at me round the door twice over. Therefore, I do not feel safe here, and I wish Lizzie to take me to Prestwich."

"Delusions of personal identity," said the first doctor, shaking his head; "delusions of persecution, and hallucinations of faces—I think I am insane, eh?"

"Have you ever noticed anything queer about your sister before?" the second doctor asked Lizzie.

"Eh, yes," said Lizzie, wiping away a tear, "her ways were that queer as never was—I never knew nothing like her ways and her manner of talkin'—but a heart of gold, doctor, she has, and I'm sure I never thought as 'twould come to this."

The doctors went away then, and apparently signed some papers in the kitchen; and presently Lizzie returned

to tell Damaris everything was settled, and a cab would come to take her to the station at 3 o'clock.

"They've sent a telegram," said Lizzie, with another tear or two, "an' all will be ready for thee, an' they'll be better soon; till thou art I'll come see thee every Sunday."

"I don't think I shall be there long," said Damaris with a smile, relieved to think the end of her troubles was now so near.

But at 3 o'clock there was no cab, and a messenger sent for it discovered that there had been a misunderstanding, and it had been thought the cab was only required for the next day. However, it would come at 4, in time for the next train. But at 4 a messenger came to say that at the last moment the only horse in the stable had fallen lame. So the next train was missed as well, and there was not another till 5.6.

There seemed nothing that Damaris could do, and yet she had an uncomfortable feeling that all these delays had not been quite accidental—that they had a purpose, and that purpose to delay departure till darkness had set in. She began to feel afraid again, and then reflected that she was safe enough with Lizzie, and that in any case no harm could come to her during a short railway journey. Her foot seemed much better, too, and she felt that if necessity arose she would not be quite helpless.

This third time the cab turned up all right. Damaris, refusing Mr. Frears' aid with a shudder of mistrust and fear she did not trouble to hide, hobbled downstairs and settled herself in a corner of the cab. Lizzie got in after her, and Mr. Frears, bare-headed and in his shirt sleeves—details that reassured Damaris, since they showed he had no intention of accompanying them—contented himself after his late repulse by superintending everything from the door. But when all was ready he came forward.

"Thee mun be off now," he remarked, "hast got th' money for th' tickets?" he added to Lizzie through the window.

"Aye," said Lizzie, and felt in her pocket. "Eh, now," she said in surprise, "if I hanna left my purse behind, an' I could ha' swore as I had it."

"I think I saw it on th' table," remarked Mr. Frears carelessly.

"Some o' these days I shall lose my head for sure," commented Lizzie in great disgust.

She jumped out of the cab and went into the house. It was all so simple and so natural that even Damaris had no suspicion, as wrapped in a big white shawl Lizzie had lent her, she reclined in the corner of the cab. Then in a moment it had happened, and she knew she was again betrayed. For with a leap like a tiger's, his eyes sparkling, his clenched teeth showing white between his parted lips, Frears sprang into the cab, banged the door of it behind him, and with one hand snatched both Damaris', while the other he clapped across her mouth so that she could not utter a cry.

Immediately the cab started off at a quick rate, and by an intuition of despair, as she struggled vainly against a strength ten times greater than her own, Damaris knew how Lizzie stood distracted and amazed on the threshold of the house, and how the driver of the cab was that man of the fierce and evil countenance who had twice peered at her round the door of her room.

follow you. There'll be search parties, but we shan't 'ave 'idden you well, and you won't be found for long 'enough. When you are, there'll be no telling what's 'appened; and the jury'll bring it in 'Death from misadventure,' and no one'll trouble any more. No one ean't even 'ave suspicions, except Lizzie, and who cares what she thinks so long as she daren't say nothin'?"

Damaris looked up through the glass of the door to where the stars shone so far above, and wondered abstractedly if it had ever been the lot of any other human being to hear the details of her taking off planned out with such callous care and cruel thought. She asked herself in her heart if it could be that her God had forsaken her.

"Just one point," she observed, as if some one else spoke, "you'll be asked why you took me up here. It was arranged Lizzie was to take me to Prestwich by train."

"Not a bit of it," he answered. "I spoke to the doctors myself, and they agreed as you had better be took in a cab for fear o' seeing more faces at doors and such like. Prestwich ain't so far by road, you know. It was to make you willing to go, since we knew we didn't dare put you through it while you was in the house with the doctor and Lizzie fussing about, that Bill came and poked at you round the door."

Frears stopped to laugh at the recollection. "It was fine, that," he said, "first time, he just dodged back and hid in my room; second time, he dodged down the stairs and out of the back, while Lizzie was with you. Of course, I swore no one could have gone by me without me seeing 'em, what was true enough, and they took it down like butter. I tell you, my dear, you're safe as a mouse in a trap."

"Safe as a mouse in a trap," echoed the man at the door, speaking for the first time and in a voice as brutal as his appearance.

"Your arrangements appear very complete," said Damaris. "It seems to me there is only one point you have forgotten."

"What is that?" asked Frears, quickly and rather uneasily.

"The existence of God," she answered.

"Oh," he said, and stared. Then he laughed and the man at the door growled out a blasphemy. "Eh, I've reckoned without God all my life," said Frears, "and I ain't done so badly."

"Well, well," said Damaris mildly, "one never knows; but why are you telling me all this?"

"Because," answered Frears with hesitation, "we don't want to put you through it if we can help it. Why should we? There's just one safe way."

"What is that?" asked Damaris, but without much hope.

"Marry him," said Frears, and jerked his head towards the silent and sinister figure of the man at the door.

Damaris did not understand. She looked at him and then at Frears.

"I don't quite follow you," she said; "marry whom?"

"Me," said the man at the door.

She turned and looked at him, understanding now,

corner where Frears held her, and she saw by the light of a street lamp in the road a man whom she knew well. It was Ostle, the detective she had had in her employment, but though she saw him she could make neither sound nor movement, so helpless was she in Frears' brutal grasp. In a moment the cab had passed, and Ostle had receded into the darkness behind. Yet hope fluttered once more warm in Damaris' breast, for now she knew a friend was near, and she supposed somehow that he had heard of her danger and had come to her rescue.

A few moments later the cab rolled close to another man, who lounged idly against a milestone with the air of one who waited. Him, too, Damaris knew, and recognized Clifford, Clifford who had warned her of her danger, Clifford who stood there now waiting to offer the help it seemed she could not implore. And then it flashed into her mind that this was the cause of Ostle's appearance here. In the rush of events, in the terror of her position, she had almost forgotten that telegram she had sent off on the previous Friday, but now she remembered it.

She could almost have laughed with the bitterness of her feelings, with appreciation of the deadly irony of the course events had taken. Here were two men near, both her friends, both ready to help her, and owing to her own action the sole thought of the one would be to seize the other and take him to prison. How strange it was that everything she had done had turned to the advantage of her enemies. By her own act she had rendered helpless the only man with power to aid her. For her own act she had thrown away all the advantages of wealth and social position that had been hers once.

"Betrayed—yes, she had betrayed Clifford, and in doing so she had betrayed herself."

It was as though a voice whispered the words in her ear; she quite thought that she heard them.

"For I love him," she said to herself with a sigh. Now that death seemed so near she felt she must be honest and true to herself. "Yes," she said to herself, "I love him. I have always loved him. It does not matter how. I wonder why I fought so hard against the idea of loving him? How silly of me," she said with an infinite self-pity, as for a little child who, in its great ignorance, had committed some grievous fault entailing lamentable and far-reaching consequences.

The next thing she knew—for she seemed to have sunk into a kind of coma—was the sudden stopping of the cab. It was very dark and lonely, and she thought that they had come to an unwhimpered place. Frears was standing up, with one hand upon the half-open door and one still pressing on her shoulder, while he muttered in a low tone to the driver standing just outside.

Damaris acted on the instant, with the swift instinct of a creature making its last effort for its life. With one swift sudden push, she sent Frears forward so heavily that his full weight came on the half-open door, which swung back beneath it, so that he stumbled out against the driver. In the momentary confusion, before the two men could disentangle themselves, Damaris sprang to the other door of the cab. She flung it open and leaped out, heedless of the pain in her foot fled away at the top of her speed, while the two men ran and allowed, shouting in a frenzy of rage and fear.

(CONTINUED NEXT SUNDAY.)



"In the middle of the night she was awakened by some sound."

Those who aimed against her life had their great safeguard in that they had first stripped her of her identity, by the aid of her own foolish actions. After a pause, Frears continued:

"Oh, it's easy enough; it only needs my 'and on your mouth for a minute or two and you'll be a dead 'un, w' I nout to show 'ow it 'appened. It's all arranged. There's more in this nor us, you know. After it's done, then we shall tell our tale as 'ow you jumped sudden-like out of the cab, while we wasn't looking, in a fit o' madness, and got away, and escaped in the darkness, spite of all we could do to

follow you. There'll be search parties, but we shan't 'ave 'idden you well, and you won't be found for long 'enough. When you are, there'll be no telling what's 'appened; and the jury'll bring it in 'Death from misadventure,' and no one'll trouble any more. No one ean't even 'ave suspicions, except Lizzie, and who cares what she thinks so long as she daren't say nothin'?"

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