

THE PRIME OF LIFE.

Oh, bless the glad sun's warmth and light!
Away, my love, we'll wander,
To where the larch shines green and bright
Against the dim wood yonder.

A CLEW BY WIRE
Or, An Interrupted Current.

BY HOWARD M. YOST.
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CHAPTER V.—CONTINUED.

The sound of the voice was intermittent. There would be a few words, then a pause, and so on. I could make no sense of the few disjointed sentences. It lasted but a few minutes. Indeed, so brief was the conversation, if that is what it was, there was no time to make an investigation.

After a long period of anxious listening I settled down again for sleep. And when at last slumber came, it was troubled. Vague, shadowy dreams flitted across my consciousness, and through them all was a sort of premonition of future events, which seemed to have a bearing upon the robbery.

The next morning I was awakened by the sun shining in my face. Hardly had I got my eyes open and my senses aroused to my new surroundings, when a loud and long-continued thumping on the front door caused me to spring out of bed. Hastily donning a few garments, I went to the door and opened it.

Mrs. Snyder was standing there, and an unmistakable look of relief came over her face when she saw me.

"Ach my! you schleep so sound I was afraid somesing de matter!" she said. "Breakfas' vas retty long dime alretty."

"All right. I'll be right over and eat it," I replied.

While I was dressing the recollection of the strange voice of the last night came to me. Now, in the broad glare of the forenoon, when all mystery takes flight and the hallucinations of the darkness become trivial, I wondered if my imagination had played me a trick. It seemed as though I had heard the voice in a dream, so unreal did the circumstance appear now.

I was standing by the huge chimney, when again, breaking in upon my thoughts, came the sound of that mysterious small voice.

As on the night before, there were no completed sentences; only a word between pauses of various duration. The sounds were plainer, however; not louder, but more distinct.

There was a mystery indeed, one which did not choose only the shades of night for its manifestations, but came in the daytime, as though possessed of such subtle and unaccountable qualities that it might defy research.

After the voice had ceased, and I continued my toilet, the sound of talking, coming from the walk outside, reached me.

I glanced out of the window, and saw Sarah and Mrs. Snyder again in most earnest conversation.

Somewhat surprised to see my old nurse so early in the day, I called to her:

"Hello, Sarah! What's the trouble? What brought you here at this time?"

"Ach, Nel, bud I am glad to see you!" she exclaimed. "I couldn't schleep all night."

"Now, that was too bad," I said. "What kept you awake?"

"I was thinkin' of you all alone in dis old house, and so much strangeness about it," the good soul replied, with her honest old face upturned to me.

"That was very foolish. Nothing is going to happen to me," I said, lightly, although I was not so sure of it now.

When I went outside the two women were still talking, and there was an awe-stricken expression on each face.

"What are you two superstitious old girls doing now?" I asked. "Hatching up more mysterious tales?"

Mrs. Snyder gravely shook her head, as though seriously condemning levity on supernatural subjects. Sarah rested her hand on my arm, and gazed up into my face. There was deep concern in every line of her countenance.

"Nel, you come wiz me," she said, leading the way. I followed around the corner of the house, and she stopped before a window, the shutters of which were closed.

"Look!" she exclaimed, pointing toward the shutters. "Mrs. Snyder says dat vas not dere yesterday."

You can't stay here, Nel. You go home wiz me."

I could not forbear a smile at Sarah's fears, but, remembering they were the consequence of the deep affection she felt for me, I checked the frivolous reply which my tongue was about to utter.

"Why, bless your dear old loving heart, Sarah," I said, taking hold of her arm, "come, I'll explain that, and when you know about it you'll laugh at me."

The women went along into my room. "You see that window? You remember the shutters were always kept closed. Well, I had forgotten all about it last night, and after I was undressed I saw my figure, clad in my white night robe, reflected from the glass. You women must have made me somewhat nervous by your talk while making up my bed. Anyhow, I was a trifle frightened at my own shadow, and fired a bullet at it. So, you see, no one tried to kill me at all. It was only my own foolishness, of which I am heartily ashamed. Now let me get some breakfast, and then we'll go all over the house to satisfy you there can be nothing in it which could do me harm."

I said nothing about the voices I had heard, nor of the noise like the slamming of a door. There was no use in adding to the inexplicable feeling of alarm which my old nurse felt.

As for the man Mrs. Snyder had seen after the shot fleeing down the road, that was easily explained.

If my house had the reputation of being haunted, it was most likely a passer-by would have wings to his heels on hearing the report of a pistol about the place.

After breakfast we went through the house.

I noticed that all the windows were closed. Therefore it was no sudden gust of air that caused the slamming of a door. But nothing was discovered which would give one reason to suppose there was anything unusual about the place.

We finally came to the attic, and I looked out of one of the small windows, first brushing away the curtain of cobwebs.

From this height I could see over the orchards. On the brow of Sunset Hill, about half a mile distant, was a large house, evidently quite new.

It was a splendid structure for the country, and I fancied a wealthy resident of the city had discovered the beauties of Nelsonville and built him a summer residence here.

"Whose place is that over on Sunset Hill?" I asked.

"Some rich man's from de city," Sarah answered.

"Do you know his name?" I continued, moved by curiosity.

"Vell, I did know. Ach, what is it, now? I forget eferysing soon," Sarah replied.

Here Mrs. Snyder chimed in: "His name is Morley."

"What?" I exclaimed, in amazement. "Morley? Sylvester Morley?"

"I ton't know his first name," the old widow answered.

"Has he a daughter? Is she here?"

"Yes, and she so fine and prout. Ach, and so pretty! De, she is here. Dey live here now in de summer," continued the old lady, glad for the opportunity of imparting news. "I see dem almost efery day. Dey drife by. And him, de man, ach, what a fine shentleman! So tall and straight, such a fine peard, and he looks so prout, too!"

The garrulous old widow's description satisfied me. My heart beat rapidly. I had come into this secluded place with no thought further from my mind than that I should find Miss Morley here.

Was there a design of fate in this? And—was she still my true love? Perhaps I should see her; but I remembered my determination and my promise to her father, and how far I still was from removing the condition imposed on the renewal of our friendship, and I hoped, our love.

This afterthought filled me with an impatience to commence some kind of investigation on my own hook.

I had had a short interview with Mr. Perry, the president of the bank, just before my departure for Europe. It had been most unsatisfactory to me, for Mr. Perry was unable to hold out no hope of immediate relief. He was just as earnest, however, in advising me to still keep on my course of apparent indifference and do nothing in the way of a search myself.

Since that interview six months had elapsed, and I had heard nothing from him. I now resolved to take the affair in my own hands. For to go on living, with Florence Morley so near to me, and still refrain from indulging in her sweet society, would simply be torture.

"Come, Nel," Sarah finally said, breaking in upon my thoughts. "We haf not seen all yed."

CHAPTER VI.

When we were again standing in the main hall on the first floor, Sarah's last remark came to me.

"We have been over the whole house, have we not? What more is there to see?" I asked.

"Ach, Nel! haf you forgot de place you always wanted to go to and ve wouldn't led you, because it vas damp and dark?"

"That's so. You mean the cellar."

"Yes, yes, to be sure. You vas lost vonst, and ve couldn't fint you for a long time. Ven ve did, you vas aschleep in de cellar."

"Well, come along. Let us have a look at it," I said, eagerly. The noise like a slamming of a door had seemed to come from below. Perhaps I should discover the cause down there.

On opening the door leading down from the dining-room, a musty odor assailed my nostrils.

It is peculiar how the sense of smell brings back to one old associations and memories. I recollected that musty odor perfectly, and it brought back the days of boyhood more vividly than anything else had done.

We descended the stairway, and found the cellar bare and empty. I peered into every dark nook and corner, but there was nothing which could have caused the noise.

"Nothing to be seen here, Sarah," I said. "Maybe we can find something of interest in the old storeroom."

My grandfather, in his latter days, had kept the village store and post office.

The house was built on the side of a small hill, so that it was three stories high on the street side and two in the rear.

The cellar was divided into two apartments by a thick wall of stone. One apartment was used for the house supplies. The other section was in turn divided in two, the front facing on the street serving as the store and post office, the rear, a deep, cavernous, underground room, having been used for the storage of barrels of vinegar, molasses, tobacco and dried fruit.

We descended the open stairway leading down to the storeroom from the main hall. The door was at the bottom, and at first I thought it was locked. Upon closer examination, I discovered that it had only become tightly jammed by a slight settling of the surrounding timbers. A few vigorous kicks soon caused it to open, and we stepped down into the room.

The shutters to the windows were closed, but there was above the door leading to the street a small transom. Through the dust and moisture-begrimed glass a few rays of light penetrated, producing a twilight gloom in the apartment, but not so deep that we were unable to see.

One of the old counters still remained, and scattered over the floor were a few empty boxes and barrels. I thought of the white-haired old man whose form had been so familiarly associated with the room, and I glanced over to the corner with a fancy that he was here still, seated behind the desk.

"Vhy, there's de door gone?" Sarah cried out, in tones of excitement.

"What door, Sarah?"

"Nel, you know, you remember. Der used to be a door to de store cellar, and now dere ain't any."

Sarah was right. There had been a doorway, through which I had stolen many times for the purpose of filling my pockets with raisins and dried fruit. There was none now. The wall of solid masonry confronted us.

It really seemed a matter of very little importance, but Sarah kept up excited exclamations all, until I finally stopped her.

"Why, Sarah, I don't see anything very strange in the walling up of a cellar doorway. No doubt Mr. Sonntag, my lawyer, had it done. I remember the place was dark, damp and unhealthy. He thought it best to have it closed up, perhaps. There was another door from that cellar leading outside, was there not?"

"Yes, right under your bedroom window," Sarah answered.

"Well, that can be easily broken down if you want to get in the place. But what would be the use of all that trouble? I don't want to use the cellar."

But then I remembered the noise which had seemed to come from beneath my bedroom, and the cause of which I was unable to discover throughout the rest of the house.

"We might take a look at the other door," I finally said, reflectively.

We ascended the stairway and went around the house. Thick vines, reaching to my bedroom window, completely hid the outside cellar door.

I parted the vines, and found again the solid foundation wall. This doorway had also been walled up.

Sarah was so greatly impressed by this new discovery that her excited exclamations broke out anew, and she again began to plead with me to leave the place.

Again I sought to quiet her fears by laughing at her, although it did seem a trifle strange that my agent should have walled up the doorways. I was satisfied he had had it done, and I wondered what his reasons could have been.

Perhaps, after all, Mrs. Snyder was right in affirming that there were mysteries about the old house. Perhaps this walled-up cellar was the seat of supernatural demonstrations, and my agent had sealed it up for that reason.

"I do not intend to lose any sleep over it," I said, lightly. "Sonntag must have had good reasons for doing this, and I can easily find out what they were by driving over and seeing him. I want to have a talk with him, anyhow."

Here the rumble of wheels reached my ear. As I glanced down the roadway and saw the approaching turnout, why did my heart beat faster and a dimness cloud my sight?

Mrs. Snyder had also glanced in that direction. "Vell, now look, Mr. Nel," she began, excitedly. "You can see yourself how dey look. Dey is coming. Dat is de Morleys."

My heart had given me the information before the widow's tongue.

There were two persons in the light road-wagon which was being whirled toward us at a rapid rate by the spirited horses. I could not be mistaken in the graceful poise of the head and the general outlines of beauty about the

young lady, nor in the grave dignity of the man.

The carriage swept along. When nearly opposite us, the young woman evidently caught sight of the group standing back from the roadway, for she leaned forward and sent a glance past her father toward us. I saw, even though my sight was dimmed by emotion, her face turn pale and her eyes expand. She gave no other sign of recognition, however, and the carriage swept by.

And this was all. After a year of separation, a year of longing and homesickness, I was greeted with a stare by the girl who had declared she would always trust and believe in me.

I watched the wagon until a bend in the road hid it from view, and then still looked toward the spot where it had disappeared.

A touch on my arm recalled my thoughts, and I glanced around into the solicitous face of my old nurse.

"I guess that's right. I knew that her great-grandfather was a bartender."—Cleveland Plain Dealer.

Ready to Oblige. Mrs. Wallington—This house is as cold as a barn. I do wish you would do something to make it warmer.

Mr. Wallington—Certainly. And then he accommodatingly lighted a match.—Somerville Journal.

Correct. "Miss Wigglesworth thinks she's eligible to the Order of the Crown. She's sure she can trace her lineage back to one of the English sovereigns."

"How far has she got?"

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Why, Tompkins, Miss Roberts cut you dead. "Yes, we fell out."

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