

The Bloomfield Times.

FRANK MORTIMER, }
Editor and Proprietor.

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BY

FRANK MORTIMER.

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Old Lawrence's Will:

WAS IT

Lost or Stolen?

CONCLUDED.

THE excitement in the town was ten-fold, a hundred-fold greater now than on the occasion of the testator's sudden death. Our post-office was besieged, and the clerks plied with questions, while I kept myself safely out of sight in the inner office, brooding in perplexity over the singular occurrence. I could arrive at no other conclusion than that the packet must have slipped into a wrong bag, and so been missent. Of course there were worrying inquiries made by the London authorities, to which I could give no other reply than this supposition. The affair was of such importance that official circulars were despatched to most of the offices in the kingdom, requiring any information concerning any missent letters; and in the course of a few weeks a handsome reward was offered for the discovery of the missing document.

About five weeks after old Lawrence's death I received a summons to present myself before the surveyor of the district, a Mr. Talbot, who lived sixteen miles or so from Thornbury. He, too, was an old friend of our family, and had assisted in obtaining the postoffice for my father. He was one of those jovial, courteous old gentlemen of a past generation, who liked to make his own, and every one's life as easy and agreeable as possible, and who had somewhat of an aristocratic contempt for the exacting public,—far less exacting than now. I received a cordial greeting from him, was set down to a good dinner, and forbidden to speak of business until he began, which he did over our wine.

"Now, Harry, just tell me all about it as shortly as possible," and I obeyed him.

"But this is a deuce of a mess!" he exclaimed, when I had finished. "The will must be found, sir. The authorities insist upon it, and I will not answer for the consequences if there is much longer delay. Do you know what your townfolk are saying, my boy?"

His manner had changed from consternation to anger, and then into compassion, as he spoke; but I only looked into his friendly face and shook my head in reply.

"They say just this," he continued, "neither more nor less,—that the will is in your possession. They say you are going to marry Parson Lawrence's only daughter, and by keeping back the will you expect him to come into possession of all the property."

"I should be a fool if I did," I answered, stammering; for this phase of my position had not failed to occur to me.

"A confounded fool," he added dryly; "the estate will be thrown into Chancery, and the lawyers will get the best pickings out of it. Come, Harry, we are old friends;

I knew you when you were a baby, and your father and mother years before. You might tell me anything, my boy."

"Thank you," I cried, grasping his offered hand, "but I have nothing more to tell. I swear I know no more about the will than you do."

"Could anybody else know of its being in your office besides you and the clerks?" said Mr. Talbot.

Strange to say—so strange that I marveled at it myself,—until that moment I had altogether forgotten, or it had been kept back from recurring to my memory, that Katie had been with me when my mother's agonized voice called to me. Like some vivid revelation made by a flash of lightning, lurid and blinding, came back the position in which we stood, and the last words I had uttered. The events which followed had been so hurried and engrossing, the sleep succeeding to them so exhausting, that the impression must have been, for the time, almost obliterated. It returned all the keener now; and my pulse stood still, and my heart sank heavily. Katie had been there; Katie had seen her uncle's will, I had left her behind me in the office alone.

I answered incoherently, stammered, contradicted myself, and at last, for almost the only time in my life, fairly burst into tears. Never did a poor, weak wretch appear more guilty than I did. My friend—for he was truly my friend—urged me, implored of me, in vain, to confess all, and make him the confidant of my temptations and my fault; he gave it no harsher name. It was impossible for me to cast a suspicion upon Katie, though as I came to think quietly over it in my bed-room—I stayed all night at Mr. Talbot's,—I could not banish from me the dread misgiving that here lay the solution of the mystery. I said to myself that at first it would be nothing but a girl's thoughtless curiosity which had changed into shame and terror upon facing the consequences of her action; and that every day had made it more impossible for her to own her fault.—Then returned powerfully to me the fascination the mere sight of the will had exercised over me, and the conjectures which had rushed to my brain as I sat staring at it. A tenth part of such a temptation, I was inclined to argue, would be too strong for the curiosity of a woman, especially a woman the most deeply interested in its contents. Yet Katie was so good, so simple-minded, so religious; should I be forced to lose my faith in her? No; I could not believe her capable of a dishonorable and criminal action. Yet where, then, was the will?

It will be readily credited that I did not sleep that night, and that I was haggard and miserable-looking in the morning. The surveyor made a last effort to gain my confidence, and my agitated reserve produced upon him the impression that I was guilty. The last sentence he uttered, with unusual sternness, was to the effect that unless the will was forthcoming speedily there was no hope of my retaining my office, even if my father kept his, being shielded by his dangerous illness at the time.

I rode homewards wretched enough, and found Snape waiting my return. Mr. Gray had gone back to London, after staying no more than a few days in Thornbury.

"Nothing discovered yet?" said Snape. "Nothing," I answered despondently.—"If there was, you'd have no need to come to me, for I should be only too glad to let you know."

"It beats everything in my professional experience," he continued.

"That's no satisfaction to me," I said in a testy tone, "the question is, what is to be done if the will does not turn up at all?"

"The very question all the relatives are asking," replied Snape. Mr. Lawrence drew up the will himself, gave no hint of the contents and has left no copy. We are every one of us, utterly in the dark as to his intentions. We cannot proceed as if he had died intestate; all the world knows he did not; and no one has a legal right to take a penny of his property.

"Will it be thrown into Chancery?" I asked.

"There will be nothing else for it if the will is not found," he said, "and to let you into a secret which concerns you, some of the relatives are talking of a prosecution against you. But I ask them, what proof have you that Henry Slaney has abstracted that document? The abstraction of any letter or packet from the Postoffice is felony such letter or packet being the property of the Postmaster General during its transit, and the penalty, is penal servitude or transportation. But how can the felony be proved? There may be good grounds for suspicion, but there is no positive proof, and could be none unless it was found in his possession, or in the possession of some person who could only have received it from him."

"It's a pleasant position to be in," said I, biting my nails viciously, which is no habit of mine, but which seemed to come naturally to me in these circumstances.

"If the will could only be found," answered Mr. Snape, with a provoking significance of tone, "all might be smoothed over even now."

"If it could only be found?" I said, over and over again, to myself. As soon as the solicitor was gone, I went up stairs to my mother's usual sitting-room. My father had that morning been pronounced well enough to leave his room for a few hours, and he was sitting in an easy chair near the fire with a faint smile upon his sunken face, which grew stronger when he saw me. It was a little brightness in the deepening gloom closing around me, and I forced a smile to my own lips.

"All going on well down stairs?" he said.

"Why not?" I answered, evasively, "why not? The work is simple enough."

He was easily satisfied about that, but not so easily about myself. What had I been over to Mr. Talbot about? What made me look so pale and anxious? Was there any coolness between Katie and me?

"She is a girl after my own heart," said my father, warmly, "a perfect treasure.—Don't you let her slip through your fingers, Harry. By the by, now we are alone, tell me how poor Lawrence made his will, and what he has done for Katie,—something handsome, I hope? Your mother would not let me speak about it, for fear of excitement."

I hesitated for a moment but so briefly that he did not notice it.

"The will cannot be found," I said.

"Not found!" he repeated.

"Yes," I continued, hurriedly, "but every search is being made for it. Snape is positive that there was a will executed a few months ago, but all he knows of its contents is, that you and Mr. Grey are the executors."

"Poor Lawrence!" sighed my father. "Do you think they have searched his laboratory well. It is not unlikely he would deposit it there, in his cabinet. Tell them to leave no corner unsearched in the laboratory."

I promised to do so, and made haste to get away. In the drawing-room I found Katie, in her mourning dress and bonnet, come in to go walking with my sisters, who luckily had just started off before her arrival. She advanced to meet me with both her hands stretched out, and with her usual frank, pleasant, calm smile upon her face. There was no one there, and I stooped down to kiss her, feeling myself an unhappy guilty wretch, as if I were the culprit, and unworthy to lay my lips upon her smooth fair forehead, which grew rosy with my kiss.

"Harry!" she murmured in a tone of remonstrance.

"I am so miserable, Katie," said I; and on the instant I resolved to lay before her my position, to exaggerate it even, to paint it in the blackest colors; and then to make it plain to her that, could the will be found, all might yet be explained away, and

smoothed over, without any public exposure. I did my best, and acquitted myself so well that she shed torrents of tears, her head resting upon my shoulder; but not a syllable did she utter which in the slightest degree hinted or betrayed that she had any knowledge of the missing will.

"Katie," I said, when I had exhausted all my eloquence, "you understand that no one now will come into possession of your uncle's property?"

"No one!" she cried, lifting up her head, and looking earnestly in my face. "I thought, if there was no will, my father would have everything. You said he was heir-at-law, and I should be a great heiress. It will not signify if you do lose your situation, Harry; I shall have enough for us both; and, if every one in the world thought you guilty, I should know you were innocent."

"But it will be thrown into Chancery instead of coming to anybody," I said, a cold, hard feeling towards her creeping over me.

"But Chancery could do nothing, after all, but give the landed property to my father," she persisted; "there can be no nearer heir, and if the will is lost, it is the same as there being no will—if Chancery has any sense," she added, half gayly.

Very heavy indeed, grew my heart, I attempted again to impress upon her the position in which her father, herself, and all the relatives stood; but she either could not understand it, or would not believe it. If it came to the worst, she answered, they would all agree to some arrangement for the division of the property, and her father, being the eldest, and the heir-at-law, would receive the largest share. She would be an heiress, and why need I fret myself about a paltry place in the Postoffice?

I could not, for the very life of me, look her in the face and say, "Katie, is it possible that you were over-tempted, and took the will?" Yet I could not throw off the growing conviction that this was the truth. I despair of conveying to you the hundredth part of the maddening conflict of my feelings during the next few weeks—my love for Kate Lawrence, my disappointment, my strong desire to believe her innocent, my pity for her, my close vigilance upon every word and glance which fell from her, and my terror lest the truth should become known to any one else. There could be no suspicion of her in any heart but mine, which loved her so truly, and was willing to endure mistrust, cold looks, and angry insinuations for her sake, yet which every day was growing colder towards her, and more full of severe judgments upon her crime. Expectations were dying away in the town, and hope was almost dead within me.

It was not possible to keep the secret any longer from my father, when he became able to attend to business. A London surveyor, accompanied by a detective, came down to investigate the matter thoroughly; but they could learn no more than was already generally known. It was a severe trouble to my father, and serious consequences threatened him in spite of his plea of sudden and dangerous illness. The fact that he was one of the executors told against him with the strangers who were appointed to investigate the affair; for they appeared to argue, that he might have taken possession of the will, though it was illegal to do so after it had once been posted, and for some reason or other suppressed it, throwing the onus of the loss upon the Postoffice.

When nothing could be discovered by the surveyor or detective, old Lawrence's relatives held a family meeting to consult upon what was to be done. But it was not very clear what the law would permit them to do in such circumstances; and there was not one of them who would have agreed to proceed as if he had died intestate. Every lawyer in Thornbury had given some opinion, and received a fee for it, upon the point; but nothing was clear and certain.

Those were the most miserable three

months that ever passed over my head.—The changed faces of my townsmen, the suspicion attaching to me, and the near prospect of my ignominiously losing my post, were hard to bear. But the deepening conviction of Katie's guilt, and my gradual decreasing love for her, were incomparably harder. She did not fail to feel the coldness and distrust of my manner, and being a girl of spirit she did not fail to mark the change by a corresponding change in herself. I pondered over such questions as these—how was the will made, and what had she done with it? Had she destroyed it? Or was it still in existence, to be discovered, perhaps, at some future day to work a just judgment upon her? However it might be, I knew that my Katie was lost to me forever; yet not for worlds would I throw upon her the burden of suspicion which weighed so heavily upon me.

The last day of the year came. There had been a semi-official letter in the morning from Mr. Talbot, intimating that the people of Thornbury were dissatisfied at my retaining an important and confidential place in the Postoffice, and that their complaints were about to be noticed from headquarters. My father only partially recovered, was very low, and my mother and sisters cried at intervals during the day. I found myself as usual, in the office about the same hour in the evening as when old Lawrence's will was brought in and laid before me on the counter, just as I had finished and folded up the quarterly money-order account. Another quarter was ended, and I said, with some bitterness of tone, "that there could be no objection to me making up the account once again." The forms upon which they were drawn out were kept in a small drawer in the counter, and I found them packed rather tightly, having evidently been pushed in, in some haste and confusion. The drawer would open with a sharp jerk, and as I gave it, I heard a sound of something falling behind, while the drawer came out in my hand. I stooped to look what had fallen, and—you will have guessed already—there lay old Lawrence's will, looking precisely as it had done when it lay on the counter before me, directed to "R. Grey, Esq., Mitre Buildings, The Temple, London."

I gave a great shout which made my father spring up from his desk, and I fell down on my knees before the empty space where the drawer had been, scarcely able to stretch out my hand to touch the will. How it had got there was plain enough to me. I had left it lying amongst the forms, which were not unlike it in shape and size, and the clerks coming into their hurried and unaccustomed work, had cleared the counter after a summary fashion, sweeping them all away together into the drawer beneath, which was used for no other purpose, and never opened, except on the last days of March, June, September, and December. It had been lying there all the while, under my hand a score of times a day, while I had been suffering one of the bitterest conflicts a man can suffer for it.

When I looked around, with the will in my trembling hand, there stood my father and the two clerks from the outer office, who had rushed in on hearing my shout, while through the door which they had left open, a lucky unit of the public surveyed the scene.

"Old Lawrence's will!" I gasped, and the unit immediately darted into the streets to proclaim the discovery.

Almost before I could recover my voice, which sounded choked and unnatural in my own ears, or had risen from knees and picked up the fallen drawer, the outer office was invaded by a crowd of excited and anxious inquirers, some of whom pressed into our sanctum, and began shaking hands with me in that frenzy of good-will and congratulation which now and then breaks out among the sympathizing public.

Old Lawrence's relatives were not long behind their townspeople: they came in agitated numbers, Katie and her father