

Slythorpe's Little Game.

In a darkened chamber, dark with the awful shadow still more than with the lack of material light, four persons gathered round a bed, on which lay a man bearing on his face the unmistakable signs of the summons which none can refuse to answer.

After an interval of silence, broken only by the suppressed sobs of the weeping girl and the monotonous scratching of the attorney's pen upon the paper, he paused and inquired, in a harsh, unpleasant voice.

"What names shall I insert as trustees? You should have two at least."

The dying man paused ere he replied with an effort.

"Godfrey Howard, Major 111th, now in India. I have no other friend."

"In that case may I venture to offer my humble services, subject to the usual proviso. I should be delighted to be useful to Miss Hope, and if your friend is abroad there may be difficulties."

"True, Slythorpe, I thank you. Make yourself trustee, then, with Major Howard, Legney—two hundred pounds for your trouble."

"Nay, my dear sir, quite unnecessary. I really—"

But again the ready pen traveled over the paper, and a quarter of an hour later Mr. Slythorpe announced that the document was ready for execution, and in a low, mechanical monotone read over its provisions. The sick man seemed more than once to lose consciousness during the reading, but at the close he appeared to nerve himself for a supreme effort.

"Yes that will do. Give me the pen," he said, and with a shaking hand affixed his signature, and with eager eyes watched the doctor and nurse as they added their own as witnesses, after which he sank back exhausted on his pillow. "Thank God, that's safe!" he gasped. "Mary, my child, you and Geoffrey—you and Geoffrey! What was I saying? God bless you, my darling! God bless—"

These were the last words Bernard Hope ever spoke.

A year had passed away since Bernard Hope's death, and Mary still remained an inmate of the house of Mrs. Murgatroyd, the good woman whom we have seen in attendance at her father's last illness, and who, to her occasional occupation as nurse, added the more permanent one of letting lodgings. Mary's sweet face and gentle manner had quite won the heart of her good-natured landlady, who was unceasing in her endeavors to soothe her grief and minister to her comforts.

Mary still showed in her face and figure the tokens of the fiery trial through which she had passed. Her slight form looked slighter still in her soft black drapery, and the shadow of an un forgotten sorrow still rested on her delicate features. Mary Hope had been her father's constant companion, and she sorely missed the happy hours in which his powerful intellect and varied experience had been unfolded for her benefit.

The death of Major Howard left Mr. Slythorpe sole trustee of Mr. Hope's will. This to Mary was a matter of the most perfect indifference. Suspecting evil of no one, she was willing that her little fortune, amounting to some five or six thousand pounds, should rest in Mr. Slythorpe's hands as in those of any other person. But of late the attorney had begun to persecute her with attentions, which, under existing circumstances, would have been distasteful to

any one, but were doubly so from a person whom she could not help regarding with an instinctive dislike. And in truth Mr. Slythorpe was not precisely the person to win a fair lady's fancy. Undersized, high-shouldered, with blinking, lashed eyes, and a general angularity, not to say knobiness, of feature, he might have been expected to rise superior to any weakness as to personal appearance; but such was by no means the case. In Mr. Samuel Slythorpe's own opinion, Mr. Samuel Slythorpe was a gentleman of considerable personal advantages, and it was his constant endeavor to make the very best of them. He was obtrusively, we might almost say offensively clean. His shirt-front, collar, and wrist bands were all of the most liberal dimensions, and of intense whiteness and starchiness, giving him the appearance of being, so to speak, "all shirt;" while his hands, which were naturally coarse and red were made still coarser and redder by perpetual washing. He was always profusely scented, and his short, scrubby hair was tortured by the combined use of the brush and the pomatum pot, into the semblance of the split almonds wherewith tinsy-cakes are wont to be decorated.

"There's that nasty worrying lawyer again, I do declare. Slythorpe, indeed! I'd Slythorpe him!"

It would be useless to endeavor to express on paper the intensity of meaning Mrs. Murgatroyd threw into her newly-coined verb; but it was evident that "Slythorping" in her mind included all the tortures of the Middle Ages, with a supplement of horsepond and other modern inventions. Mary smiled at the good lady's vehemence.

"My dear Mrs. Murgatroyd, you really shouldn't be so severe. Mr. Slythorpe is a little peculiar, but I have no doubt he means kindly, and you know he is the trustee of poor papa's will."

"I know he is, my dear, and I wish he wasn't. I know he shouldn't be trustee to a toment of mine, drah him!"

"Now really, Mrs. Murgatroyd, you are too bad," said Mary, smiling in spite of herself. "I am sure poor Mr. Slythorpe isn't nearly so dreadful as you make out."

At this point the conversation was interrupted by the entrance of the gentleman in question, and Mrs. Murgatroyd, passing him with a final sniff of abhorrence, quitted the apartment.

Mr. Slythorpe, for once in his life, appeared ill at ease. He was got up with his accustomed care, and the suggestion of scented soap which accompanied him was even stronger than usual; but his usual self satisfied air was wanting. He evidently had something on his mind—some piece of rascality, a physiognomist would have conjectured, which he either had recently perpetrated or was about to perpetrate. Let us hope that the physiognomist would have been wrong.

"My dear Miss Hope," he began, after the first greetings had been exchanged. "I grieve to be the bearer of very unpleasant intelligence."

Mary looked up with quiet indifference, scarcely believing that, after all she had gone through, any news, good or bad, could have for her more than the most passing interest. Slythorpe continued:

"I am sure that you will believe I did it for the best; but misfortunes will happen, you know, even with the utmost care and caution. I am sure I thought the investment as safe as the bank; but there's no trusting anything nowadays."

"What is the misfortune, Mr. Slythorpe, for you haven't yet told me? Nothing very serious, I hope?"

"Only too serious, my dear Ma—" he tried to say "Mary," but couldn't get it out, and substituted "Miss Hope"—"nothing less than the loss, I fear, of the whole of your little fortune."

Mary turned very pale, but gave no other sign of emotion. "How did it happen?" she said, with an effort.

"Your money was, as you know, in the Three Per Cents, where it produced a miserable £160 a year. In the hope of doing better for you, I sold out, and invested it in a new mining company, the Wheal Marina, which promised to pay a minimum dividend of ten per cent, and so would have just tripled your income. And this morning I am grieved to find from The Times that the company is an utter smash. The directors have bolted, and the stockholders will lose every penny of their money."

"Is all gone? Nothing left?"

"Not a sixpence, and you remain liable for calls to the amount of about as much more."

Poor Mary's fortitude quite gave way. "O dear, what shall I do? I haven't a friend in the world."

"No, no, don't say that, Miss Mary," said Slythorpe, in a gentle patronizing manner; "it isn't as bad as that comes to. I haven't disguised my own feelings toward you; and though you've lost your money, you know, that needn't make any difference between you and me. My affection ain't of the mercenary sort; in fact, as I got you into the mess (though with the best of intentions, mind you,) it's only fair I should get you out of it."

Mary had hidden her face in her hands but she became aware, from the increased intensity of the all-pervading scented-soap aroma, that Slythorpe was drawing nearer to her, and in another moment his arm was around her waist. She drew herself up proudly:

"Sir, I am willing to believe you mean kindly, but your offer under such circumstances is an insult. Be good enough to leave me."

Slythorpe would have parleyed, but with an air of an outraged queen Mary Hope rang the bell, and obedient to the summons, Mrs. Murgatroyd appeared.

"Open the door for Mr. Slythorpe, if you please."

"You'll be sorry for this, you'll find, Miss Hope," said Slythorpe; but Mary vouchsafed no answer, and the attorney retired discomfited. Mrs. Murgatroyd holding the door for him with an expression of thorough enjoyment. As soon as it was closed upon him, she bounced back into Mary's room, and flung open the windows.

"Let's have a breath of fresh air, for goodness' sake, after that nasty, slimy, scented sermon. I always feel as if the house wanted disin—what d'ye call it? with Condy's Sea-salt or Tidman's Restorer, or some o' them deldollers, whenever he's been in it. Why, my dear lamb, whatever is the matter?"

Poor Mary's overwrought nerve had at last given way, and she fell upon the sofa in a fit of violent hysterics. Mrs. Murgatroyd, with motherly instinct, let her emotion have its way, and she was soon so calmed as to be able with many tears to tell the story of this new misfortune, finally crying herself to sleep on the good old woman's sympathizing bosom.

It was two days after the scene just recorded, and Mary Hope, with The Times before her, was answering advertisements for a governess. Mary was not one to sit still under the pressure of calamity, however heavy, and having got over the first shock of her misfortune, at once set about bravely to earn her own livelihood. With this view she was now seeking to procure a situation, as a governess, entering upon her task with a brave heart, though she well knew the trials to which such a position would probably expose her. She had answered three advertisements, and had folded and sealed her letters, and now, with her open desk before her, was counting her little store of ready money, and calculating how long she could at any rate subsist before she found employment. In replacing her purse her hand fell upon a portrait, which she took out, and gazed at fondly. "Dear old Geoffrey, if you had lived how different my future would have been! I suppose I ought to say God's will be done, but O, it's very very hard!" A few moments she continued gazing through her tears at the portrait, when a sharp knock at the outer door startled her, and she replaced it in the desk. She heard Mrs. Murgatroyd in conversation with some one, and then a quick, well-remembered voice said, "Where's This room?" And in another moment the door was flung open, and Mary Hope was sobbing in her lost lover's arms.

After the blissful excitement of the first meeting had subsided, a season of mutual explanations followed. Geoffrey Howard had been dangerously wounded and had been a prisoner for the greater part of a year in an Indian dungeon, where for many weeks his life had hung on a thread by reason of an attack of malignant fever. His worn and sallow features, his skin bronzed to Oriental swarthinness, and the scar, of a deep sabbre-cut across his cheek, scarce hidden by a rather ragged beard, bore eloquent witness to the perils he had passed through. He had landed in England but twelve hours previously, and had lost not a moment in seeking the presence of his darling and her father, for he was of course ignorant of Bernard Hope's death. Mary, too, had much to tell, and nestling by Geoffrey's side, her little white fingers hidden in the rugged brown hands of her lover, which held them as though they would never again let them go, she told him all she had gone through—the loss of her father, the history of the will, and lastly, the loss of her little fortune.

"I don't understand it," said Geoffrey.

"The man has been playing some deep game."

"Perhaps he really wished to get me more—what do you call it?—interest for my money. I daresay it was meant

kindly enough, though it has happened so unfortunately."

"I don't believe it, darling. If he had really your interest at heart, he would have regarded safety before all things. I strongly suspect that if all things had gone well you would simply have received your three per cent., and Mr. Slythorpe would have pocketed the difference."

"O Geoffrey, Geoffrey! I'm afraid you have come home very uncharitable. Besides, what does it matter about a lot of stupid money, now I have got you back again?—unless, indeed, you would have liked me better for having the money."

There was only one possible answer to such an accusation, and Major Howard made it—that is to say, he called Mary a little goose, kissed her, and dropped the subject, having taken care, however, to ascertain the address of Mr. Slythorpe and the name of the company in which Mary's money had been lost.

On leaving her, he took a hansom cab and drove to the office of the liquidator of the company, when, on his stating that he desired to make some inquiries on behalf of one of their shareholders, Mr. Slythorpe, he was informed to his astonishment that there was not and never had been any shareholder of that name on the books of the company. He next inquired whether, perchance, the shares were standing in Miss Hope's own name, and again was answered in the negative. Utterly bewildered, he drove to Mr. Slythorpe's office. Mr. Slythorpe was at home, and he speedily found himself in the attorney's presence. Mr. Slythorpe was a little nervous. He was always a little nervous with strangers till he knew their business; and Major Howard's announcement that he had called on behalf of Miss Mary Hope did not tend to increase his confidence. He was, however, far from suspecting Major Howard's identity, but jumped to the conclusion that he was a hostile solicitor employed by Miss Hope to call him to account. Major Howard's next remark tended to confirm that impression.

"You stated to Miss Hope, I think, a couple of days ago, that the property bequeathed to her by her father's will had been invested in the Wheal Marina Company, which has just come to grief. You are of course aware that an investment, upon such a rotten security was a gross breach of trust, for which you are liable."

"Not at all; the power of investment is unlimited. Indeed shares of companies are specially included."

"You are certain of that?"

"Quite so. I drew the will myself."

"Very good. The shares stood, I suppose, in your own name?"

"Yes; in my name, of course as sole trustee."

"Then pray how is it, Mr. Slythorpe that I don't find your name among the list of shareholders of the company?"

Mr. Slythorpe's countenance fell.

"Because—because—I may as well make a clean breast of it—to tell you the truth, the money never was in that company at all. It was a false alarm, Sir, a false alarm."

"Then where on earth is the money, sir? And what do you mean by a false alarm?"

"I'll tell you, if you'll have a little patience. As a brother solicitor, I'm sure you won't press harder on me than you are quite obliged. Miss Hope's money is in the Wheal Mary Ann, one of the most flourishing companies going, and her shares are worth just double what I gave for them."

"Then what on earth induced you—"

"I'll tell you between ourselves, I've taken an uncommon fancy to Miss Hope and I had made up my mind to make her Mrs. S.; but somehow she didn't take to me quite as kindly as I could have wished. Now the other morning when I took up The Times, almost the first thing I caught sight of was the smash of the Wheal Marina, and the similarity of name gave me quite a turn, for just at the first moment I thought it was the Wheal Mary Ann. And then the thought struck me, 'If it only had been, my lady, you'd have been glad enough to say 'Yes' to Samuel Slythorpe.'" And then I thought I'd try it. It was merely a little innocent practical joke—a *rouse d'amour*, Sir: a mere *rouse d'amour*." And Mr. Slythorpe smiled.

"You atrocious scoundrel!" There was a sudden blow, a heavy crash, and Mr. Samuel Slythorpe measured his length on the floor. The clerk outside, hearing the downfall, popped his head into the room, but seeing the state of things discreetly retired again, remarking:

"Beg pardon; thought you rang, Sir." Meanwhile Major Howard, having knocked Slythorpe down, proceeded to set him up again; and with his own dandy cane, which stood by the side of the fireplace gave him one of the most tremendous thrashings ever recorded in the pages of history. And the clerk in the outer office, who owed Slythorpe many a grudge for acts of petty tyranny, listened at the door smiling pleasantly at each "swish" of the descending cane, and finally indulging in a war dance ex-

pressive of triumph and exaltation round the office stool.

A fortnight later, Major Howard, looking wonderfully better in health and strength, stood before the altar of a quiet city church with a graceful little figure by his side. And with no pomp or ceremony, no breakfast, no speeches, no wedding guests, with only good Mrs. Murgatroyd for bridesmaid, and two true lovers were made one. And six months afterwards, in the Court of Queen's Bench, the great assault case of Slythorpe vs. Howard was tried. And when the lawyers on both sides had had their say, the presiding judge said, "Gentlemen of the jury, it is not disputed that a very violent assault was committed on the plaintiff, and he is therefore entitled to your verdict. But in assessing the damages, gentleman, you will consider the general merits of the case, and give the plaintiff only such compensation as you think he fairly deserves." And the jury, in awarding one farthing by way of damages, expressed their unanimous regret that there wasn't a smaller coin.

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