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A MOORLAND PRINCESS

By Mrs. C. N. Williamson

SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

Jim Breakspear, an ex-Colorado rancher, who has distinguished himself as a Yeoman in the South African war and is being feted in London society, intends running down to Brighton to see Vivien Oakley, a girl he had met at several "at homes," but misses his train. Strolling about Victoria station he lights upon a room in which a sale of derelict property is being conducted, and is led by curiosity to bid his whole available money (£20) for an old portmanteau, marked with a Maltese cross, and its contents. He finds by incidents on the way home that some person or persons are eager by any means to procure possession of his purchase. On arriving at his lodgings, he examines his prize and finds costumes of various nationalities, all marked with the Maltese cross, a death mask taken from some person who seemed to have come to a violent end, a photograph, a coil of golden hair and five sheets of paper covered with mysterious allusions to various localities, dates, and sums of money. The photograph is that of a girl so lovely that Breakspear feels irresistibly compelled to follow up the mystery in the hope of finding her. The same evening he is surprised to receive a visit at his lodgings from Miss Oakley, who induces him to accompany her on an errand, which, she says, is one of danger. On his return he finds a stranger had been to his rooms with a plausible excuse and had removed the portmanteau. The five sheets of paper, however, are safe in Breakspear's pocket, and he has reason to think from the way in in which his belongings in his rooms had been overhauled that these had been the object of special and, of course, unavailing search. Breakspear suspects Miss Oakley of complicity, and, without directly charging her, endeavors to surprise her into an admission, but without effect. An attempt is made to secure the papers from Breakspear by force, but he overcomes his assailant, who then offers to introduce him to the lady of the photograph in exchange for the documents.

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CHAPTER V.—(Continued.)

The Thing That Moved Under the Seat.

WHEN Eagle-face saw the papers in Breakspear's hand, a flush rose to his sallow forehead, which was high and narrow, with the skin stretched tightly across the bone. "I suppose you won't take my word for the promised meeting with my daughter, and give me the memoranda now?" he said, with an anxious, fawning humility that sickened Breakspear not only of him, but of the whole affair. From a strange adventure, tingling with romantic interest, it had suddenly degenerated into a sordid business in which he, to say the least of it, was playing no heroic part.

"No, of course I won't take your word for anything," retorted Jim, sullenly. The position in which he was placed, in which he was voluntarily lingering, was disgraceful, and he hated himself for continuing to traffic with this creature of a baser world.

"You know I am in your hands," said Eagle-face, still in the oily tones that Breakspear loathed. "I didn't suppose you would trust me. Value must be given for value received. That's only fair. In consideration that you do not use your present advantage to injure me and ruin my daughter's happiness, and that you return to me the papers in your possession, I am ready to show my trust in you by introducing you to one of the most beautiful girls in the world—if I do say so who am her father. I might, on the contrary, try to take the papers from you—"

"You might try," echoed Breakspear grimly.

"By strategy, since I quite understand that force would be useless. But I trust you—I recognize that you are a gentleman—a man of honor. I regret what has passed. I can say no more. I can only make amends. You saw a lady dressed in black and veiled, talking with me at Victoria yesterday, perhaps?"

"Yes, I saw such a lady."

"Well, that was my daughter—the original of the photograph you honor with your admiration. It was she who attended the sale of unclaimed luggage for me, as I had my own reason for not appearing. It is as important for her interests as for mine that the papers should return to my hands."

"Do the Brandon-Paynes know your daughter?" inquired Breakspear abruptly.

"Ah! I see your meaning. I introduced myself into your rooms last night under the name of Brandon-Payne. But neither my daughter nor I has the pleasure of his acquaintance. I was lucky enough to see in the society intelligence in an evening paper yesterday that you had attended a reception at the house of a Mrs. Brandon-Payne. I ran a risk in choosing the name, but I was prepared to run risks. As for your name, it was easy to learn that. In a short time you seem to have made yourself well known in London society. But your South African record and your appearance have been a passport."

Breakspear hardly knew whether he wanted to laugh or swear at this impertinence; but he did neither.

"Has your daughter by any chance a friend called Miss Oakley?" he inquired.

"Oakley?" repeated the man. "I have never heard the name. No, you may take it from me that my daughter has no such friend. In fact, the circumstances of her life have prevented her from making friends. You will be the first of your sex, with the exception of her father, to claim the honor. And it shall be yours, to-day, if you choose to go to my humble lodgings with me. But, remember, Mr. Breakspear, it is the papers for the introduction. When I have shown my good faith by taking you across my threshold, I shall expect you to place the papers in my hand."

Five long, sallow fingers had been laid upon Jim's knee, but he shook them off, springing to his feet. "Take your papers now, you hound, and be hanged to you!" he exclaimed, in a passion. "I'm hanged if I'll buy an introduction to a woman—in any such way. There's your property. Now grovel for it."

As he spoke, he dashed the papers on the floor of the carriage, and, still carried away by anger against himself and the wretch with whom he had been bargaining, he flung himself towards the door. The train was slowing at last into Victoria station, and, without waiting for it to stop, he sprang out, conscious that the man he had left was already down on his knees, grabbing at the luck which had been thrown to him, like a bone to a dog.

Jim ran along the platform for a few yards to regain his balance, nearly lost in leaping out while the train was still moving comparatively fast. In his present mood his one wish was never to see Eagle-face again—to forget the whole episode, smirched now out of all promise of adventurous romance.

he might have found her a pearl of price fallen among swine. Yet, how could he have done differently, and kept his self-respect?

Into the midst of his self-questionings entered a soothing reflection. If Eagle-face believed that he, Breakspear, had intentionally retained the fifth paper, he would probably endeavor to open communications again presently, and perhaps the chance for a meeting with the daughter might present itself under auspices more favorable, less derogatory. Meanwhile, he would write to Miss Oakley, and ask, incidentally, if he had made his sketch on a bit of paper with some notes on the other side; also, whether she had happened to keep the paper.

All the vivid color seemed to have faded out of his life, which now had the aspect of a landscape forsaken by the sun. There was nothing to do at home which interested him, the episode of the portmanteau being closed—at all events temporarily—therefore he sought to revive dying excitement by writing the proposed letter at once to Miss Oakley.

He posted it early that evening, knowing that she would certainly receive it by the first post in the morning. Then, if she answered immediately, he might possibly get her letter late the same night; and before that time other things might have happened—who could tell?

Nobody could tell, but nothing did happen, and all the next day passed without Breakspear's hearing from Miss Oakley, or communication having been opened again by Eagle-face. It was a dull day—a day of irritating inaction, as was the next; and Wednesday would be St. Mark's eve, April 24th.

The thought added to the restlessness of his disappointment. The thought broke off in his mind to give place to another, so strange that it came with a quick leap of the pulses.

CHAPTER VI.

The Man Who Was Digging.

Suddenly an incident of such seeming unimportance that he had forgotten it till this moment returned to his memory with a shock.

When he and Miss Oakley had been on the way to Brighton together a few hours ago, she had turned the conversation to Jim's life on his cousin's ranch in Colorado. She had shown a flattering interest in his career since leaving Oxford and England, almost at the same time—a troubled time for him, as it was then his father had died, leaving him a legacy of but a few hundreds, whereas he had been led to think of himself as heir to many thousands. Vivien had asked questions about ranch life, and, finally, to illustrate his answers, he had searched his pockets for a note book in which to draw a rough sketch of the house where he and his cousin had lived, and the buildings adjacent.

The notebook had not been forthcoming, had evidently been forgotten; but instead, Breakspear had drawn out several letters, and on a folded half-sheet of paper, blank at all events on the outside, he had carelessly illustrated his description of the Colorado ranch. What had become of the paper afterwards he did not know. It might have fallen on the floor of the carriage and lain there unnoticed when they left the train at Brighton, or Vivien Oakley might have kept the sketch.

So little importance had Jim attached to the memoranda found in the portmanteau, after the disappearance of the photograph and the curl of hair, that he had not even remembered which pocket he had put them into, and as he had been talking continually while he made his little pencil drawing, it was possible that he had inadvertently used one half-sheet of the separated memoranda for his sketching material.

He wondered, if this were the case, which paper had disappeared in such an unlooked-for way. Already he had forgotten several of the places named, and the sums of money either received or paid—it was difficult to be sure which. The dates had entirely passed out of his head, with the exception of one, which he happened to remember best because it was associated with a name familiar to him—that of Satan's Tor, Dartmoor. The other records had to do with the past; this thing was arranged to happen at Satan's Tor, on April 24th; and when he had first read the note, he had been pricked by the desire (since lost sight of in the quick crowding of events) to present himself there on that day.

"St. Mark's eve!" he murmured, wondering how he, who knew so little of the church calendar, should chance to have kept in mind the date of a saint's day. Yet so it was. He had always known when St. Mark's eve was due, and the day seemed to be twined with some old memory as ivy drapes an oak. Then from some neglected shelf of memory tumbled down the missing parcel, wrapped up and stored away there by the dear old superstitious Dartmoor woman who had been his nurse. During that unforgettable visit of his with her to Dartmoor, she had filled his mind with many strange ghost stories, redolent of the soil from which they had risen like evening mists. Some of them had been of a peculiarly blood-curdling nature; and for years afterward, the imaginative little lad had lain awake at night, thinking of the horrible, naked, dead white arms that crawled like great worms thru the churchyard of Dartmoor on St. Mark's eve, rearing their hands like heads, and using their nails—which gleamed thru the dark with pale, phosphorescent light—for eyes.

These arms were those of the people who would die in the parish during the next year; and four-year-old Jim had inquired the date of this awful night, resolving that, whatever happened, he would avoid Dartmoor on St. Mark's eve.

"I wonder which of the five papers is lost?" he thought now. "Curious if it were that one. But, whichever it is, why should the notes be of such vital importance to this fellow? He must have them all fixed in his memory, and, so far as I can see, there was nothing in any of the papers to incriminate him or others in case they should fall into the hands of strangers."

Now that Breakspear had thrown away his chance of meeting the unknown beauty who had made herself mistress of his thoughts, he began keenly to regret his quixotic impulsiveness. Certainly, it had been degrading to him and her also, that he should have haggled vulgarly with the wretch who claimed to be her father, for the purchase of her acquaintance. Still, he had meant good, not evil. He might have been the means of rescuing her from unhappiness;

He did not look towards the train he had left, but as he walked quickly away, a voice followed him.

Eagle-face had jumped out of the moving train also, and was running after him with eager strides. It was beneath Breakspear's dignity to run also, and in a moment the man was at his back. "You've cheated me!" were the words panted into his ear from behind. "You had five papers. You have only given me four."

Jim turned on him. "You hound! I threw you all I had," he said. "It's like you to doubt my word. Take what you've got and be thankful, for I've nothing more to give, and want no more of you."

So saying, he flung the other off, with a contemptuous movement of the arm, and, instead of persistently following as Breakspear had half expected, Eagle-face fell back. Had Jim glanced over his shoulder, he would have seen the man standing still, as if stunned, his face yellow-white, his lips apart. But Jim did not glance over his shoulder. He went on doggedly, knowing that he had deliberately thrown away his chance of meeting a girl whose very picture had been more to him than the reality of any other woman; knowing this, yet not sure whether he had been a fool or a wise man.

"What game was the fellow playing when he accused me of keeping back something?" he asked himself angrily. "He'd got all he wanted from me for nothing, instead of pay, and yet—"

ment in hearing neither from Vivien Oakley nor Eagle-face. What should he do? Would it be a sign of driveling idiocy if he went to Dartmoor and tried to find his way to Satan's Tor?

Vivien had kept the sketch which Breakspear had made for her. She had kept it because she honestly loved him, because everything that he did was precious in her eyes. When she reached Red Down hall, her nerves strung to their highest tension with many fears, many anxieties, she had taken the folded paper with the sketch from the pocket of her coat where she had hastily slipped it while traveling, and, having kissed the marks of Jim's pencil, she laid the sketch away with two or three other trifling souvenirs of him, which she had tenderly preserved.

It was not until his letter arrived that Vivien had thought of examining the other side of the paper, but his question regarding it sent her instantly to make inspection. Then she recognized the handwriting in the memorandum, and realized at a glance the importance of her discovery.

She was delighted that the paper had fallen into her hands, tho she could not decide at once exactly what use to make of it. She wanted to do the best that she could for herself; and the thought that her wisdom in choosing a line of conduct might affect her whole future, confused her judgment. Only one thing was clear to her for the moment. She must neither allow the paper to return to Jim Breakspear, or let her refusal to give it or the information set forth upon it, anger him against her.

As for the rest, it was now in her power to make terms with a man who had held her mercilessly under his control, and she longed to use her advantage to the utmost; yet—there was something else to think of. She was a woman in love, and her head could not always dominate her heart. There was another reason why she was glad that she had the paper. If she liked, she might take a bold step, and discover a thing which she ardently wished to know. To take such a step would be foolish, womanish, would mean a great risk which might endanger more than one project. She knew well that she ought, for her own sake, to steel herself against the temptation, yet in her heart she was almost sure that she would yield to it.

With her mind in this turmoil, Vivien let a day or two go by before answering Breakspear's letter. Then she wrote saying she had looked everywhere for the paper with the sketch, which she dimly remembered having put into her coat pocket in the train. (This was in case Jim had seen her dispose of the folded half-sheet.) Hoping to find it, she had delayed writing, she went on to state, but she had been disappointed; and as she had not looked at the other side of the sheet, being interested only in the sketch, she could not tell whether or not there had been notes on the paper. She ended by sending an invitation from her friends, cordially seconded by herself, for Jim to visit Red Down hall for three or four days. And he was begged to come on April 24th—the day after that on which he would receive the invitation. There was to be an informal dance in the evening, and Vivien couched in very flattering terms her desire to have the first waltz with Jim. She had something to tell him, too, she said, something very important—something in which he would be interested.

This letter arrived on Tuesday morning, and, oddly enough, it drove in the last nail which clinched his decision to go to Dartmoor and Satan's Tor. The very fact that he was asked to be present somewhere else, made him certain that if he did not go to Dartmoor and strive to snatch the secret of the black portmanteau and the Maltese cross, he would deeply regret it when too late. So he telegraphed to Vivien Oakley: "Extremely sorry previous engagement prevents my accepting kind invitation," and took the first train to Exeter.

Already, before he had made up his mind to the journey, Breakspear had looked up routes and trains. He knew that to reach New-Take Farm, where his old nurse's people had lived, he must go to Mavistock by rail, and then drive for eight or ten miles, passing the quaint village of Mallery-Tavy, which he remembered. New-Take Farm had once been an old hanor-house, but its ancient grandeur had departed when more than half the building had been destroyed by a great fire on the moor, now nearly two hundred years ago. A little later, the manor-house had passed into the possession of a farmer, and even the name had been changed. It was a lonely place, one of the most isolated on the moor, and Breakspear recalled a long drive between the village of Mallery-Tavy and New-Take; tho how many miles it had been he could not tell.

The ridiculous part of his expedition was that he did not know the hour of the appointment at Satan's Tor, if appointment it really was. He only knew that something was to happen at the place named on April 24th. Perhaps it was not his Satan's Tor, but another, since no details of the