The Bloomfield Times.

FRANK MORTIMER, Editor and Proprietor. | AN INDEPENDENT FAMILY NEWSPAPER. | Terms: IN ADVANCE, One Dollar per Year.

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THE BLOOMFIELD TIMES

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BY

FRANK MORTIMER.

SUBSCRIPTION TERMS.

ONE DOLLAR PER YEAR!

IN ADVANCE.

ADVERTISING RATES.

Transient—8 Cents per line for one insertion.
12 " " " two insertions.
15 " " " three insertions.
Business Notices in Local Column 10 Cents per line.
Notices of Marriages or Deaths inserted free.
Tributes of Respect, &c., Ten cents per line.

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One Square per year, including paper,	$ 8 00
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Ten Lines Nonpareil or one Inch, is one square.

Old Lawrence's Will:

WAS IT

Lost or Stolen?

THE WILL lay upon the counter before me, and my eyes were riveted upon the large cover which contained it, and which bore the inscription, "R. Grey, Esq., Mitre Buildings, the Temple, London." Within it lay Kate's destiny and mine. Whether we were to be married or not before our hair was gray was the secret wrapped up in its folds.

To go back to the beginning. My father had been the junior partner in the old bank of Fletcher and Slaney, of Thornbury, which had come to grief, after an honorable old-fashioned manner, paying off all its debts, according to the custom of forty years ago, at the expense of the firm, who thereupon became poor men. My father had many friends, and in those times, when political influence had its finger in the bestowal of all public offices worth having, the members for our Tory borough had little difficulty in procuring for the ex-banker the office of postmaster, then vacant.—The bank-offices, occupying the ground floor of our residence, were altered somewhat to suit the new purposes to which they were put. The public business room became a sort of outer office, and my father's private apartment the stamping and sorting place for the letters. The upper portion of the partition wall was thrown down, but left at a sufficient height to screen the inner room from the observation of any person in the outer one; yet it was open enough to make every word audible in either part, unless intentionally spoken in a whisper. In the course of a few years my father appointed me his head clerk, upon the promotion of the previous clerk to an office of his own; and our united salaries amounted to £400 a year, besides the numerous perquisities which at that time of day fell to the share of the postmaster, such as private letter-bags, and the postage upon local letters. We had two under-clerks, and the duties were light; very different from what they have since become, as I am told. The penny postage had only just come in; postage stamps were still an institution of the future, and money-orders had been a recognized branch of the establishment no more than two years. Only four years before, the stamp duty on newspapers had been 3½d. apiece, and the wildest Whig had not yet dreamed of a penny paper.—There were hours in our post-office when our two subordinates were more than sufficient for all the work of the place, and my father's post was little else than a sinecure.

One of the borough-men, who had been most active in procuring this comfortable berth for us, was an old crony of my father's,—both of them were Masons, and both dabblers in chemistry,—and also the wealthiest man in the whole neighborhood. He was a bachelor and continued to live very much in the simple and inexpensive style he had been used to in poorer days. His money had grown by lucky speculations and careful economy. A good number of his kindred lived about the town, all moderately well off, and more or less successful in life, except the brother next eldest to himself, who, having entered the Church had gained no higher promotion in it than a poor curacy in his native town, with an income of £100 a year. Old Lawrence treated him with a kind of fretful irritable brotherliness, which was but poorly plastered over by a yearly gift, grudgingly given, of another hundred. I need scarcely say that all the kindred were specially affectionate to old Lawrence.

His niece, Kate Lawrence, the curate's daughter, was,— well I shall not try to describe what she was, except by saying that I was in love with her, and had been ever since I had first seen her in church, listening, with a beaming and loving face, to her father preaching one of his prosiest sermons. Every body knew I was in love with Katie, for I made no secret of it; and Katie was just as simply and frankly in love with me, and made no secret of it either. Yet I am quite sure I had never asked her, in so many words if she would be my wife; but we were tacitly, without pledge or promise, given, engaged to marry one another as soon as fickle fortune would permit it. When that would be, the most prophetic soul could not foretell; for our lavish household expenditure at home, which had not been materially reduced upon the failure of the bank, swallowed up the united income of my father and myself, while my three sisters, now portionless, did not seem in a fair way to make elligible settlements. There was only one chance, a distant one, when old Lawrence died, would he leave Katie or her father any portion of his accumulated wealth?

Six or seven years had passed without the brightening of our prospects, when, quite unexpectedly, one morning old Lawrence's housekeeper rushed in with news that she had found her master dead in his bed. Only the night before, he and my father had been trying some chemical experiments, and the shock to the latter was so violent that he was insensible for some time, and continued speechless after his conciousness had apparently returned. Of course, my mother and sisters were in great agitation, and it was an hour or two before I could leave them, after assisting to get my father to bed, and sending for his doctor. As soon as I could, however, I hastened to the poor solitary old man's house. The streets were all in commotion, and the whole town seemed in a fever of curiosity concerning the sudden event, and what might result from it. In the house inself I found every one of the relatives who lived in the town, including two younger brothers and a married sister of the deceased, and by the side of the dead man sat Katie's father, genuine tears of sorrow blinding his eyes.

The excitement, once awakened, did not seem likely to slumber again till curiosity was satisfied. It was plain that the old man had died from natural causes; but as soon as the town was assured of that, the question upon every tongue was, "Has he made a will?" or, "How has he left his money?" I was myself devoured by anxiety, of which I was half ashamed. If he had died intestate, Katie's father, as heir-at-law, would come into possession of his landed property, and into a fourth part of his personality, which would be no insignificant windfall in itself. It was a subject which might well thrust itself upon me, in spite of my father's serious attack, which seemed not unlike a stroke of paralysis.

During the course of the afternoon, old Lawrence's solicitor, Mr. Snape, was announced, and I went to speak to him. He requested to see my father, with a very important tone and expression of countenance.

"It is impossible," I answered, "quite impossible; he cannot see any one. He has not spoken since this morning, when he heard of the sudden death of his old friend. Arnold is apprehensive of paralysis. Is it anything that I can do?"

"No, no," replied Mr. Snape; "your father is one of the executors to Mr. Lawrence's will, and I have brought it here with me, to consult him about it. The other is Grey, of the Temple. Under these circumstances, I suppose I must forward it to him; and perhaps it is best. It must be proved at Canterbury, and he can see to it at once."

"Why at Canterbury?" I asked eagerly.

"Because there is landed property in three different dioceses," he answered. "I'll send it to Grey by to-night's mail."

"Well, my father can do nothing," I said, wondering all the time whether Mr. Snape knew what were the provisions of the will, so momentous to Katie and me.

There was a will, however; that far was certain. A kind of wild hope which had been kindled in my breast, was quite quenched by the visit from Mr. Snape.—I felt myself sinking into a gloomy depression, which appeared exceedingly ominous to me. For three or four hours I brooded despondently over the fact that there was a will, scarcely allowing myself to cherish a spark of hope that Katie was provided for in it; for how often does a rich man leave his money to the poorest of his kindred? I had nothing else to occupy my mind. My mother and sisters sat weeping in my father's darkened and silent room. All the windows in our house had the curtains drawn. At last it occurred to me that this was the last day of September, and that the money-order account, which was made up quarterly, ought to be balanced, and sent up to London by the night's mail. Glad of anything to work at, I went down stairs to the inner office, found the necessary forms, and set myself steadily to the task.

I had just completed it, and folded up my balance-sheet, when I heard a footstep and voice in the outer office, both loud, and of a kind to arrest attention. They belonged to one of Snape's clerks, who had come in to post his master's letter.

"Look here," he said; "I was to see you take this one straight in to Mr. Slaney; it's on no account to be left here with ordinary letters. It's old Lawrence's will, I guess. By George! I only wish that my name was inside of it."

It was brought to me immediately, and placed before me on the counter. I did not touch it, but there it lay, a long narrow packet, not over large or bulky, yet containing the whole of Kate's future and mine.

I cannot say how long I sat before it, fascinated, perfectly spell-bound; my eyes riveted upon it, as if they could see through the thick cover, and read the momentous lines within. I never touched it with my fingers even. I felt as if I no more dare do that than I would have dared to tease and arouse some deadly serpent. I am concious however, that not the shadow of an idea of opening it ever crossed my mind. At last I felt a warm smooth little hand laid upon mine, and Katie's voice whispered close to my ear. "What is it you're staring at, Harry?"

There was of course an entrance into this inner office from the house, and Katie had stolen in several times before, when I was alone, and had always spoken in the lowest of whispers, lest the clerks in the office beyond should overhear her: yet I started nervously at the sound of her voice and the touch of her hand, and she was obliged to repeat her question before I seemed to comprehend it.

"This is your uncle's will," I answered.

Her eyes met mine, and there was a strange look in them, such as I had never seen before,—an uneasy, troubled, almost sly expression. She had been crying until they appeared smaller than usual under their swollen lids. She dropped her eyelids hurriedly, and then she whispered again,—

"If there had been no will?"

I answered her as if that were a question but afterwards it occurred to me that it was an involuntary utterance of her wish.

"Your father would have been heir-at-law, Katie," I replied, "and you a great heiress."

As I was speaking, an alarmed and hurried voice called loudly for me from the interior of the house,—a voice so urgent, and strung to such a pitch of terror, that it drove every thought of everything else out of my mind. At a couple of bounds I sprang up the staircase, and into my father's bedroom, where every one was in confusion and dismay. Some crisis of his sudden attack had come on, and he was to all appearance in the agonies of death. A friendship, too rare between father and son, existed between him and me,—a very close friendship, which had grown with my growth from boyhood. To lose him would be to lose half my life. I did not give a thought to my official duties; the Queen's mail was nothing to me; and during the whole of that long night I never left my father's side.

The next morning he was pronounced to be out of immediate danger, though he continued speechless, and seemed scarcely concious of our presence. By dint of persevering entreaty, my mother persuaded me to go and lie down, when I fell into one of those utter and awful lethargies, deeper and more deathlike than sleep, which now and then seem to come to obliterate any impression stamped too deeply upon the brain. When I awoke I felt calm and strong again. Katie was in the house, and she and my sister lavished upon me those trivial feminine attentions so expressibly soothing after any great emotion, when one is suffering from languor which usually follows it.

When the hour for making up the mail arrived, I went down into the office, and made some slight inquiries as to how the clerks had managed the work the evening before. They had been late, of course; but the mail-coach—there was no railway near Thornbury then—had waited for them to complete their evening's dispatch, and they believed everything had gone off as well as usual.

But the return mail proved that everything had not gone off as well as usual. Our mail, leaving Thornbury at 8 P. M., reached the London office about noon the next day; and the return mail, not quitting London until eight o'clock on the following morning, threw the arrival of the answers to correspondence to the fourth morning. On the fourth day after old Lawrence's death, to the serious inconvenience of all parties, there appeared no reply to Mr. Snape's communication to Mr. Grey, which had been enclosed with the will, and in which he desired to be immediately acquainted with any instructions left by the deceased in regard to his funeral. The next London mail was waited for, but there was still no letter: and then the interment necessarily took place, while the solicitor addressed a second communication to the executor.

I awaited with the keenest anxiety, the arrival of Mr. Grey or his reply, and all the town was on tip-toe of expectation. The relatives did nothing but meet one another, and discuss the will in all its possibilities. There was a wistful look about Katie's face. It was nine days now since old Lawrence's death, but the wonder, instead of dying out, was growing greater every day. Why did not the executor come to satisfy the general curiosity, and set the general mind to ease? The mail-bags reached Thornbury about midnight, and were ordinarily deposited in the office to await the appointed hour for opening them at seven in the morning, which was considered quite early enough for the accommodation of the public. But upon this occasion Mr. Snape spent the evening with me, and when the mail arrived, he and I went down alone into the quiet office, where I picked out the London bag, opened it, took out the bundles of letters, ran my eager fingers and eyes over them, until I came to the one I was in search of, and handed it over to the lawyer.

There was a dead silence in the hour and place, only the clock ticking off the seconds as evenly as if nothing was happening. I watching Mr. Snape's face hungrily, as if it would reflect and disclose what he was reading. The letter was brief, but he read it over twice. It seemed a very long pause of suspense to me, yet I suppose three minutes had scarcely passed.

"He says he has never heard of old Lawrence's death!" exclaimed Mr. Snape at length; "he knows nothing about his will; has never received it!"

"Never received it!" I repeated, "not received it! But I could take my oath it went from this office."

"Did you see it go into the bag yourself?" asked Mr. Snape.

I hesitated a minute or two, for that deep lethargic sleep I spoke of had dimmed my recollections of that night. I remembered it was the night I had left the two under-clerks to do all the work alone, while I was watching beside my father; but I recalled also the exact spot where I had left the will on the counter, reared up against the folded money-order account, which had been duly acknowledged as received. If one had gone safely, why not the other?

"No," I answered, after that long pause; "I took it in, and left it here on the counter; but the clerks did the work that evening. It would be impossible for them to overlook it. Besides, we should have found it the next day if it had been left behind; and I should certainly have informed you of the irregularity. No. It *must* have gone from here."

So said the elder clerk, when we questioned him in the morning. He could not positively swear to it, because they had been hurried and flurried over their work; but he was quite sure it must have gone, if it had been on the counter as I described. The other clerk who had taken it in, and knew it to be Lawrence's will, had not made up in the London bag, or he would have taken special notice of it, and would have been able to swear to it. Still, both of them were positive that it had not been left behind; though it might have got into the wrong bag, and been missent.

"I'll go to London by to-night's mail," said Mr. Snipe.

Nothing could be more significant of the importance of the document; for a journey to London by coach, occupying sixteen hours at the swiftest, was not undertaken for a trifle. The anxiety which had been devouring me was now sharpened to a keener point; but both Mr. Snape and I wished to keep the affair quiet as long as possible, and I said nothing about it to any one, my father still being too ill to have it confided to him. As for the clerks, both being unmarried men, there was little dangar of their telling tales out of school, after being once warned to keep it to themselves for the present.

But the anxiety I had suffered before was security itself compared with my consternation and disquietude when Mr. Snape returned, accompanied by Mr. Grey, who asserted that he had seen nothing whatever of the packet which had been posted in our office. There was not a shadow of a doubt of that last circumstance. The clerk who received it and I myself were compelled to admit that it had been safely deposited with us; but no trace of it could be found beyond that. Both Snape and Grey had been to the General Post-office to make inquiries there, but nothing was known of it. The whole onus of the disappearance rested upon our office, and three persons within it.

It was simply impossible to keep the mysterious loss of old Lawrence's will any longer a secret. The relatives were ready to pull Mr. Grey to pieces as soon as he showed his face in the town. Was it not shameful, scandalous, that a fortnight had already dragged by, and no one knew how a quarter of a million of money — for rumors said the old man's wealth was no less—had been bequeathed? With what reluctance Grey made known the facts. There had been a will; he and the postmaster were executors; it had been posted for him on the night after old Lawrence's death, and nothing more was known about it.

[CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK.]