

I Where is Bela?

A high and narrow gate of carefully joined boards, standing ajar in a fence of the same construction! What is there in this to rouse a whole neighbourhood and collect before it a group of eager, anxious, hesitating people? I will tell you.

This fence is no ordinary fence, and this gate no ordinary gate; nor is the fact of the latter standing a trifle open, one to be lightly regarded or taken an inconsiderate advantage of. For this is Judge Ostrander's place, and anyone who knows Shelby or the gossip of its suburbs, knows that this house of his has not opened its doors to any outsider, man or woman, for over a dozen years; nor have his gates—in saying which, I include the great one in front—been seen in all that time to gape at anyone's instance or to stand unclosed to public intrusion, no, not for a moment. The seclusion sought was absolute. The men and women who passed and repassed this corner many times a day were as ignorant as the townspeople in general of what lay behind the grey, monotonous exterior of the weather-beaten boards they so frequently brushed against. The house was there, of course,—they all knew the house, or did once—but there were rumours (no one ever knew how they originated) of another fence, a second barrier, standing a few feet inside the first and similar to it in all respects, even to the gates which corresponded exactly with these outer and visible ones and probably were just as fully provided with bolts and bars.

To be sure, these were reports rather than acknowledged facts, but the possibility of their truth roused endless wonder and gave to the eccentricities of this well-known man a mysterious significance which lost little or nothing in the slow passage of years.

And now! in the freshness of this summer morning, without warning or any seeming reason for the change, the strict habit of years has been broken into and this gate of gates is not only standing unlocked before their eyes, but a woman—a stranger to the town as her very act shows—has been seen to enter there!—to enter, but not come out; which means that she must still be inside, and possibly in the very presence of the judge.

Where is Bela? Why does he allow his errands—But it was Bela, or so they have been told, who left this gate ajar . . . he, the awe and terror of the town, the enormous, redoubtable, close-mouthed black man, trusted as man is seldom trusted, and faithful to his trust, yes, up to this very hour, as all must acknowledge, in spite of every temptation (and they had been many and alluring) to disclose the secret of this home of which he was not the least interesting factor. What has made him thus suddenly careless, he who has never been careless before? Money? A bribe from the woman who had entered there? Impossible to believe, his virtue has always been so impeccable, his devotion to his strange and dominating master so sturdy and so seemingly unaffected by time and chance!

Yet, what else was there to believe? There stood the gate with the pebble holding it away from the post; and here stood half the neighbourhood, staring at that pebble and at the all but invisible crack it made where an opening had never been seen before, in a fascination which had for its motif, not so much the knowledge that these forbidden precincts had been invaded by a stranger, as that they were open to any intruding foot—that they, themselves, if they had courage enough, might go in, just as this woman had gone in, and see—why, what she is seeing now—the unknown, unguessed reason for all these mysteries;— the hidden treasure or the hidden sorrow which would explain why he, their first citizen, the respected, even revered judge of their highest court, should make use of such precautions and show such unvarying determination to bar out all comers from the place he called his home.

It had not always been so. Within the memory of many there it had been an abode of cheer and good fellowship. Not a few of the men and women now hesitating before its portals could boast of meals taken at the judge's ample board, and of evenings spent in animated conversation in the great room where he kept his books and did his writing.

But that was before his son left him in so unaccountable a manner; before—yes, all were agreed on this point—before that other bitter ordeal of his middle age, the trial and condemnation of the man who had waylaid and murdered his best friend.

Though the effect of these combined sorrows had not seemed to be immediate (one month had seen both); though a half-year had elapsed before all sociability was lost in extreme self-absorption, and a full one before he took down the picket-fence which had hitherto been considered a sufficient protection to his simple grounds, and put up these boards which had so completely isolated him from the rest of the world, it was evident enough to the friends who recalled his look and step as he walked the streets with Algernon Etheridge on one side and his brilliant, ever-successful son on the other, that the change now observable in him was due to the violent sundering of these two ties.

Affections so centred wreck the lives from which they are torn; and Time, which reconciles most men to their losses, had failed to reconcile him to his. Grief slowly settled into confirmed melancholy, and melancholy into the eccentricities of which I have spoken and upon which I must now enlarge a trifle further, in order that the curiosity and subsequent action of the small group of people in whom we are interested may be fully understood and, possibly, in some degree pardoned.

Judge Ostrander was, as I have certainly made you see, a recluse of the most uncompromising type; but he was such for only half his time. From ten in the morning till five in the afternoon, he came and went like any other citizen, fulfilling his judicial duties with the same

scrupulous care as formerly and with more affability. Indeed, he showed at times, and often when it was least expected, a mellowness of temper quite foreign to him in his early days. The admiration awakened by his fine appearance on the bench was never marred now by those quick and rasping tones of an easily disturbed temper which had given edge to his invective when he stood as pleader in the very court where he now presided as judge. But away from the bench, once quit of the courthouse and the town, the man who attempted to accost him on his way to his carriage or sought to waylay him at his own gate, had need of all his courage to sustain the rebuff his presumption incurred.

One more detail and I will proceed with my story.

The son, a man of great ability who was making his way as a journalist in another city, had no explanation to give of his father's peculiarities. Though he never came to Shelby—the rupture between the two, if rupture it were, seeming to be complete—there were many who had visited him in his own place of business and put such questions concerning the judge and his eccentric manner of living as must have provoked response had the young man had any response to give. But he appeared to have none. Either he was as ignorant as themselves of the causes which had led to his father's habit of extreme isolation, or he showed powers of dissimulation that were hardly in accordance with the other traits of his admirable character.

All of which closed inquiry in this direction, but left the maw of curiosity unsatisfied.

And unsatisfied it had remained up to this hour, when through accident—or was it treachery—the barrier to knowledge was down and the question of years seemed at last upon the point of being answered.

II
Was He Living?— Was He Dead?

Meantime, a fussy, talkative man was endeavouring to impress the rapidly collecting crowd with the advisability of their entering all together and approaching the judge in a body.

“We can say that we felt it to be our dooty to follow this woman in,” he argued. “We don’t know who she is, or what her errand is. She may mean harm; I’ve heard of such things, and are we goin’ to see the judge in danger and do nothin’?”

“Oh, the woman is all right,” spoke up another voice. “She has a child with her. Didn’t you say that she had a child with her, Miss Weeks?”

“Yes, and—”

“Tell us the whole story, Miss Weeks. Some of us haven’t heard it. Then if it seems our duty as his neighbours and well-wishers to go in, we’ll just go in.”

The little woman towards whom this appeal — or shall I say command—was directed, flushed a fine colour under so many eyes, but immediately began her ingenuous tale. She had already related it a half dozen times into as many sympathising ears, but she was not one to shirk publicity, for all her retiring manners and meekness of disposition. It was to this effect:

She was sitting in her front window sewing. (Everybody knew that this window faced the end of the lane in which they were then standing.) The blinds were drawn but not quite, being held in just the desired position by a string. Naturally, she could see out without being very plainly seen herself; and quite naturally, too, since she had watched the same proceeding for years, she had her eyes on this gate when Bela, prompt to the minute as he always was, issued forth on his morning walk to town for the day’s supplies.

Always exact, always in a hurry — knowing as he did that the judge would not leave for court till his return—he had never, in all

the eight years she had been sitting in that window making button-holes, shown any hesitation in his methodical relocking of the gate and subsequent quick departure.

But this morning he had neither borne himself with his usual spirit nor moved with his usual promptitude. Instead of stepping at once into the lane, he had lingered in the gate-way peering to right and left and pushing the gravel aside with his foot in a way so unlike himself that the moment he was out of sight, she could not help running down the lane to see if her suspicions were correct.

And they were. Not only had he left the gate unlocked, but he had done so purposely. The movement he had made with his foot had been done for the purpose of pushing into place a small pebble, which, as all could see, lay where it would best prevent the gate from closing.

What could such treachery mean, and what was her neighbourly duty under circumstances so unparalleled? Should she go away, or stop and take one peep just to see that there really was another and similar fence inside of this one? She had about decided that it was only proper for her to enter and make sure that all was right with the judge, when she experienced that peculiar sense of being watched with which all of us are familiar, and turning quickly round, saw a woman looking at her from the road,—a woman all in purple even to the veil which hid her features. A little child was with her, and the two must have stepped into the road from behind some of the bushes, as neither of them were anywhere in sight when she herself came running down from the corner.

It was enough to startle anyone, especially as the woman did not speak but just stood silent and watchful till Miss Weeks in her embarrassment began to edge away towards home in the hope that the other would follow her example and so leave the place free for her to return and take the little peep she had promised herself.

But before she had gone far, she realised that the other was not following her, but was still standing in the same spot, watching her

through a veil the like of which is not to be found in Shelby, and which in itself was enough to rouse a decent woman's suspicions.

She was so amazed at this that she stepped back and attempted to address the stranger. But before she had got much further than a timid and hesitating Madam, the woman, roused into action possibly by her interference, made a quick gesture suggestive of impatience if not rebuke, and moving resolutely towards the gate Miss Weeks had so indiscreetly left unguarded, pushed it open and disappeared within, dragging the little child after her.

The audacity of this act, perpetrated without apology before Miss Weeks' very eyes, was too much for that lady's equanimity. She stopped stock-still, and, as she did so, beheld the gate swing heavily to and stop an inch from the post, hindered as we know by the intervening pebble. She had scarcely got over the shock of this when plainly from the space beyond she heard a second creaking noise, then the swinging to of another gate, followed, after a breathless moment of intense listening, by a series of more distant sounds, which could only be explained by the supposition that the house door had been reached, opened and passed.

"And you didn't follow?"

"I didn't dare."

"And she's in there still?"

"I haven't seen her come out."

"Then what's the matter with you?" called out a burly, high-strung woman, stepping hastily from the group and laying her hand upon the gate still standing temptingly ajar. "It's no time for nonsense," she announced, as she pushed it open and stepped promptly in, followed by the motley group of men and women who, if they lacked courage to lead, certainly showed willingness enough to follow.

One glance and they felt their courage rewarded.

Rumour, which so often deceives, proved itself correct in this case. A second gate confronted them exactly like the first even to the point of being held open by a pebble placed against the post.

And a second fence also! built upon the same pattern as the one they had just passed through; the two forming a double barrier as mysterious to contemplate in fact as it had ever been in fancy. In gazing at these fences and the canyon-like walk stretching between them, the band of curious invaders forgot their prime errand. Many were for entering this path whose terminus they could not see for the sharp turns it took in rounding either corner. Among them was a couple of girls who had but one thought, as was evinced by their hurried whispers. "If it looks like this in the daytime, what must it be at night!" To which came the quick retort: "I've heard that the judge walks here. Imagine it under the moon!"

But whatever the mysteries of the place, a greater one awaited them beyond, and presently realising this, they burst with one accord through the second gate into the mass of greenery, which, either from neglect or intention, masked this side of the Ostrander homestead.

Never before had they beheld so lawless a growth or a house so completely lost amid vines and shrubbery. So unchecked had been the spread of verdure from base to chimney, that the impression made by the indistinguishable mass was one of studied secrecy and concealment. Not a window remained in view, and had it not been for some chance glimmers here and there where some small, unguarded portion of the enshrouded panes caught and reflected the sunbeams, they could not have told where they were located in these once well-known walls.

Two solemn fir trees, which were all that remained of an old-time and famous group, kept guard over the untended lawn, adding their suggestion of age and brooding melancholy to the air of desolation infecting the whole place. One might be approaching a tomb for all token that appeared of human presence. Even sound was lacking. It was like a painted scene—a dream of human extinction.

Instinctively the women faltered and the men drew back; then the very silence caused a sudden reaction, and with one simultaneous

rush, they made for the only entrance they saw and burst without further ceremony into the house.

A common hall and common furnishings confronted them. They had entered at the side and were evidently close upon the kitchen. More they could not gather; for blocked as the doorway was by their crowding figures, the little light which sifted in over their heads was not enough to show up details.

But it was even darker in the room towards which their determined leader now piloted them. Here there was no light at all; or if some stray glimmer forced its way through the network of leaves swathing the outer walls, it was of too faint a character to reach the corners or even to make the furniture about them distinguishable.

Halting with one accord in what seemed to be the middle of the uncarpeted floor, they waited for some indication of a clear passageway to the great room where the judge would undoubtedly be found in conversation with his strange guest, unless, forewarned by their noisy entrance, he should have risen already to meet them. In that case they might expect at any minute to see his tall form emerging in anger upon them through some door at present unseen.

This possibility, new to some but recognised from the first by others, fluttered the breasts of such as were not quite impervious to a sense of their own presumption, and as they stood in a close group, swaying from side to side in a vain endeavour to see their way through the gloom before them, the whimper of a child and the muttered ejaculations of the men testified that the general feeling was one of discontent which might very easily end in an outburst of vociferous expression.

But the demon of curiosity holds fast and as soon as their eyes had become sufficiently used to the darkness to notice the faint line of light marking the sill of a door directly in front of them, they all plunged forward in spite of the fear I have mentioned.

The woman of the harsh voice and self-satisfied demeanour, who had started them upon this adventure, was still ahead; but even she

quailed when, upon laying her hand upon the panel of the door she was the first to reach, she felt it to be cold and knew it to be made not of wood but of iron. How great must be the treasure or terrible the secret to make necessary such extraordinary precautions! Was it for her to push open this door, and so come upon discoveries which—

But here her doubts were cut short by finding herself face to face with a curtain instead of a yielding door. The pressure of the crowd behind had precipitated her past the latter into a small vestibule which acted as an ante-chamber to the very room they were in search of.

The shock restored her self-possession. Bracing herself, she held her place for a moment, while she looked back, with a finger laid on her lip. The light was much better here and they could all see both the move she made and the expression which accompanied it.

“Look at this!” she whispered, pushing the curtain inward with a quick movement.

Her hand had encountered no resistance. There was nothing between them and the room beyond but a bit of drapery.

“Now hark, all of you,” fell almost soundlessly from her lips, as she laid her own ear against the curtain.

And they hearkened.

Not a murmur came from within, not so much as the faintest rustle of clothing or the flutter of a withheld breath. All was perfectly still—too still. As the full force of this fact impressed itself upon them, a blankness settled over their features. The significance of this undisturbed quiet was making itself felt. If the two were there, or if he were there alone, they would certainly hear some movement, voluntary or involuntary—and they could hear nothing. Was the woman gone? Had she found her way out front while they approached from the rear? And the judge! Was he gone also?—this man of inalterable habits—gone before Bela’s return—a thing he had not been known to do in the last twelve years? No, no, this