

A Wedding Tombstone.

BY CLARICE IRENE CLINGHAN.



O you never heard tell of Melindy Barbour's weddin' tombstone?" said grandma in a tone of surprise. "For the land's sake, I thought everybody knew about that."

I confessed the most abject ignorance and immediately drew up to the fire. This was partly to gain information and partly because, although the fireplace was wide and deep throated and big logs were blazing in it, there were biting draughts of stinging November air coming in at the loosely fitting door. For grandmother would not be persuaded to leave the home that had been hers for fifty years, and which now showed some signs of decay. She sat knitting vigorously by the firelight, for, although she had all the modern conveniences of heating and lighting, her big fireplace cast its ruddy glow out into the room through all the long winter evenings. I was an angular schoolgirl of fifteen then, with a great love of the romantic, and was on a four weeks' visit at the old homestead. It seemed never to occur to grandma that, having been raised in a different part of the country, the happenings at Ragged Corner (where she lived) would naturally be unknown to me. She always expressed fresh surprise at my ignorance on these subjects. After knitting a few minutes in silence, she began:

"You've seen the old stone house down on the bank of the river, all shut in with pines and evergreens? It's nigh a hundred years old. When I was born it had been built ten years. When I was a young married woman the Barbours came to live there, and they was proud, high-feelin' people that nobody could get acquainted with. That's what made 'em take it so dretful hard when — but here I am, way ahead of my story. You see, Mr. Barbour embezzled or did something of that kind, and went to

prison. After he had been there a year he up and hung himself, and that is the last of him so far as my story goes.

“Then his wife and little boy shut themselves up in the stone house and never went outside the gate hardly. She’d had a good deal of schooling, his mother had, and she taught him herself as long as she could, and then he bought books and studied by himself. He tried going to school when he was a small boy, but one of the scholars threw it at him about his father, and Mortimer nearly killed him, and after that his mother kep’ him home. And she was such a proud woman, was Mis’ Barbour, and lofty and severe in her ways. She wouldn’t let nobody sympathize with her, which everybody wanted to, as there’s so little going on in a place like Ragged Corner. Mis’ Barbour was real selfish with her grief, so she got herself disliked, besides folks bein’ suspicious after the way her husband turned out. What did they live on? Oh, the boy farmed it, and later they do say he wrote books on what they call natural history, though to my mind it was the most unnatural stuff I ever heard tell of,—all about beetles and bugs with three hundred muscles in their heads, and as could carry twelve hundred times their own weight on their own backs, which everybody knows he must have got up as he went along. They were dretfully taken up with each other, he and his mother, and she believed everything he said was so, even about the bugs and beetles. But she was his own born mother, and that explains it.

“When she died, Mortimer liked to went crazy. He planted her grave with vi’lets and pansies, and at the head was a white marble monument he had gone to the city for — nothing nearer would suit him. But he didn’t display no taste. Nothing on it, my dear, but the old lady’s name and the date she died — not an angel, nor a cherub, or a lamb, or a broken rosebud, nor a bit of verse. And yet he always seemed to set store by her.

“Then Mortimer, he just stuck to the old house, same as ever, though now he was alone. I used to wonder how it seemed to him late at night hearin’ the swash of the river and the sighin’ of them pine trees. He wore his hair long, as was the custom in them days, and it was curly up at the ends, like the picture of John Wesley. But he had eyes that went right through you and

came out the back of your head. And he never set foot into the meeting-house, nohow.

“Now, he was the last man in the village I’d ever said would got married. But as sure as you set there, when the little milliner, Melinda McAllister, came into the place, he was struck. That wasn’t nothing strange—all the young fellows was—but, mind you, *she was struck, too*. No, you wouldn’t ‘a’ thought it. Everybody warned her, and told her about his father’s hangin’ himself in prison, and how queer his mother was, and that Mortimer was as odd as Dick’s hatband and wouldn’t come to no good. She listened, with her eyes big and cool and a little hot patch of red on her cheeks like a daub of paint, but she never said a word. That was Melindy McAllister all over, never to say a blessed word, but go and do just as she saw fit. First we knew they was engaged, and it was given out in meeting. Next day her aunt she lived with came in to see me, and wrung her hands, sayin’ she wouldn’t be surprised if Melindy was murdered before the year was out. What can you think of a man who lives like a hermit, and had a crooked father and a peculiar mother?

“But we wasn’t prepared for the worst. A day or two before the wedding, in comes old Mis’ Johnson, and says, ‘Shut up the doors tight,’ says she, ‘and the winders. I’ve got something to tell you that’ll make your hair rise up,’ she says, whisperin’-like. So I shut the door, she a-workin’ her hands together like one possessed. ‘It’s about Melindy,’ she went on. ‘He’s been and got a tombstone for her.’ ‘Who?’ asked I, as if I didn’t know, but my knees knocked together and I felt a bit sick. ‘Mortimer Barbour,’ says she. ‘My grandson, Johnnie, was after a bird’s nest in a tree over in his yard. The limb broke, and down he went right onto the roof of the old cornhouse, that hasn’t been used for years. It went in under him like tinder, and as soon as he could pick himself up and found no bones broke, what should he see but a new white gravestone, a-settin’ up quite pert in a corner against some rubbish. He went up to it, and he says as true as the Bible he saw ‘Melinda Barbour’ cut on it, and the date she is a-goin’ to die.’ ‘I don’t believe it,’ says I, but I was all a-faint, and had to go and make us each a cup of tea, so we could bear up under it.

“As soon as I said I didn’t believe it Mis’ Johnson said we’d go ourselves and *see*. And we did go, Mortimer bein’ away in the fields, and got into the cornhouse. It was towards dark, and we shook with the cold, though it was a warm day in June. We’d brought a bit of candle with us, and Mis’ Johnson lit it, and then we saw — land sakes, child, how scairt you look; don’t get so near the fire, honey, you’ll be all ablaze. Where was I? Oh, we saw the stone, just as Johnnie said, a real gravestone of white marble, and on it the name ‘Melindy Barbour,’ with the date ‘Sept. 5, 18—,’ below it. But the rest we couldn’t make out. ‘He’s going to let her live three months, may heaven forgive him,’ says old Mis’ Johnson, meanin’ different from what she said.

“The next day I went to Melindy, and told her the whole truth. And would you believe it, she said she thought Mis’ Johnson and I had no business prying about other people’s affairs? ‘If he had bought me a thousand gravestones I’d have him just the same,’ says she. So they was married the next day in the meeting-house, but Melindy was white as a ghost, and she trembled so she could hardly walk. They went right away on the cars, and we threw some old shoes after ’em, but all the wishin’ of joy was make believe, and I never saw a bride with such a white, set face, never looking at her husband nor yet at us.

“They was away nearly three months; then they came back to the old house. But folks said they wasn’t happy, that she was as cold as a stone, and he was always at his books and old insects. One day I got a letter askin’ me to come and see her. She was lyin’ down on a lounge when I got there, white and so thin, with big eyes with a sorry, hungry look in ’em. But she had on a smart gown, and was as pretty as a pictur. As soon as we’d shaken hands and I’d taken off my bonnet and mantilla, she says, ‘Do you know what day to-morrow is?’ Then I thought it up, and said it was the 5th of September. ‘The day I am to die,’ she says in a soft, quiet way. Then I up and asked her if Mortimer had been ill-treatin’ her, but she put up her finger, and said, ‘Not a word to my husband; he doesn’t know I know it.’ Then she said he was awful good to her, but she couldn’t get that gravestone out of her head day or night. All at once it came to me

how matters was; she'd been too proud to give him up, besides her likin' him, too; and she'd been too proud to tell him about it; and so betwixt the two the poor child was almost beat out. She asked if I would go out to the cornhouse with her to see the stone. She wanted to see it and was afraid to go alone.

“Then a queer thing happened. Mortimer had come into the next room while she'd been talkin', and heard every word. I never saw anybody so stirred up as he was when he came in. ‘Is that tombstone what has stood between us?’ he said, and went on to explain that it had been ordered for his mother. He was such a bad writer that the stone-cutter mistook the name Malviny for Melindy, and after the stone was half done it was found out, and they made him pay for it. So, as it was his, they brought it to him, and, not knowin' what to do with it, he'd just set it up in the cornhouse and forgot all about it. Melindy, she began to cry, and then they fell to huggin' and kissin' each other, as if they hadn't met for years. I tried to put in a word to ca'm 'em, but they saw me without seeing me, and heard me without hearing me, so I put on my bonnet and mantilla and came away and left 'em.

“After that? Dear me, they was the happiest couple you ever saw. They used the gravestone for a front doorstep, wrong side up, and it was real pretty. Melindy was dretful proud of him, and believed every word he wrote about them bugs and beetles, just as his mother did, which only goes to show that the old sayin' is true, that love is blind.”

