

The Spiral Stone

Arthur Colton

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The graveyard on the brow of the hill was white with snow. The marbles were white, the evergreens black. One tall spiral stone stood painfully near the centre. The little brown church outside the gates turned its face in the more comfortable direction of the village.

Only three were out among the graves: "Ambrose Chillingworth, aetat 30, 1675"; "Margaret Vane, aetat 19, 1839"; and "Thy Little One, O God, aetat 2," from the Mercer Lot. It is called the "Mercer Lot," but the Mercers are all dead or gone from the village.

The Little One trotted around busily, putting his tiny finger in the lettering and patting the faces of the cherubs. The other two sat on the base of the spiral, which twisted in the moonlight over them.

"I wonder why it is?" Margaret said. "Most of them never come out at all. We and the Little One come out so often. You were wise and learned. I knew so little. Will you tell me?"

"Learning is not wisdom," Ambrose answered. "But of this matter it was said that our containment in the grave depended on the spirit in which we departed. I made certain researches. It appeared by common report that only those came out whom desperate sin tormented, or labors incomplete and great desire at the point of death made restless. I had doubts the matter were more subtle, the reasons of it reaching out distantly." He sighed faintly, following with his eyes, tomb by tomb, the broad white path that dropped down the hillside to the church. "I desired greatly to live."

"I too. Is it because we desired it so much, then? But the Little One —"

"I do not know," he said.

The Little One trotted gravely here and there, seeming to know very well what he was about, and presently came to the spiral stone. The lettering on it was new, and there was no cherub. He dropped down suddenly on the snow with a faint whimper. His small feet came out from under his gown, as he sat upright gazing at the letters with round, troubled eyes, and up to the top of the monument, for the solution of some unstated problem.

"The stone is but newly placed," said Ambrose, "and the new-comer would seem to be of those who rest in peace."

They went and sat down on either side of him, on the snow. The peculiar cutting of the stone, with spirally ascending lines, together with the moon's illusion, gave it a semblance of motion. Something twisted and climbed continually, and vanished continually from the point. But the base was broad, square, and heavily lettered: "John Mareschelli Vane."

"Vane? That was thy name," said Ambrose.

1890. AETAT 72.

AN EMINENT CITIZEN, A PUBLIC BENEFAC-
TOR AND WIDELY ESTEEMED. ,

FOR THE LOVE OF HIS NATIVE PLACE RE-
TURNED TO LAY HIS DUST THEREIN.
THE JUST MADE PERFECT.

"It would seem he did well and rounded his labors to a goodly end, lying down among his kindred as a sheaf that is garnered in the autumn. He was fortunate."

And Margaret spoke, in the thin, emotionless voice which those who are long in the graveyard use: "He was my brother."

"Thy brother?" said Ambrose.

The Little One looked up and down the spiral with wide eyes. The other two looked past it into the deep white valley, where the river, covered with ice and snow, was marked only by the lines of skeleton willows and poplars. A night wind, listless but continual, stirred the evergreens. The moon swung low over the opposite hills, and for a moment slipped behind a cloud.

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"Says it is not so, 'For the Love of his Native Place'?" murmured Ambrose.

And as the moon came out, there leaned against the pedestal, pointing with a finger at the epitaph, one that seemed an old man, with bowed shoulders and keen, restless face, but in his manner cowed and weary.

"It is a lie," he said slowly. "I hated it, Margaret. I came because Ellen Mercer called me."

"Ellen isn't buried here."

"Not here?"

"Not here."

"Was it you, then, Margaret? Why?"

"I didn't call you."

"Who then?" he shrieked. "Who called me?"

The night wind moved on monotonously, and the moonlight was undisturbed, like glassy water.

"When I came away," she said, "I thought you would marry her. You didn't, then? But why should she call you?" ,

"I left the village suddenly!" he cried. "I grew to dread and then to hate it. I buried myself from the knowledge of it, and the memory of it was my enemy. I wished for a distant death, and these fifty years have heard the summons to come and lay my bones in this graveyard. I thought it was Ellen. You, sir, wear an antique dress; you have been long in this strange existence. Can you tell who called me? If not Ellen, where is Ellen?" He wrung his hands, and rocked to and fro.

"The mystery is with the dead as with the living," said Ambrose. "The shadows of the future and the past come among us. We look in their eyes, and understand them not. Now and again there is a call even here, and the grave is henceforth untenanted of its spirit. Here, too, we know a necessity which binds us, which speaks not with audible voice and will not be questioned."

"But tell me," moaned the other, "does the weight of sin depend upon its consequences? Then what weight do I bear? I do not know whether it was ruin or death, or a thing gone by and forgotten. Is there no answer here to this?"

"Death is but a step in the process of life," answered Ambrose. "I know not if any are ruined or anything forgotten. Look up, to the order of the stars, and handwriting on the wall of the firmament. But who hath read it? Mark this night wind, a still small voice. But what speaketh it? The earth is clothed in white garments as a bride. What mean the ceremonials of the seasons? The will from without is only known as it is manifested. Nor does it manifest where the consequences of the deed end or its causes began. Have they any end or a beginning? I can not answer you."

"Who called me, Margaret?"

And she said again monotonously:

"I didn't call you."

The Little One sat between Ambrose and Margaret, chuckling to himself and gazing up at the new-comer, who suddenly bent forward and looked into his eyes, with a gasp.

"What is this?" he whispered.

"Thy Little One, O God, aetat 2, from the Mercer Lot," returned Ambrose gently.

"He is very quiet. Art not neglecting thy business, Little One? The lower walks are unvisited to-night."

"They are Ellen's eyes!" cried the other; moaning and rocking. "Did you call me? Were you mine?"

"It is written, 'Thy Little One, O God,'" murmured Ambrose.

But the Little One only curled his feet up under his gown, and now chuckled contentedly.