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JOHN PORTMAN'S SECRET.

If there was one quality more than another in which Mr. John Portman, solicitor of Byrnes's Buildings, Lincoln's Inn, was deficient, it was sentiment. His most malignant enemy would not have accused him of this weakness; his detractors—being a prosperous man, he had, of course, plenty—called him very cold and unfeeling; his friends modified this opinion somewhat, and said that he was "practical." "There's no nonsense about John Portman," was the favorite phrase with them, and they meant to be complimentary.

A stern, inflexible man, marking out his path in life with a rigid, unyielding barrier of duty, paying no weakness—infirmary of pure humanity. Such feelings were foreign to his nature, and he had no sympathy with them. To all outward seeming he was a man for whom love, pity, charity—all the softer and tenderer emotions that, like bright flowers beautifying the rugged path of life—had no existence.

It was considered an exquisite piece of drollery on the part of the junior clerk in Mr. Portman's office, who was also by unanimous consent of his fellows elected "arch wag" or "head joker" of the establishment, for that young gentleman to whom he behind his hand, and to pass on his employer's private room with the morning letters: "Here's some more hot blooded—scandal!" Also about the epoch of St. Valentine's would console his brother clerks by flowery descriptions of a gorgeous combination of paper, lace and flowers that he had seen in Mr. Portman's room, coupled with verses remarkably satirical and biting.

The humor of these jests lay, of course, in the apparent impossibility and incongruity of connecting Mr. John Portman seriously with the "arch wag" position. He was so hard, and stern, and cold, that the bare idea would have provoked a smile from the gravest lips. Yet the time had been, and not so very many years since, either, when John Portman had loved and tended on a woman. Deep in the innermost recesses of his private cabinet there was a secret drawer, the spring of which was stiff and rusty from long disuse. It held a copy of a marriage certificate, a few letters tied with a tiny blue ribbon, a miniature portrait of a fair young face, with dark violet eyes, set in gold brown hair, and which, even in the smallest worn, had a haughty, willful look, and a tiny wedding-ring.

Deep in the innermost recesses of John Portman's heart lay the secret of which the cabinet held the silent record. Whether its memories were as still within his bosom, none but himself could tell; but his grave, calm face no more betrayed it, self than did the impassible, insensible mood.

Ten years before, John Portman had been, in his grave, quiet way, a happy man. He had fallen in love with the original of the miniature which lay folded in his secret drawer, and after some little opposition, his suit with Edith Gray had prospered.

The opposition came not from Mr. Gray, but from the young lady herself. "There was some foolish boy and girl affection," the father explained to John Portman, "which had existed between Edith and a prodigal cousin of hers; but it was of no consequence; it should be put a stop to at once."

John Portman had seen the cousin in question, and had felt jealousy enough at the perfect understanding that seemed to exist between him and Edith; but as Mr. Gray had promised, it was soon put a stop to. Henry Lorraine disappeared from the neighborhood, and shortly afterward Edith Gray gave a cold, constrained assent to John Portman's proposal.

At that time he was thirty years old; tall and well formed, and even handsome, but for a stiffness in his motion and a cold immobility of feature, which never seemed to subside or warm into grace and geniality.

He was a rich man, too, but how far that circumstance had led Mr. Gray to persuade or even coerce Edith into an acceptance of him, John Portman did not care to inquire.

In the end they were married, and the man, otherwise so cold and impassible, seemed to change in the society of his beautiful young wife.

He loved her with the quiet, deep intensity that belongs only to such a nature as his, and he looked on her all that his wealth could procure or his love could invent.

Edith returned his strong devotion but coldly, or rather, she received it evidence, but passively. But he would have contented himself even with this scanty recom-

ment to himself any event that would render the officer's presence necessary; his thoughts were not defined enough for that.

Then his attention was directed to a man who was looking at the house in succession, and then at an envelope he held in his hand. Mr. Portman saw him cross from one side of the road to the other more than once, and at length addressed himself to the policeman, who immediately indicated with his finger the solicitor's house.

The man nodded and crossed over. Before he could reach the door, John Portman had descended and opened it. "Mr. Portman, sir," said the man, holding out a letter.

"Yes." The solicitor glanced at the address. It was his wife's handwriting. He guessed the fatal truth then. She had left him. Eat frow—alone.

He closed the door heavily; and going into his library, locked himself in. Then, summoning all the self-possession of his strong nature, he opened the envelope. It contained her wedding-ring and a letter.

"Before you read this"—so the letter ran—"I shall have placed myself beyond the power of repentance. Blame your cowardly act for it—not me. How I loved my cousin, even when I married you, and sacrificed myself for my old father's sake, you know. How I could have crushed that love in my heart, and left nothing but duty, matters not now. You choose to think me guilty when I was innocent before Heaven. He had written to me many times. I had only read the first; the last I destroyed unopened. The one on which you founded your charge was intercepted before it reached me. I had never spoken to him since I accepted your hand. I never would have done so, but for the indignity you put upon me; and I say again, blame your own cowardly act for the shame and ruin that have befallen both our lives!"

The shock was a terrible one to John Portman; his name dishonored at one fell blow. Had he been a man of less command of self, of less power of will, it would have maddened him. As it was, he folded the letter, tied it up together with other letters, and placed them in the hidden drawer in the cabinet, and locked up the secret in his own heart for ten long years.

From that moment he became the cold, stern, silent man we have described him. In all these years any sentiment of pity for the wretched man who had dishonored his name, he never showed in the daily life; for all the evidence his outer being gave, she might never have existed—Living or dead, she was nothing to him—she could be nothing in time to come.

It was late in November, the snow had fallen early that year, and thinly covered the house-tops and untrodden places with its pure white mantle. In the streets and roadways passengers, horses and vehicles had trampled and crushed it into a brown, half-melted sludge, seeming like a condensation of the murky fog that hung over the great city.

It was barely four o'clock, yet it was quite dark; what little light the season left at that hour had been blotted out by the fog. The lamps in the streets, made themselves—by little else—visible. Vehicles of all descriptions were rattling through the streets, the drivers shouted equivocal compliments as they miraculously avoided collision with each other. Well-dressed and well-fed respectability shouldered its way along the pavements as if engaged in a race against time; while shivering, hungry, poverty slung along or crouched in sheltering doorways, having no part in the busy life around them; the withering, sapless offshoots of the parent stem—civilization.

Among the jostling, eager crowd, Mr. John Portman made his way, cold and unobtrusive of the scene around him. Beggars held out their hands and put up their appeal for charity. They might as well have addressed themselves to the granite pillar at the corner of the street where the solicitor halted a moment to look at his watch by the light of the gas-lamp.

As he put his watch back into his pocket, there flitted by him—so close almost as to touch him—a female figure, shabby and poorly clad. Although his head was bent toward the ground, he caught a glimpse of the features, and in an instant recognized them.

For a moment his heart ceased to beat, and then the blood coursed through his veins as it had not done for many a year. He staggered back as if a heavy blow had struck him, but, recovering directly, looked after the figure receding in the darkness, and followed rapidly in its track.

He soon neared her, for although she walked quickly, her step faltered frequently; and every now and then she turned with her hand to her side, as if to take breath; but always before John Portman could satisfy himself whether he had made a terrible mistake, she passed on again.

What a whirl of conflicting, tumultuous thoughts made his brain giddy as he followed that silent figure, his footsteps noiseless in the snow! Could it be that she who had been dead to him for ten years yet lived? Or was it only a specter risen from the grave of memory to haunt him on that night? He could not then compose his thoughts to any course but to follow her to the end, and that was near.

She had now reached a row of mean, dilapidated houses, branching from a street full of glaringly lighted up shops of the lowest class. One of these houses she entered without knocking, for the door stood open, and John Portman followed

her into the house. He passed on to the second floor, and there he found her sitting at a table, her hands clasped in prayer.

She had not seen him, and he could not hear her pray, for the feeble light of a lamp on the table was his only guide. He stood in the doorway, looking at the kneeling figure, his heart stirring with new emotions, strange and dead to him for so many years.

After a little while she spoke in a low, broken voice, but still sternly and distinctly, and he listened to the words as though he were in a dream.

"As Heaven hears me," she said, "I have prayed for this, although I dreamed it—a part of my just punishment. My captation could not have been complete unless you had seen to your fault has brought me; and here on my knees, I thank Heaven for it. What degradation I have felt—what want and misery I have undergone—were nothing to what I experienced here." She clasped one hand upon her poor wasted side; and then went on: "When I left you, my angry, wounded pride prompted me to do you a shameful wrong; in all my suffering it has been a consolation to me to know that I sinned myself and you that shame; for I sin innocent—before Heaven!"

She slowly raised her wasted hands, as if in a solemn appeal for the truth of what she said, then clasped them on her knees, and continued:

"Even when I left you forever, as I well know, the atonement of what I had in my heart, terrified me, and I would have returned to ask your forgiveness, and to yield my own; but for my pride, that hindered me; and I wrote a lie to you—as Heaven judges me, it was—for I left England alone."

The figure in the doorway stirred as if it would step towards her; but she extended her hands to keep it off.

"Hear me out," she said faintly; "there is not much more to tell. I will not speak of what I suffered thinking of you, of how my repentance atoned only with my pride. I changed my name when I left England, and in Italy obtained my engagement as governess to the daughter of a Spanish nobleman. So I lived awhile drearily and quietly enough, until he found me out—my cousin and I was forced to fly from a danger I feared worse than death. From that time the misery I so well deserved fell heavily upon me. I was very well for a long time, but the death for which I prayed so earnestly would not come to me, and I recovered. I was forced to labor with my hands, for the life I loathed; but in all that weary time there was no bitterness in heart for you. Can you forgive me—dying—brother-hearted?"

Her wasted figure drooped as the last words left her lips, and she would have fallen but for him; he was kneeling by her side in an instant holding her in his arms, speaking to her brokenly—his cold and reserved all swept away by the pent-up emotions of ten long years, but now let loose.

"Not dying, Edith! Look up and speak to me! Heaven knows I have need of forgiveness more than you! Live for my sake, Edith, and let the years to come atone for the wretched past!"

The look upon her face—the awful change of coming death he saw there as he followed the weary head upon his shoulder—was too plain to be mistaken, and a low cry of agony broke from him. "It is better as it is," she said again, in a voice so low that he could scarcely hear it. "You can forgive now, dear; but if I lived, the old reproach would cling to me, and grow stronger in your heart again. It is far better as it is."

The stern, cold man, quite broken down now, could not reply for the heavy sob that shook him, he could only answer by drawing her yet closer to him. In a moment she turned her face to him with the old sweet smile upon it that he so well remembered, and said, "Kiss me." Even as he did so, she gave a faint sigh, and was dead.

In the pretty country churchyard where she had often ran and played when a little child, she was laid to rest. A marble cross stands at the head of the grave, with the name "Edith" upon it only. With her he buried the relics that the old cabinet had held so long, but he kept her memory fresh in his heart, and never forgot the lessons her sad ending had taught him. No longer cold and self-contained, he learned the wisdom of humility, love, forbearance, and in sympathy with the faults of others learned to know his own.

As a drunken man was staggering along the Bovey the other night, he saw great cars passing with different colored lights and gazing at the red, yellow, blue and green lamps, was heard exclaiming, "I must get of this place; it's too stinky. They're running drug stores around on wheels."

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