

one of 'em was ready to swear that he had never spoken the truth in all his life. Never mind. It was business, and it was worth all it cost to see you do it; only I want you on the other side next time.

"Your name's Stanton—Robert Stanton. You're my old friend John Olmstead's nephew. Your mother was an Olmstead—Mary Olmstead. I used to know her. Used to think she was an angel. Think so still, even if she did refuse to marry me. It almost killed me at the time, and it's almost killed me ever since. You look just like your mother, and, if you don't mind I'd like to shake hands with you."

"Good gracious, man, it takes me back again to— Confound it, I'm pretty old for tears. I say, my daughter's here with me. She's my sister's child. I took her when her father and mother died. Oh, I never married. No, indeed. Seems you and she have met before. She caught sight of you here and sent me after you to ask if you wouldn't come round and dine with us to-night. Dinner's in one hour. Private lodgings. All alone. No form. Here's the card. And, I say, you'll excuse me now, won't you? I must be getting back to her, or she'll say I'm growing old and take too long at doing errands. One hour. Don't forget. Glad to have met you, sir. Hope to see more of you." And he was gone.

Stanton watched as he disappeared in the crowd, and, with a half-sigh, half-smile, remarked:

"If she thinks he is growing old she's mistaken."

CHAPTER X.

If the meeting had been the working out of his own plans, Stanton would have carried his message on his tongue. As it was, he held it more in deference, waiting for an opportunity that was slow to come.

"Your trip has changed you till I believe your friends at home will hardly know that it is really you," Miss Braddon said, in response to a passing compliment. "You wouldn't have said that a year ago. You'd just have looked me over solemnly, and remarked: 'Hm. You must have been out of doors. You have freckles on your nose.'"

"I certainly had a vast collection of disagreeable traits," Stanton replied, seeing his first opportunity. "I've discovered some of them and been making a struggle to dislodge them. I'm glad if you see a change, for you knew me at my worst, and I'm heartily ashamed of it. Any change at all must be for the better."

"Oh, Mr. Stanton, what an idea!" she exclaimed. "Of course I knew you at your worst, but, truly, that worst was so much better than the best I ever knew of hosts of people who think themselves very good, that I have always considered you a remarkably model man. Papa says it's all because you're an Olmstead and couldn't be anything else. And don't you think we're all of us a little ashamed every time we look back? I am. If I weren't I shouldn't think I was making any progress."

"You're comforting to say the least," Stanton replied, and was going on to press the opportunity, when Miss Braddon interrupted:

"We saw by the paper that you were soon to leave for home. What a lion they will make of you!"

"Of me?"

"Certainly."

"Why?"

"Because you deserve it, of course."

"Deserve what?"

"To be lionized."

"For what?"

"Now, Mr. Stanton, if I didn't know you I should think all sorts of things; but instead I'll begin and tell you all about what you know just as well as the rest of us, only you don't see it in the same light. Didn't you make a great hero of yourself when your steamer was captured by pirates in the Gulf of Siam?"

"Indeed I did not, Miss Braddon," Stanton exclaimed, and his cheeks flushed. "I swung a rusty sword in the face of a few Chinese cowards, and they ran without a scratch. That was heroism indeed."

"Of course I don't know all the particulars, but I'm sure the king of Siam thought so, or he wouldn't have decorated you with an order. The New York papers thought so, or they'd not have printed so much about it. The British government thought so, or it would not have remembered it till you reached London, two months ago, and presented you with a medal. But how was it about your being almost killed by a tiger, in India, while saving the life of a little native girl? There was a story printed about that, too."

"I was hardly hurt at all," Stanton replied, thoroughly confused. "I simply wanted the tiger's skin as a memento, and I have it."

With a merry laugh Miss Braddon replied: "How fortunate for the little girl that that was just the tiger whose skin you wanted, and that you wanted it at that very moment when it was about to kill her! But what papa thought most of was your address before the Historical society of London, when you gave them an old Babylonish brick. He said he couldn't see how a lawyer could possibly know so much about antiquity."

Vainly Stanton endeavored to take another step toward the end he had in view. Before the evening was past Miss Braddon had invited him to drive with them to Vesuvius the next day, and to sit in their box at the opera the next evening.

The second day was a failure, like the first, so far as the message was concerned, while with every atom of manhood in him Stanton struggled to hold himself back from what he knew would be a fatal plunge into that bewildering pool.

Why should she fascinate him till his heart and brain reeled? No woman had so much as attracted him before; and now, of all times, when it must not be!

"Is it because she knows that I am married and thinks herself safe?" he asked himself. "I hope she is safe. If not, surely I am not worthy of Esther Thorndike's love. I don't know. Sometimes when she looks at me that way, as though she were ready to put her arms round my neck, I feel as if I could throw away everything to run to her. It would be throwing away everything, and I will not do it."

Then he thought of ignominious flight, but there was just one day left before his intended departure from Naples. He determined to see it to the end, true to himself and to his wife, and if he still failed to find the opportunity to give her the message he would at least conduct himself in such a way that he might write it in a letter and send it to her after he was gone, asking her to deliver it.

He even decided to take the initiative, and invited the banker and his daughter to spend the last afternoon in a sail to Capri.

At the very last moment Mr. Braddon declared that he did not much like the water, and decided to remain at home. A cold shiver crept over the young lawyer as he heard the announcement; but Miss Braddon had no intention of abandoning the trip on her father's account.

With grim determination Stanton clutched the door of his heart that nothing should open it. It was a very new experience.

Miss Braddon had never made herself so beautiful before. She had never been so entertaining. The boatman was accustomed to carrying lovers to Capri. Of all the world the Bay of Naples is the place for them. It is the beautiful home of love.

If Stanton had sought for opportunities to say: "I love you," they were without number; but to deliver his message was utterly impossible.

The sails were filling to return when Miss Braddon said, abruptly:

"Mr. Stanton, you are not really so happy as you wish to seem. I wonder if you would tell me why?"

"It is because I am not satisfied," he replied, as abruptly.

"I was afraid, at the time, that it would prove an irksome bondage, and I am very sorry," she said, as though in all their conversation they had spoken of nothing else but that one subject which had not once been mentioned.

"You were mistaken," Stanton replied, calmly.

Like a flash the dark eyes turned on his.

"Do you mean that it is not irksome?"

"Not in the way you mean," Stanton said.

"I hardly understand you."

"Yet I very much wish that you did."

"Why in particular?"

"Because through you is my only hope of being understood where, of all, I am most anxious to be understood."

"Do you mean with Esther Thorndike?"

"Yes."

"Why, you have never even mentioned her name."

"If I were not bound by a condition that is a most irksome bondage, I should have gone to her, direct, long ago, instead of living in the hope that in some way I might reach her through you."

"What would you have me say to her?"

"Tell her that I am trying to be a better man than when she saw me, and ask her to give me freedom from the chains she bound, and let me, as a man, come to her, as a woman, and try to win her love."

"Truly, Mr. Stanton, you astonish me. Is that what you have been thinking of, all these days?"

"I could have had but one other thought."

"What thought?"

"To win your love."

"And that you do not care for?" she asked, almost sadly, trailing a rope in the water.

"That is not the question."

"It is for me, if I love you."

Stanton turned, slowly, till his eyes rested full upon hers. His face was very pale. It was more than he had ever dared to dread. He knew that it meant death—death to the hopes he had fostered and the dreams he had dreamed, death to his self-respect, death to his future. Yet he could most easily have said:

"In a look of death there be, Come, and I will look on thee."

His lips moved slowly, but they moved steadily, with all the force of his will behind them, as he replied:

"Any living man who had the right would be a blind fool not to love you and long for your love."

"But you have not the right?"

"No."

"Because you have a wife?"

"Yes."

"But do I not understand the arrangement, and does not Esther? And if you asked her do you not think that she would agree to some arrangement that would set you free?"

"After she has seen me and known me, if she cannot love me and be my real wife, and if for herself she wishes to be free, she can say so. It is her right."

"Is it because you have discovered that you really want a wife, a real wife, and your sense of honor forces you to hold the place open for her?"

"I think not."

"Surely you don't mean that you think you love her?"

"I don't know."

"Did you ever see her face?"

"Never."

"Have you ever learned much about her?"

"I know absolutely nothing but what she and you have told me."

"Well, if you were not bound in honor to her, surely for that one meeting you would not still be thinking of her."

"Or perhaps we might have met again and again, as the result of one meeting, had it not been for that binding. At all events, for that meeting I am indebted to you, and by your help I hope to meet her again."

"Surely you do not think she loved you, Mr. Stanton?"

"I hope that she will love me, some day."

"Has no one tempted you to let slip such a slender thread as that?"

"It must be stronger than it seems, for no one has tempted me—no one but the woman to whom I have come for help to win my wife."

The boat was close upon the landing-stage. The carriage was already waiting there. As they stepped on shore Miss Braddon turned abruptly, and said:

"If you and Esther should try to be more to each other, and fail, it would be worse than it is now. You cannot possibly be sure that you love her. I will tell her all I know, but let it rest this way. You said that you were to reach home on the 6th of December. It is the first anniversary of the marriage. Think it over till then. If you feel as you have said to-day, send some flowers to papa's bank for her that day. If you find that you have a single doubt, oh, I beg of you, for her sake, not to do it. She will think it over, too, and if the flowers come to her she will send some message to your home in Brooklyn, telling you what she feels in her heart is best. If you do not send the flowers, it will only be that you wish to be honest and true. If she returns some message which you do not wish, remember it is because she, too, is trying to be honest with herself and you."

"Now, don't think it rude in me. I am only a woman, and I want to be alone. You have said good-by to papa. Please let me say it right here; and may the best of life be yours always!"

Before he could speak, she was gone. Stanton stood in bewildered astonishment and watched the carriage drive away.

At least she was not angry. She did not look it. Yet the carriage disappeared and she had not looked back.

Her last words were still ringing in his ears as Stanton took a worn card from his pocket and read: "May the best of life be yours, always! Esther Thorndike."

He replaced it with a troubled sigh and turned his face toward America.

CHAPTER XI.

On the afternoon of the 5th of December, 1893, Stanton stood upon the wharf at New York.

He went first to a florist's. Then repeating Miss Braddon's words, "I want to be alone," he went to a hotel and took a room without registering.

It was a useless precaution, however, for the morning papers announced his arrival in a way to indicate Miss Braddon's prophecy correct.

His office was besieged when he reached it in the morning. He was astonished that business men could be so cordial. In spite of every effort, it was noon before he reached his home, where Sam and his wife made their timid greetings as expressive as they dared.

They were amazed by the hearty response they received, for since his baby days they had never known the young master say so much and say it so kindly to them.

There were many messages and cards of welcome. Dr. Borden had already called, and left word that he should call again. The good man might chide his friend if he thought him in the wrong, but he was enough of a true man to be all the more his friend for that.

One envelope Stanton caught eagerly from the pile and with it hurried to his room. There he opened it and in blank astonishment stood staring at the card it contained.

Across the center was the name "Esther Thorndike." In the corner was Mr. Braddon's home address, and above the name was written: "Jeremiah 40:4."

"She might have said what she had to say without the help of Jeremiah," he muttered, and, folding his arms, stood looking down at the little card as it lay on the table. It must have been for some time that he stood there, and the knife was cutting deep, for tears glistened in his eyes, when a tap on the door roused him and Sam's white head appeared.

Sam had come with a simple message from his wife concerning the hour when the master would have the first meal served; but the sight of the master's face obliterated it, simple as it was, and to an incoherent effort on Sam's part to say something, Stanton replied:

"Bring me a Bible, Sam."

Sam's wife stood anxiously waiting at the foot of the stairs, for she proposed to have that first meal the masterpiece of her life.

"He don't seem to want to eat, M'ria," Sam said, when he was safely landed at the bottom. "His arms was folded and his hair standin' up, and when I asked him how 'twould be 'bout eatin', says he: 'Bring me a Bible, Sam.' Now, do you go fish one up, M'ria, an' fish it lively; for he didn't look like he cared to wait for one to grow out in the garden."

The good woman knew the locality of everything in the house except the books. Books without pictures had no charms for her.

It happened, however, that there was one Bible, a colossal affair, overburdened with illustrations, resting upon a plush cushion, under embroidered velvet, in the library. In calmer moments she might have recalled the whereabouts of some smaller copy, for there were Bibles enough about the house; but her mind was centered on soups, broiled chicken and condiments, pies, cakes and puddings, with bread turned upside down in the oven for just a last touch of brown on the bottom. She recalled only this one copy, and started for it at a rolling waddle which really was not resultant in such rapid transit as her ordinary gait, but was more in harmony with the general idea of haste.

She dusted the huge volume with her apron and came back to Sam, bending under the burden.

"When the verse was found, Stanton unconsciously read aloud. The print was colossal; in common, instinctive consistency, a silent perusal would not have coped with it.

When Sam returned to his waiting wife he said:

"Now, M'ria, you mark my words. What with wanderin' in ungody parts, 'mong pirates an' tigers an' heathen kings an' old bricks, as you've read about in the papers, that young man has gone daft. He just made them leaves fly till he struck what he wanted, an' then he read out to me 'bout chains an' 'Babylon an' Christopher Columbus, an' up he jumped and down them stairs an' out doors like a rat with a cat behind."

"Sho, Samuel!" his wife said, struggling to be calm. "Might be you was a leetle daft yourself. Christopher Columbus ain't one of the Bible folks. You know that, Samuel."

"I'm not so sure I do, M'ria," Sam said, doubtfully. "I know he come on

later, but I have my doubts if he didn't take his name out of the Bible, same's I did. He read it all out plain, and the very last was Christopher Columbus. Book's open just as he left it, M'ria. You just go see."

M'ria climbed the stairs and studied and studied till she came to the verse which Sam recognized.

"That's it! That's it!" he exclaimed. "Now begin back and read it all."

So M'ria read, slowly and solemnly, as was befitting one who could not read well at the best, and was reading from the Bible:

"And now, behold, I loose thee this day from the chains which were upon thine hand. If it seem good unto thee to come with me into Babylon, come, and I will look well unto thee; but if it seem ill unto thee to come with me into Babylon, forbear; behold, all the land is before thee; whither it seemeth good and convenient for thee to go, thither go." But there was never a word concerning Christopher Columbus at the close, and the good wife remarked, as many and many a time she had done before:

"Samuel, I told you so."

In the meantime Stanton had crossed the city of Brooklyn and found the door of Thaddeus Braddon's mansion opened for him by the banker's daughter, even before he rang the bell.

He never knew precisely what took place, but he always remembered the flash of the diamond set in pearls, and the words:

"I didn't want to love you. I didn't want to love anyone. I ran away from you in Jerusalem and Paris, for until you bowed to me in Naples, I felt sure that you must have found out who it was, and I knew that if you looked into my eyes they would betray me and you would know that I—that I was only a woman and I loved you."

THE END.

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