THE QUALITY OF MERCY

A Story of Contemporary American Life.

By WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS.

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PART THREE.

CHAPTER XI.

There was trouble with the telegraph and telephone connections between Hathboro' and Ponkwasset, and Adeline had to go to the funeral without an answer to Elbridge's message. Below her surface interest in the ceremony and the behavior of the mourners and the friends, which nothing could have alienated but the actual presence of calamity, she had a nether misery of alternating hope and fear, of anxieties continually reasoned down, and of security lost the instant it was found. The double strain told so upon her nerves that when the rites at the grave were ended she sent word to the clergyman and piteously begged him to drive home with her.

"Why, aren't you well, Miss Northwick?" he asked, with a glance at her troubled face, as he got into the covered sleigh with her.

"Oh, yes," she said, and she flung herself back against the cushioning and began to cry.

"Poor Mrs. Newton's grief has been very trying," he said gently and with a certain serenity of smile he had, and he added, as if he thought it well to lure Miss Northwick from the minor affliction that we feel for others' sorrows to the sorrow itself, "It has been a terrible blow to her—so sudden, and her only child."

"Oh, it isn't that," said Adeline, frankly. "Have—have you seen the—paper this morning?"

"It came," said the clergyman. "But in view of the duty before me, I thought I wouldn't read it. Is there anything particular in it?"

"No, nothing. Only—only—" Adeline had not been able to separate herself from the dreadful thing, and she took it out of the carriage pocket. "There has been an accident on the railroad," she began firmly, but she broke down in the effort to go on. "And I wanted to have you see—see—" She stopped, and handed him the paper.

He took it and ran over the account of the accident, and came at her trouble with an instant intelligence that was in itself a sort of reassurance. "But had you any reason to suppose your father was on the train?"

"No," she said from the strength he gave her. "That is the strange part about it. He went up to the Mills yesterday morning, and he couldn't have been on the train at all. Only the name——"

"It isn't quite the name," said Wade, with a gentle moderation, as if he would not willingly make too much of the difference, and felt truth to be too sacred to be tampered with even while it had merely the form of possibility.

"No," said Adeline, eager to be comforted, "and I'm sure he's at the Mills. Elbridge has sent a despatch to find out if he's there, but there must be something the matter with the telegraph. We hadn't heard before the funeral; or, at least, he didn't bring me word; and I hated to keep round after him when——"

"He probably hadn't heard," said the clergyman, soothingly, "and no news is good news, you know. But hadn't we better drive round by the station, and find out whether any answer has been——"

"O, no! I couldn't do that!" said Adeline, nervously. "They will telephone the answer up to Elbridge. But come home with me, if you haven't something to do, and stay with us till we——"

"Oh, very willingly." On the way the young clergyman talked of the accident, guessing that her hysterical conjectures had heightened the horror, and that he should make it less dreadful by exploring its facts with her. He did not declare it impossible her father should have been on the train, but he urged the extreme improbability.

Elbridge and his wife passed them, driving rapidly in Simpson's booby, which Adeline had ordered for their use at the funeral, and when she got into the house Elbridge was waiting there for her. He began at once: "Miss Northwick, I don't believe but what your father's stayed over at Springfield for something. He was talking to me last week about some hosses there——"

"Isn't he at the Mills?" she demanded sharply.

Elbridge gave his hat a turn on his hand before he looked up. "Well, no, he hain't been yet——"

Adeline made no sound, but she sank down as a column of water sinks.

At the confusion of movements and voices that followed Suzette came to the door of the library and looked wonderingly into the hall, where this had happened, with a book clasped over her finger. "What in the world is the matter?" she asked with a sort of sarcastic amaze, at sight of Elbridge lifting something from the floor.

"Don't be alarmed, Miss Suzette," said Mr. Wade, "your sister seems a little faint, and——"

"It's this sickening heat!" cried the girl, running to the door, and setting it wide. "It suffocates me when I come in from the outside. I'll get some water." She vanished and was back again instantly, stooping over Adeline to wet her forehead and temples. The rush of the cold air began to revive her. She opened her eyes, and Suzette said, severely, "What has come over you, Adeline? Aren't you well?" and as Adeline answered nothing, she went on: "I don't believe she knows where she is. Let us get her into the library on the lounge."

She put her strength with that of the young clergyman, and they carried Adeline to the lounge. Suzette despatched Elbridge, hanging helplessly about, for some of the women. He sent the parlor maid, and did not come back.

Adeline kept looking at her sister as if she were afraid of her. When she was recovered sufficiently to speak, she turned her eyes on the clergyman, and said huskily, "Tell her."

"Your sister has had a little fright," he began, and with this gentle eyes on the girl's he went on to deal the pain that priests and physicians must give. "There's the report of a railroad accident in the morning paper, and among the passengers—the missing—was one of the name of Northwick——"

"But father is at the Mills!"

"Your sister had telegraphed before the funeral, to make sure—and word has come that he—isn't there."

"Where is the paper?" demanded Suzette, with a kind of haughty incredulity.

Wade found it in his pocket, where he must have put it instead of giving it back to Adeline in the sleigh. Suzette took it and went with it to one of the windows. She stood reading the account of the accident, while her sister watched her with tremulous eagerness for the help that came from her contemptuous rejection of the calamity.

"How absurd! It isn't father's name, and he couldn't have been on the train. What in the world would he have been going to Montreal for at this time of year? It's ridiculous!" Suzette flung the paper down, and came back to the other two.

"I felt," said Wade, "that it was extremely improbable——"

"But where," Adeline put in faintly, "could he have been if he wasn't at the Mills?"

"Anywhere in the world except Wellwater Junction," returned Suzette, scornfully. "He may have stopped over at Springfield, or——"

"Yes," Adeline admitted, "that's what Elbridge thought."

"Or he may have gone on to Willoughby Junction. He often goes there."

"That is true," said the other, suffering herself to take heart a little. "And he's been talking of selling his interest in the quarries there; and——"

"He's there, of course," said Suzette with finality. "If he'd been going further, he'd have telegraphed us. He's always very careful. I'm not in the least alarmed, and I advise you not to be, Adeline. When did you see the paper first?"

"When I came down to breakfast," said Adeline, quietly.

"And I suppose you didn't eat any breakfast?"

Adeline's silence made confession.

"What I think is, we'd better all have lunch," said Suzette, and she went and touched the bell at the chimney. "You'll stay with us, won't you, Mr. Wade? We want lunch at once, James," she said to the man who answered her ring. "Of course, you must stay, Mr. Wade, and help see Adeline back to her right mind." She touched the bell again, and when the man appeared, "My sleigh at once, James," she commanded. "I will drive you home, Mr. Wade, on my way to the station. Of course I shall not leave anything in doubt about this silly scare. I fancy it will be no great difficulty to find out where father is. Where is that railroad guide? Probably my father took it up to his room." She ran up stairs and came down with the book in her hand. "Now we will see. I don't believe he could get any train at Springfield, where he would have to change for the Mills, that would take him beyond the Junction at that hour last night. The express has to come up from Boston——" She stopped and ran over the time table of the route. "Well, he could get a connecting train at the Junction; but that doesn't prove at all that he did."

She talked on, mocking the mere suggestion of such a notion, and then suddenly rang the bell once more, to ask sharply: "Isn't lunch ready yet? Then bring us tea, here. I shall telegraph to the Mills again, and I shall telegraph to Mr. Hilary in Boston; he will know whether father was going anywhere else. They had a meeting of the Board day before yesterday, and father went to the Mills unexpectedly. I shall telegraph to Ponkwasset Junction, too; and you may be sure I shall not come home, Adeline, till I know something definite."

The tea came, and Suzette served the cups herself, with nerves that betrayed no tremor in the clash of silver or china. But she made haste, and at the sound of sleighbells without she put down her own cup, untasted.

"Oh, must you take Mr. Wade away?" Adeline feebly pleaded. "Stay till she comes back!" she entreated.

Suzette faltered a moment, and then with a look at Mr. Wade, she gave a harsh laugh. "Very well!" she said.

She ran into the hall and up the stairs, and in another moment they heard her coming down again; the outer door shut after her, and then came the flutter of the sleigh bells as she drove away.

Over the lunch the elder sister recovered herself a little, and ate as one can in the suspense of a strong emotion.

"Your sister is a person of great courage," said the clergyman, as if he were a little abashed by it.

"She would never show that she's troubled. But I know well enough that she's troubled, by the way she kept talking and doing something every minute; and now, if she hadn't gone to telegraph, she'd—I mustn't keep you here any longer, Mr. Wade," she broke off in the sense of physical strength the food had given her. "Indeed, I mustn't. You needn't be anxious. I shall do very well, now. Yes! I shall!"

She begged him to leave her, but he perceived that she did not really wish him to go, and it was nearly an hour after Suzette drove away before he got out of the house. He would not let her send him home; and he walked toward the village in the still, sunny cold of the early winter afternoon, thinking of the sort of contempt with which that girl had spurned the notion of calamity, as if it were something to be resented, and even snubbed, in its approach to her. It was as if she had now gone to trace it to its source, and defy it there; to stamp upon the presumptuous rumor and destroy it.

Just before he reached the crest of the upland that shut out the village from him, he heard the clash of sleigh bells; a pair of horses leaped into sight, and came bearing down upon him with that fine throw of their feet which you get only in such a direct encounter. He stepped into the side track, and then he heard Miss Sue Northwick call to her horses and saw her pulling them up. She had her father's fondness for horses, and the pair of little grays were a gift from him with the picturesque sledge they drew. The dasher swelled forward like a swan's breast, and then curved deeply backward; from either corner of the band of iron filigree at the top dangled a red horse tail. The man who had driven her to the station sat in a rumble behind; on the seat with Suzette was another young lady, who put out her hand to Wade, with a look of uncommon liking, across the shining bearskin robe, and laughed at his astonishment in seeing her. While they talked, the clipped grays nervously lifted and set down their forefeet in the snow, as if fingering it; they inhaled the cold air with squared nostrils, and blew it out in blasts of white steam. Susette said, in explanation of her friend's presence: "Louise had seen the account, and she made her brother bring her up. They think just as I do, that there's nothing of it; one of the papers had the name Nordeck; but we've left Mr. Hilary at the station, fighting the telegraph and telephone in all directions, and he isn't to stop till he gets something positive. He's trying Wellwater now." She said all this very haughtily, but she added, "The only thing is, I can't understand why my father hasn't been heard of at the Mills. Some one was asking for him there yesterday."

"Probably he went on to Willoughby Junction, as you suggested."

"Of course he did," said Louise. "We haven't heard from there yet."

"Oh, I'm not in the least troubled," said Sue, "but it's certainly very provoking." She lifted her reins. "I'm hurrying home to let Adeline know."

"She'll be very glad," Wade returned, as if it were the certainty of good news she was carrying. "I think I'll join Matt at the station," he suggested to Louise.

"Do!" she answered. "You can certainly manage something between you. Matt will be almost as glad of your coming as my going. I thought we were coming up here to reassure Sue, but I seem strangely superfluous."

"You can reassure Adeline," said Sue. She added to Wade: "I keep thinking what an annoyance it will be to my father to have all this fuss made over him. I sometimes feel vexed with Adeline. Good-by!" she called back to him as she drove away, and she stopped again to add: "Won't you come up with Mr. Hilary when you've heard something definite?"

Wade promised, and they repeated their good-bys all round with a resolute cheerfulness.

CHAPTER XII.

The affair had been mixed up with tea and lunch, and there was now the suggestion of a gay return to the Northwick place and an hour or two more in that pleasant company of pretty and lively women, which Wade loved almost as well as he loved righteousness. He knew that there was such a thing as death in the world; he had often already seen its strange, peaceful face; he had just stood by an open grave; but at the moment his youth denied it all, and he swung along over the hard-packed roadway thinking of the superb beauty of Suzette Northwick, and the witchery of Louise Hilary's face. It was like her to come at once to her friend in this anxiety, and he believed a strength was in her to help bear the worst, the worst that now seemed so remote and impossible.

He did not find Matt Hilary in the station; but he pushed through to the platform outside and saw him at a little distance standing between two of the tracks, and watching a group of men there who were replacing some worn-out rails with new ones.

"Matt!" he called to him, and Matt turned about and said, "Hello, Caryl!" and yielded him a sort of absent-minded hand, while he kept his face turned smilingly upon the men. Some were holding the rails in position, and another was driving in the spike that was to rivet the plate to the sleeper. He struck it with exquisite accuracy from a wide, free-handed rhythmical swing of his hammer.

"Beautiful! Isn't it?" said Matt. "I never see any sort of manual labor, even the kinds that are brutified and demoralized by their association with machinery, without thinking how far the arts still come short of the trades. If any sculptor could feel it, what a magnificent bas-relief just that thing would make!" He turned round to look at the men again: in their different poses of self-forgetfulness and interest in their work, they had a beauty and grace, in spite of their clumsy dress, which ennobled the scene.

When Matt once more faced round, he smiled serenely on his friend. Wade, who knew his temperament and his philosophy, was deceived for the moment. "Then you don't share Miss Northwick's anxiety about her father?" he began, as if Matt had been dealing directly with that matter, and had been giving his reasons for not being troubled about it. "Have you heard anything yet? But of course you haven't, or——"

Matt halted him, and looked down into his face from his greater height with a sort of sobered cheerfulness. "How much do you know about Miss Northwick's father?"

"Very little—nothing in fact but what she and her sister showed me in the morning paper. I know they're in great distress about him; I just met Miss Suzette and your sister, and they told me I should find you at the station."

Matt began to walk on again. "I didn't know but you had heard some talk from the outside. I came off to escape the pressure of inquiry at the station; people had found out somehow that I had been put in charge of the telegraphing when the young ladies left. I imagined they wouldn't follow me if I went for a walk." He put his hand through Wade's arm, and directed their course across the tracks toward the street away from the station, where Elbridge had walked his horses up and down the evening he met Northwick. "I told them to look out for me, if they got anything; I should keep in sight somewhere. Isn't it a curious commentary on our state of things," he went on, "that when any man in a position of trust can't be accounted for twenty-four hours after he leaves home, the businesslike supposition is that he has run away with money that doesn't belong to him?"

"What do you mean, Matt?"

"I mean that the popular belief in Hatboro' seems to be that Northwick was on his way to Canada on the train that was wrecked."

"Shocking, shocking!" said Wade. "What makes you think they believe that?"

"The conjecture and speculation began in the station the moment Miss Northwick left it, and before it could be generally understood that I was there to represent her. I suppose there wasn't a man among them that wouldn't have trusted Northwick with all he had, or wouldn't have felt that his fortune was made if Northwick had taken charge of his money. In fact, I heard some of them saying so before their deference for me shut their mouths. Yet I haven't a doubt they all think he's an absconding defaulter."

"It's shocking," said Wade, sadly, "but I'm afraid you're right. These things are so common that people are subjected to suspicion on no kind of——" But just at this juncture Matt lifted his head from the moment's revery in which he seemed to have been far absent.

"Have you seen much of the family this winter?"

"Yes, a good deal," said Wade. "They're not communicants, but they've been regular attendants at the services, and I've been a good deal at their house. They seem rather lonely; they have very little to do with the South Hatboro' people, and nothing at all with the villagers. I don't know why they've spent the winter here. Of course one hears all kinds of gossip. The gossips at South Hatboro' say that Miss Suzette was willing to be on with young Wilmington again, and that she kept the family here. But I place no faith in such a conjecture."

"It has a rustic crudity," said Matt. "But if Jack Wilmington ever cared anything for the girl, now's his chance to be a man and stand by her."

Something in Matt's tone made Wade stop and ask, "What do you mean, Matt? Is there anything besides——"

"Yes." Matt took a fresh grip of his friend's arm, and walked him steadily forward, and kept him walking in spite of his involuntary tendency to come to a halt every few steps, and try to urge something that he never quite got from his tongue, against the probability of what Matt was saying. "I mean that these people are right in their suspicions."

"Right?"

"My dear Caryl, there is no doubt whatever that Northwick is a defaulter to the company in a very large amount. It came out at a meeting of the directors on Monday. He confessed it, for he could not deny it in the face of the proof against him, and he was given a number of days to make up his shortage. He was released on parole; it was really the best thing, the wisest as well as the mercifullest, and of course he broke his word and seized the first chance to run away. I knew all about the defalcation from my father just after the meeting. There is simply no question about it."

"Gracious powers!" said Wade, finally helpless to dispute the facts which he still did not realize. "And you think it possible—do you suppose—imagine—that it was really he who was in that burning car? What an awful fate!"

"An awful fate?" asked Matt. "Do you think so? Yes, yours is the safe ground in regard to a thing of that kind—the only ground."

"The only ground?"

"I was thinking of my poor father," said Matt. "He said some sharp things to that wretched creature at the meeting of the Board—called him a thief, and I dare say other hard names—and told him that the best thing that could happen to him was a railroad accident on his way home."

"Ah!"

"You see? When he read the account of that accident in the paper this morning, and found a name so much like Northwick's among the victims, he was fearfully broken up, of course. He felt somehow as if he had caused his death—I could see that, though of course he wouldn't admit anything of the kind."

"Of course," said Wade, compassionately.

"I suppose it isn't well to invoke death in any way. He is like the devil, and only too apt to come, if you ask for him. I don't mean anything superstitious, and I don't suppose my father really has any superstitious feeling about the matter. But he's been rather a friend—or a victim—of that damnable theory that the gentlemanly way out of a difficulty like Northwick's is suicide, and I suppose he spoke from association with it, or by an impulse from it. He has been telegraphing right and left to try to verify the reports, as it was his business and duty to do, any way; and he caught at the notion of my coming up here with Louise to see if we could be of any use to those two poor women."

"Poor women!" Wade echoed. "The worst must fall upon them, as the worst always seems to do."

"Yes, wherever a cruel blow falls there seems to be a woman for it to fall on. And you see what a refinement of cruelty this is going to be when it reaches them. They have got to know that their father met that awful death, and that he met it because he was a defaulter and was running away. I suppose the papers will be full of it."

"That seems intolerable. Couldn't anything be done to stop them?"

"Why the thing has to come out. You can keep happiness a secret, but sorrow and shame have to come out—I don't know why, but they do. Then, when they come out, we feel as if the means of their publicity were the cause of them. It's very unphilosophical." They walked slowly along in silence for a few moments, and then Matt's revery broke out again in words: "Well, it's to be seen now whether she has the strength that bears, or the strength that breaks. The way she held her head, as she took the reins and drove off, with poor Louise beside her palpitating with sympathy for her trouble and anxiety about her horses, was, yes, it was superb; there's no other word for it. Ah, poor girl!"

"Your sister's presence will be a great help to her," said Wade. "It was very good of her to come."

"Ah, there wasn't anything else for it," said Matt, flinging his head up. "Louise has my father's loyalty. I don't know much about her friendship with Miss Northwick—she's so much younger than I, and they came together when I was abroad—but I've fancied she wasn't much liked among the girls, and Louise was her champion, in a way. When Louise read that report, nothing would do but she must come."

"Of course."

"But our being here must have its embarrassments for my father. It was a sacrifice for him to let us come."

"I don't understand."

"It was he who carried through the respite the directors gave Northwick; and now he will have the appearance before some people of helping to cover up the miserable facts, of putting a good face on things while a rogue was getting away from justice. He might even be supposed to have some interest in getting him out of the way."

"Oh, I don't think any such suspicion can attach itself to such a man as Mr. Hilary," said Wade, with a certain resentment of the suggestion even from the man's son.

"In a commercial civilization like ours any sort of suspicion can attach to any sort of man in a case like this," said Matt.

Wade took off his hat and wiped his forehead. "I can't realize that the case is what you say. I can't realize it at all. It seems like some poor sort of play, of make-believe. I can't forgive myself for being so little moved by it. We are in the presence of a horror that ought to make us uncover our heads and fall to our knees and confess our own sins to God!"

"Ah, I'm with you there!" said Matt, and he pushed his hand further through his friend's arm.

They were both still well under thirty, and they both had that zest for mere experience, any experience, that hunger for the knowledge of life, which youth feels. In their several ways they were already men who had thought for themselves, or conjectured rather; and they were eager to verify their speculations through their emotions. They thought a good deal alike in many things, though they started from such opposite points in their thinking; and they both had finally the same ideal of life. Their intimacy was of as old a date as their school days; at Harvard they were in the same clubs as well as the same class. Wade's father was not a Boston man, but his mother was a Bellingham, and he was nurtured in the traditions of Hilary's social life. Both had broken with them: Wade not so much when he became a ritualist as Hilary when he turned his back on manufacturing.

They were now not without a kind of pride in standing so close to the calamity they were fated witnesses of, and in the midst of their sympathy they had a curiosity which concerned itself with one of the victims because she was a young and beautiful girl. Their pity not so much forgot as ignored Northwick's elder daughter, who was a plain, sick old maid, and followed the younger with a kind of shrinking and dread of her doom which Matt tried to put into words.

"I assure you if I couldn't manage to pull away from it at moments, I don't see how I could stand it. I had a sense of personal disgrace, when I met that poor girl, with what I had in my mind. I felt as if I were taking some base advantage of her in knowing that about her father, and I was so glad when she went off with Louise and left me to struggle with my infamous information alone. I hurried Louise away with her in the most cowardly haste. We don't any of us realize it, as you say. Why, just imagine! It means sorrow, it means shame, it means poverty. They will have to leave their house, their home; she will have to give up everything to the company. It isn't merely friends and her place in the world; it's money, it's something to eat and wear, it's a roof over her head!"

Wade refused the extreme view portrayed by his friend's figures. "Of course she won't be allowed to come to want."

"Of course. But there's really no measuring the serious reach of a disaster like this. It strikes from a coil that seems to involve everything."

"What are you going to do if you get bad news?" asked Wade.

"Ah, I don't know! I must tell her, somehow; unless you think that you——" Wade gave a start which Matt interpreted aright; he laughed nervously. "No, no! It's for me to do it. I know that; unless I can get Louise. Ah! I wonder what that is."

They were walking back toward the station again, and Matt had seen a head and arm projecting from the office window, and a hand waving a sheet of yellow paper. It seemed meant for them. They both began to run, and then they checked themselves, and walked as fast as they could.

"We must refer the matter to your sister," said Wade, "and if she thinks best, remember that I shall be quite ready to speak to Miss Northwick. Or, if you think best, I will speak to her without troubling your sister."

"Oh, you're all right, Wade. You needn't have any doubt of that. We'll see. I wonder what there is in that despatch."

The old station master had come out of the station and was hurrying to meet them with the message, now duly enclosed in an envelope. He gave it to Matt and promptly turned his back on him.

Matt tore it open and read: "Impossible to identify parlor-car passengers." The telegram was signed "Operator," and was dated at Wellwater. It fell blankly on their tense feeling.

"Well," said Wade, after a long breath. "It isn't the worst."

Matt read it frowningly over several times; then he smiled. "Oh, no. This isn't at all bad. It's nothing. But so far it's rather comforting. And it's something, even if it is nothing. Well, I suppose I'd better go up to Miss Northwick with it. Wait a moment; I must tell them where to send if anything else comes."

"I'll walk with you as far as St. Michael's," said Wade, when they left the station. "I'm going to my study there."

They set off together, up the middle of the street, which gave them more elbow room than the sidewalk narrowly blocked out of the snow.

From a large store as they were passing, a small, dry-looking, pompous little man advanced to the middle of the street, and stopped them. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Wade! I beg your pardon, sir!" he said, nimbly transferring himself, after the quasi self-introduction, from Wade to Matt. "May I ask whether you have received any further information?"

"No," said Matt, amiably, "the only answer we have got is that it is impossible to identify the passengers in the parlor car."

"Ah, thank you! Thank you very much, sir! I felt sure it couldn't be our Mr. Northwick. Er—good morning, sir."

He bowed himself away, and went into his store again, and Matt asked Wade: "Who in the world is that?"

"He's a Mr. Gerrish—keeps the large store there. Rather an unpleasant type."

Matt smiled. "He had the effect of refusing to believe that anything so low as an accident could happen to a man of Northwick's business standing."

"Something of that," Wade assented. "He worships Northwick on the altar of materia success."

Matt lifted his head and looked about. "I suppose the whole place is simply seething with curiosity."

Just after they reached the side street where Wade left him to go down to his church, he met Sue Northwick driving in her sleigh. She was alone, except for the groom impassive in the rumble.

"Have you heard anything?" she asked sharply.

Matt repeated the despatch from the operator at Wellwater.

"I knew it was a mistake," she said, with a kind of resolute scorn. "It's perfectly ridiculous! Why should he have been there? I think there ought to be some way of punishing the newspapers for circulating false reports. I've been talking with the man who drove my father to the train yesterday morning, and he says he spoke lately of buying some horses at Springfield. He got several from a farm near there once. I'm going down to telegraph the farmer; I found his name among father's bills. Of course he's there. I've got the despatch all written out."

"Let me take it back to the station for you, Miss Northwick," said Matt.

"No; get in with me here, and we'll drive down, and then I'll carry you back home. Or! Here, Dennis!" she said to the man in the rumble; and she handed him the telegram. "Take this to the telegraph office, and tell them to send it up by Simpson the instant the answer comes."

The Irishman said, "Yes, ma'am," and dropped from his perch with the paper in his hand.

"Get in, Mr. Hilary," she said, and after he had mounted she skilfully backed the sleigh and turned the horses homeward. "If I hear nothing from my despatch, or if I hear wrong, I am going up to Wellwater Junction myself, by the first train. I can't wait any longer. If it's the worst, I want to know the worst."

Matt did not know what to say to her courage. So he said, "Alone?" to gain time.

"Of course! At such a time, I would rather be alone."

At the house Matt found Louise had gone to her room for a moment, and he said he would like to speak with her there.

She was lying on the lounge, when he announced himself, and she said, "Come in," and explained, "I just came off a moment, to give my sympathies a little rest. And then, being up late so many nights this week. What have you heard?"

"Nothing, practically. Louise, how long did you expect to stay?"

"I don't know. I hadn't thought. As long as I'm needed, I suppose. Why? Must you go back?"

"No—not exactly."

"Not exactly? What are you driving at?"

"Why, there's nothing to be found out by telegraphing. Some one must go up to the place where the accident happened. She sees that, and she wants to go. She can't realize at all what it means to go there. Suppose she could manage the journey, going alone, and all that; what could she do after she got there? How could she go and look up the place of the accident and satisfy herself whether her father was——"

"Matt!" shrieked his sister. "If you go on you will drive me wild. She mustn't go; that's all there is of it. You mustn't think of letting her go." She sat up on the lounge in expression of her resolution on this point. "She must send somebody—some of their men. She mustn't go. It's too hideous!"

"No," said Matt, thoughtfully. "I shall go."

"You!"

"Why not? I can be at the place by four or five in the morning, and I can ascertain all the facts and be able to relieve this terrible suspense for her."

"For both of them," suggested Louise. "It must be quite as bad for that poor, sick old maid."

"Why, of course," said Matt, and he felt so much ashamed of having left her out of the account that he added, "I dare say it's even worse for her. She's seen enough of life to realize it more."

"Sue was his favorite, though," Lodise returned. "Of course you must go, Matt. You couldn't do less! It's magnificent of you. Have you told her, yet, that you would go?"

"Not yet. I thought I would talk it over with you first."

"Oh, I approve of it. It's the only thing to do. And I had better stay here till you come back——"

"Why, no; I'm not sure." He came a little nearer and dropped his voice. "You'd better know the whole trouble, Louise. There's great trouble for them whether he's dead or alive. There's something wrong in his accounts with the company, and if he was on that train he was running away to Canada to escape arrest."

He could see that only partial intelligence of the case reached her.

"Then if he's killed, it will all be hushed up. I see! It makes you hope he's killed."

Matt gave a despairing groan. "If he's killed it makes it just so much the worse. The defalcation has to come out, any way."

"When must it come out?"

"A good many people know of it; and such things are hard to keep. It may come out—some rumor of it—in the morning papers. The question is whether you want to stay till they know it here; whether it would be wise, or useful."

"Certainly not! I should want to kill anybody that was by when such a thing as that came out, and I should despise Sue Northwick if she let me get away alive. I must go at once!"

She slid herself from the lounge, and ran to the glass, where she put up a coil of hair in the knot it had escaped from.

"I had my doubts," Matt said, "about letting you come here without telling you just what the matter was, but mother thought you would insist upon coming any way and that you would be embarrassed."

"Oh, that was quite right," said Louise. "The great thing now is to get away."

"I hope you won't let her suspect——"

"Well, I think you can trust me for that, Matt," said Louise, turning round upon him, with a hairpin in her mouth, long enough to give him as sarcastic a glance as she could. If her present self-possession was a warrant of future performance, Matt thought he could trust her; but he was afraid Louise had not taken in the whole enormity of the fact, and he was right in this. As a crime she did not then, or ever afterward, fully imagine it. It may be doubted whether she conceived of it as other than a great trouble and as something that ought always to be kept from her friend.

Matt went down stairs and found Sue Northwick in the library.

"I feel perfectly sure," she said, "that we shall hear of my father at Springfield. One of the horses he got there has gone lame, and it would be quite like him to stop and look up another in the place of it on the same farm."

The logic of this theory did not strike Matt, but the girl held her head in such a strong way, she drew her short breaths with such a smoothness, she so visibly concealed her anxiety in the resolution to believe herself what she said that he could not refuse it the tribute of an apparent credence. "Yes, that certainly makes it seem probable."

"At any rate," she said, "if I hear nothing from him there, or we get no news from Wellwater, I shall go there at once. I've made up my mind to that."

"I shouldn't wish you to go alone, Sue," Adeline quavered. Her eyes were red, and her lips swollen as if she had been crying; and now the tears came with her words. "You could never get there alone in the world. Don't you remember, it took us all day to get to Wellwater the last time we went to Quebec?"

Sue gave her sister a severe look, as if to quell her open fears at least, and Matt asked aimlessly, "Is it on the way to Quebec?"

Sue picked up the railroad guide from the desk where she had left it. "Yes; it is, and it isn't." She opened the book and showed him the map of the road. "The train divides at Wellwater, and part goes to Montreal and part to Quebec. There are all sorts of stops and starts on the Quebec branch, so that you don't arrive till next morning, but you get to Montreal in five or six hours. But the whole thing seems perfectly frantic. I don't see why we pay the slightest attention to it! Of course papa has stayed over in Springfield for something; only he's usually so careful about telegraphing us if he changes his plans——"

She faltered, and let the book drop. Matt picked it up for her and began to look at the time table, at first to hide the pain he felt at the self-discouragement in which she ended, and then to see if he might not somehow be useful to her. "I see that a train from Boston meets the Springfield train at Wellwater."

"Does there?" She bent to look over the book with him, and he felt the ungovernable thrill at being near the beauty of a woman's face which a man never knows whether to be ashamed of or glad of, but which he cannot help feeling. "Then perhaps I had better go by way of Boston. What time does it start? Oh, I see! Seven-thirty. I could get that train—if I don't hear from him at Springfield. But I know I shall hear."

A stir of drapery made them aware of Louise at the library door. Suzette went toward her, "Are you going?" she asked, without apparently sharing the surprise that Matt felt at seeing his sister with her hat and gloves on, and her jacket over her arm.

"Yes, I'm going, Sue. I just ran up to see you—I had to do that—but we both know I'm of no use here; and so we won't make any pretences." Louise spoke very steadily, almost coldly; her brother did not quite know what to make of her; she was pale, and she looked down while she spoke. But when she finished buttoning the glove she was engaged with, she went up and put both her hands in Suzette's. "I don't need to tell you that I'm going just to get myself out of your way. It isn't a time for ornamental friendshipping, and you've got all the good you could out of seeing me, and knowing that I'm anxious with you. That's about all there is of it, and I guess we'd better not spin it out. But remember, Sue, whenever you need me, when you really want me, you can send for me, and if I don't come again till you do, you'll know that I'm simply waiting. Will you remember that—whatever happens?"

Matt gave a long tacit sigh of relief.

"Yes, I will, Louise," said Suzette. They kissed each other as if in formal ratification of their compact, which meant so much more to one of them than it could to the other.

"Come, Matt!" said Louise.

She added hastily, to prevent insistence against her plan, that she would have time to walk to the station, and she wished to walk. Then Matt said: "I will see you aboard the train, and then I'll come back and wait till you hear from Springfield, Miss Suzette."

"That is a good idea," said Louise.

"But," Adeline urged tremulously, "sha'n't you be afraid to go to Boston alone? It'll be dark by the time you get there!"

"The journey can't be very dangerous," said Louise, "and when I arrive, I shall put myself in charge of a faithful Boston hackman, and tell him I'm very valuable and am to be taken the best of care of. Then I shall be set down at our door in perfect safety."

They all had the relief of a little laugh; even Adeline joined reluctantly in it.

When they were once free of the house, Matt said: "I wonder whether she will remember, after the worst comes, what you said, and whether she will trust you enough to turn to us?"

"I don't know. Probably she will be too proud at first. But I shall come, whether she asks me or not. If they had relations or connections, as everybody else has, it would be different. But as it is——"

"Yes, of course," said Matt.

"I wish I could realize that Sue is fond of him, as we are of papa. But I can't. He always made me feel creepy; didn't he you?"

"He was a secret person. But as far as I had anything to do with him at the Mills, when I was there, I found him square enough. He was a country person."

"I suppose Sue's pride is countrified," said Louise.

Matt went on, "His secrecy may have been only a sort of shyness; Heaven knows I don't want to judge him. I suppose that that slow deliberation of his was an effort to maintain himself with dignity. Of course, we see him now in the light of his rascality, poor man, and most of his traits seem ugly."

They had a little time after they reached the station, and they walked up and down the platform talking, and Matt explained how his father might be glad to have him go to Wellwater and settle the question whether Northwick was in the accident or not. It would be a great relief for him to know. He tried to make out that he was going from a divided motive.

"Oh, you needen't be at the trouble to say all that to me, Matt," said Louise. "I don't blame you for wanting to go, even out of kindness."

"No, I suppose there's no guilt attaching to a thing of that kind," Matt answered.

There were a good many loungers about the station, young men and girls, released from the shops for the day; in such towns they find the station an agreeable resort, and enjoy a never-failing excitement in the coming and going of the trains. They watched the Hilarys, as they walked, with envy of that something distinguished which both of them had. They were both tall and handsomely made, and they had the ease before their fellow-beings which perhaps comes as much from the life-long habit of good clothes as from anything else. Matt had a conscience against whatever would separate him from his kind, but he could not help carrying himself like a swell for all that; and Louise did not try to help it, for her part. She was an avowed worldling, and in this quality she now wore a drab cloth costume, bordered with black fur down the front of the jacket and around it at the hips. The skirt, which fell plain to her feet, had a border of fur there, and it swirled and swayed with her long, dashing stride in a way that filled all those poor girls who saw it with despair. It seemed to interest almost as painfully a young man with a thin, delicate face, whom she noticed looking at her. She took him at first for one of those educated or half-educated operatives, who are complicating the labor problem more and more. He was no better dressed than others in the crowd, and there was no reason why he should not be a hat-shop or a shoe-shop hand, and yet at a second glance, she decided that he was not. He stood staring at her with a studious frown, and with the faint suggestion of a sneer on his clean-shaven, fine lips; but she knew that he was admiring her, however he might be hating her, and she spoke to Matt about him as they turned from him in their walk and promised to point him out. But when they came up again to where he had been standing eh was gone. The train came in and Louise got aboard, and Matt made his way into the station and went to ask the operator in the telegraph office if she had got anything for Miss Northwick.

She said: "Something just come. I was waiting for the hack to send it up."

"Oh, I will take it, if you please. I am going back to Mr. Northwick's," said Matt.

"All right."

Matt took the despatch and hurried out to find some means of getting quickly to Miss Northwick with it. There was no conveyance about the station, and he started up the street at a gait which was little short of a run, which exposed him to the ridicule of such small boys as observed his haste in their intervals of punging. One, who dropped from the runner of a sleigh which came up behind him, jeered him for the awkwardness with which he floundered out of its way in the deep snow of the roadside. The sleigh was abruptly halted, and Sue Northwick called from it, "Mr. Hilary! I couldn't wait at home, and I've just been at the depot by the lower road. You have a despatch?"

"Yes, I have a telegram."

"Oh, give it to me!"

He withheld it a moment. "I don't know what it is, Miss Northwick. But if it isn't what you expected, will you let—will you allow me——"

As if she did not know what she was doing, she caught the despatch from his hand, and tore it open. "Well," she said, "I knew it. He hasn't been there; now I shall go to Wellwater." She crumpled the telegram nervously in her hand, and made a motion to lift the reins.

Matt put his hand on her wrist. "You couldn't. You—you must let me go."

"You?"

"Me. I can get into Boston in time for that half-past-seven train, and I can do all the things when I get to Wellwater that you couldn't do. Come; be reasonable! You must see that what I propose is best. I solemnly promise you that nothing shall be left undone, or omitted or forgotten, that could set your mind at rest. Whatever you would wish done, I will do. Go home; your sister needs you; you need yourself; if you have a trial to meet greater than this suspense, which you've borne with such courage, you want all your strength for it. I beg you to trust me to do this for you. I know that it seems recreant to let another go in your place on such an errand, but it really isn't so. You ought to know that I wouldn't offer to go if I were not sure that I could do all that you could do, and more. Come! Let me go for you!"

He poured out his reasons vehemently, and she sat like one without strength to answer. When he stopped she still waited before she answered simply, almost dryly, "Well," and she gave no other sign of assent in words. But she turned over the hand on which he was keeping his, and clutched his hand hard; the tears, the first she had shed that day, gushed into her eyes. She lifted the reins and drove away, and he stood in the road gazing after her till her sleigh vanished over the rise of the ground to the southward.

(To be continued.)

FOR THE WEARY

And worn mothers and wives—how many such there are! Not worn with age—few of them have reached middle life—but with exhausting work and worry. For the majority, it is impossible to escape these hard conditions; but the means of successfully facing them are within the reach of every one. To sharpen the appetite, aid digestion, enrich and purify the blood, build up the system, and make the weak strong, Ayer's Sarsaparilla is the best of all medicines. Mary Henrickon, Park street, Ware, Mass., testifies: "For over twelve months I was afflicted with general debility, headache, and loss of appetite, followed by chills. I was scarcely able to drag myself about the house, and no medicine helped me so much as Ayer's Sarsaparilla. Since taking this remedy I have entirely recovered my health and strength."

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