

WHO WAS GUILTY

A VICTIM OF CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE

CHAPTER XVII.

Stunned and bewildered, I sat gazing at the death warrant in my trembling hand. It was no less. This letter, made public, would seal my doom.

I was, then, a murderer. In my sleep I had killed my uncle, and had afterward drawn the rope from his neck and the ring from his finger. In this way it was that those articles came into my possession. Mechanically my hand stole to the pocket in which they were concealed. Mile. Rosalie smiled, and in that smile I saw that she knew the meaning of the motion. I could not speak. I could not lift my head. How much higher than I was this base woman. Full of venom, maliciousness and spite, as she was, her soul was free from blood guiltiness.

"You are guilty," she said.

"I must be guilty," I said mechanically.

"What do you propose to do?"

"I propose," she replied, "in a voice of much sweetness, to see you. You have a wife and daughter. What would your disgraceful death mean to them?"

"This reference to those dear innocent ones whose honor was my honor, whose shame was my shame, and who were brought to the bar of justice, would share my infamy, completely unmanned me. A sob of agony escaped from my lips.

"Is it not worth while," said Mile. Rosalie, "to save yourself, so that they may be saved?"

"Yes, yes," I gasped, seizing her hand and looking imploringly into her face.

"To save them from ignominy and from lifelong sorrow. Is it possible that you will do this for me and them?"

"I will. Hush! There is a knock at the door. Ask who's there."

Her voice, as she spoke, did not rise above a whisper. I strove to utter the words she dictated, but my tongue clave to the roof of my mouth.

"Richard! Richard!"

It was my wife calling softly to me from without.

"Open the door," whispered Mile. Rosalie. "I will hide behind there," pointing to a screen. "She will not see me. Do not let her keep you long. When she is gone I will show you that you have nothing to fear."

She glided with noiseless footsteps behind the screen, and moved to the door. I forgot for a moment that she was locked, and my wife called to me that the key was turned. I unlocked the door and admitted her; but I did not allow her to step into the middle of the room. She was in her nightdress, and I well remember that there was a piece of narrow red ribbon at her neck, which looked to me like floss silk. I must be alone. And still she lingered, and continued to speak in sweet and loving tones; and clasped me round the neck and kissed me; but I pushed her from me, and bade her go to her room and sleep.

"You will come soon?" she asked, so lightly.

"I do not know. I do not know," I muttered. "I have much to do. Do you not see how you are distressing me?"

Shortly afterward she left me, but not before she made another effort to soothe me. She smoothed my forehead with a cambric handkerchief and put it into my hand, and then she turned cool and would refresh me. As she crossed the threshold I quickly locked the door upon her, and the handkerchief fell from my hand. Mile. Rosalie, gliding forward from her hiding place behind the screen, picked it up and toyed with it, and I made no attempt to take it from her. The vital issue at stake completely engrossed me.

"We are free now from intrusion," she said, "and our business will not take long. I have /ms to propose. First, and now her face assumed a new phase of malignity. Tell me what you think I was doing while I was hiding behind the screen."

"Doing? Nothing?"

"Not even listening?"

"Ah, yes; you could not help doing that."

"Of course not. It was not to be supposed that I would play the part of a eavesdropper, unless I was compelled. Such an infamous woman as I am! That is what you called me a few minutes ago. I was a liar and a thief as well, was I not? I like to be correct. And but a few short hours before that you discharged me in a manner that would ruin the fair fame of any lady, and informed me that I was not a fit associate for your wife and daughter. And yet I am going to save them; yes, indeed I am, and to save you, too! But I must tell you first what I was doing while your wife was here. I was taking down in shorthand the words that were spoken between you. You had no idea of the extent of my accomplishments, had you? I am really accomplished. Years ago I learned shorthand, and it used to bring me in a few shillings. Oh, what a hard life I have led; what a bitter, cruel life! But I am going to enjoy myself now that I have the chance. You see, with this book, chief and this little piece of paper in my hand I can go to your wife and say, 'Not only is your husband a murderer, but he loves me; when I prove to her, by relating what you said to each other just now, that I was in your room concealed while you were so anxiously trying to get rid of her.'"

She did not speak rapidly; now and again she paused, to give me an opportunity of replying; but I could find no words, so confounded was I by her altered manner. That I was more completely than ever in her power was evident to me in spite of my agony of bewilderment. But the woman who held me in her toils had said she would save me! In what way? Not out of tenderness and pity, but out of hate and scorn. What course was to be dictated by these sentiments?

"You understand me?" she asked. "It is necessary that you should tell me that you understand me."

"So far?" I said, "I understand you."

"I am about to dictate terms. My silence, my mercy, must be purchased. I have set a price and terms upon them. In the murdered man's dispatch box there were five thousand pounds. I must have that money."

"I have not got it."

She laughed mockingly. "But, my dear sir, my innocent, virtuous gentleman, money I must have. You drew from the bank to-day \$1,000. I must have that. It is in this room. Ah, there is a safe in the corner; you keep your precious things in it. Your eyes are wandering toward it now. And those two keys upon the table—why, as I am an honest woman, they must be the keys

of the safe! I wonder, now, if I could unlock it!"

I allowed her to do as she would. She unlocked the safe and drew therefrom two bags of gold, 500 sovereigns in each.

"I sell you your life for the gold in these bags," she said. "Is it agreed?"

I nodded vacantly. My senses were numbed. If I could have poured out my heart's blood to save from sorrow and shame my darling wife and daughter, gladly would I have shed it. What, then, in comparison, were these bags of gold?

"It is fortunate," she said, "that you were paid in gold. I should have refused bank notes, and then you would have been on the straight road to the gallows. But there is another condition; your life is not worth a moment's purchase if you decline it. You will go from this house to-night within the hour, and you will never set foot in it again. Where you go I do not care; disappear, drown yourself, hang yourself; it will not matter to me. If you refuse to obey me, if ever you seek again the society of your wife and daughter, they and all the world shall be made acquainted with your crime. That is my revenge; as sweet to me—as sweet—as money. You would have driven me forth. I drive you forth. So long as you are in hiding in any part of the world you like you are safe. Do you agree?"

"I must agree."

"Then there is nothing more to be said." She moved toward the door, opened it, and spoke to me from that spot. Every word of her hissing voice fell clear upon my senses, although she spoke in a tone so low that it could not travel to any other part of the house.

"I shall watch that you keep your word. I hate you and yours; violate the conditions, and I will bring down upon your lady wife and daughter to the gutters. I will hunt and pursue and expose them, so that they shall never know a moment's peace. You know what you have to expect. Good-night."

She was gone, and I was alone. Well did I know that she was not to be trifled with. I threatened into execution if I did not keep faith with her. And was it not better that I should disappear from the sight of those I loved and never see them again? Was it possible, knowing what I knew, that I could ever allow them to place their innocent lips to my guilty ones, that I could ever gaze into their dear, innocent eyes without shuddering? True, I felt that I had sinned unconsciously, but the guilt was no less mine than if I had done the deed in the broad light of day, with all my senses about me. I must go, and live henceforth a wretched man. No more peace for me, but, nevertheless, I was as one who was blind. I left everything in the room in confusion, the safe unlocked, papers on the table. I took nothing with me. Feeling my way along the dark passages, and creeping so softly that I could not hear the sound of my footsteps, I came to the door of my dear Eunice's bedroom. I slid down, and pressed my lips to the door, then rose, and felt my way onward again. I paused at the door of my bedroom, in which my darling wife lay. Softly, softly to my knees I slid, and with my hand I unlocked the door, and the panel. I did not pray—I could not; but the mute voice within me was bidding adieu to life, to love.

Softly I rose to my feet and went out into the night alone.

CHAPTER XVIII.

I doubt whether, if I tried, I could describe at length the weeks and months that followed. Like one who was dead, but possessing still the power of motion, I pursued my lonely way. All through the first night of my departure I walked till the first faint streak of light heralded the coming day. I must have walked fast and mechanically in a direction in which I should not be recognized. I suited me that I had reached a place. I did not know. An humble wayside inn was near; I entered it and asked for a room. There I remained during the day, and when night fell I went out again, and walked on and on, through fields and villages, taking any track that promised to lead me farther and farther away from familiar scenes. I must have adopted some method of cunning concealment that no one accosted me and inquired whether I was going. When day dawned I was in a wood, and there I lay unobserved. At night again I continued my flight, and so, day after day, night after night, I passed, until I felt that I was lost—and safe. I kept no count of the days, and only knew when it was Sunday by the ringing of the church bells. I entered no church; I did not pray; I strove not to think; all I wished was that time would pass swiftly. I spoke to no man unless I was spoken to; I never held my hand with tenderness upon the form of child or animal. My heart was turning into stone, and I set myself steadfastly to the task of banishing from my mind every gentle sentiment that strove to find lodgment there. Of my wife and daughter I would not think. There was between them and me a barrier which I believed to be eternal. I never looked at newspaper or printed page; the world's doings interested me no longer.

One Sabbath I was sitting in a churchyard; I was tired and faint, and my feet were blistered with walking over rough roads. It belonged to my mood to choose ever the stony paths.

They were singing in the church—a quaint old church covered with ivy. Worn with fatigue, my eyelids closed, and a light slumber overtook me. It could have lasted but a short time, for when I opened my eyes I heard the singing still within the church. What specially aroused me was the voice of one of the singers. My wife had just such a voice; its note of familiar sweetness startled me. I listened in wonder. The singing ceased, and soon afterward the congregation issued from the church. I scanned them eagerly as they came forth; for a brief space my sterner spirit did not assert itself.

I had no fear that I should be recognized, supposing that the voice which had impressed me was that of my wife. I scanned them eagerly as they came forth; for a brief space my sterner spirit did not assert itself.

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turn to see, but I knew that he was looking after me.

Near the churchyard was a lightly timbered wood. Thither I wandered, encompassed by silence, and threw myself upon the ground at the foot of a tree. Taking some bread from my pocket, I ate it to keep life within me.

Ordinarily when I was accosted by a stranger my chief anxiety was to fly from the neighborhood; but something chained me to this spot. It may have been the voice singing in the church; it may have been the manifest kindness of the stranger who had accosted me. When evening came I was still there.

I was not at so great a distance from the church that I could not hear the singing at the evening service; true, it came faintly to my ears, but my senses were abnormally sharpened. Amid all the voices I detected that which had stirred me in the morning, and was glad when I heard it and sorry when it ceased. They were the first humanizing sensations I had experienced for many months. The service ended, and all was again silent. It was a fine evening, and I resolved to pass the night in the wood, and recommence my wanderings in the early morning. I reckoned upon complete solitude, but it was not to be mine.

Three persons strolled in the direction of the spot upon which I was lying, and stopped within a short distance of me. A clump of trees and the gathering darkness concealed me from their observation. One of the persons began to speak, and I recognized his voice. It was that of the man who had spoken to me so kindly in the churchyard. In his company were a woman and a young girl, whose face I could not distinguish, but whose form reminded me of Eunice. The father was telling them of his meeting with me, and of the manner in which I had met his kind words.

"He is a stranger here," the man said; "I have never seen his face before. Indeed, I saw but little of it now, it was so covered with tangled hair. Poor fellow! Some deep trouble is weighing upon him."

"Perhaps, father," said the young girl, "he was hungry."

"I think not," was the father's answer, "or he would have behaved differently. Hunger is a sharp monitor, my dear. He was not hungry; he was dejected. He looked to me more like a hunted animal than a human being."

"A man escaped from prison, perhaps," suggested the mother.

"It may be; if so, a long time must have elapsed since he made his escape; otherwise his hair would not have been so abundant. Before I spoke to him I noticed in his eyes a look of singular refinement, and I am sure that at some period of his life he had moved in a good position. Perhaps he had a happy home, like ours; perhaps he had a wife and child whom he loved as I love you. To have enjoyed such happiness and to have lost it—all, my dears, is a sad thought. If that poor man's heart were laid bare before us we should see it throbbing with suffering—unmerited, mayhap, but likely, too, to have been created by error or sin. Should I meet him again I will strive to learn his story, and will help him if he will let me."

They passed on, with further words of pity for me. I waited till the earth was shrouded in darkness, and then I fled from the wood. There was a terror in the idea of meeting that kind heart again.

From the gloomy months I could pluck other records, before I spoke to him of my story. More and more insensible did I become to influences of a humanizing nature; harder and harder grew my heart; and there came periods of savage delirium, when, in my desolation, I raised my clenched hand heavenward, and cried, "God, and he was good. For the bitter question forced itself upon me, why should I be thus punished? The evil within me was not of my creating; the sleeping instinct of savagery which had led me to the unconscious commission of a deed of blood was not of my planting. In my waking hours I had done a good life, and had held deservedly an exalted and beloved position in my home. I was kind to the poor, and my heart was always open to the call of charity. Why, then, should I be compelled to wander through the world 'more like a hunted animal than a human being'?" If there was a God, and he was good, would he not permit this? In the peril of those thoughts lay a deeper danger than that which sprang from the sin which weighed upon my soul.

(To be continued.)

No Race Suicide Threat.

South Dakota is pointing to itself with some little pride while the discussion of "race suicide" goes on in the older sections of the country. That State is not worrying about depopulation, says the New York Post. Its population, without counting immigration, is increasing faster than almost anywhere else in the country, and an abundant tide of immigration, both from other States and from Europe, is coming in at the same time. Indeed, the chief difficulty is said to be in keeping enough schools open for an education. The paragraphers say that even if there were enough schoolhouses to go around, the teachers are almost certain to get married very promptly, and the instruction comes to an end. South Dakota is undeniably a land where many are born and few die. The birth rate is computed at 31.8 to the thousand population, while that of number of people only 7.5 shuffle off this mortal coil every year. The community lives up closely, in fact, to this one of President Roosevelt's ideas.

What Ailed the Clock.

Mrs. Benson's clock, after having kept excellent time for several years, suddenly stopped. After trying for some time to make it go, she removed it from its shelf and sent it to a clock-repairer.

"Madam," he said, after inspecting. "Is this clock kept in a damp room?"

"No," she replied, "we keep it in the driest room in the house."

"Has it ever had a fall into a tub of water, or anything of that sort?"

"Never."

"Well, I can't understand it. Its works are as rusty as if it had been left unused in a cellar for a year."

"I can't see how that can be," said Mrs. Benson. "We are so careful of that clock that we always keep our vials of muriatic and sulphuric acid inside of it, where we know they will never be touched."

Then the jeweler understood.

Fortune's Favorite.

Short—That fellow Blank is a lucky cuss. He makes money at everything he goes into.

Long—What did he do that started your wheels to revolving?

Short—Why, he fell into an open sewer last week and recovered \$3,000 damages from the city.—Chicago News.

"You seem in trouble," he said. "Can I help you in any way?"

I rose, cast a wrathful glance at him, and walked away from him. I did not

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