SHADES OF THE PAST

By CHARLES CAREY
AUTHOR OF
"A Woman to Win," "The Van Suyden Sapphires," Etc.

Synopsis of Chapters Already Published

Returning from a beefsteak dinner late one February night, Robert Graham, a poor young New York lawyer, rescues from a burning hotel, and at the same times falls in love with Gladys Corlett, the daughter of a millionaire. Escorting her and her father to a place af safety, he proceeds to his own boarding house, and there finds a refined young girl lying unconscious in the snow on the doorstep. She revives sufficiently to tell him that she has been deserted by a villain who lured her to the city under promise of marriage; then she faints again. Graham, happening to have only thirty cents in his pocket, is in a quandry what to do; but finally, on a chivalric impulse, determines to give up his own room to the girl for the night, and carries her upstairs. He is horrified to discover that she is apparently dead.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FELLOW BOARDER.

IN THE realization of his terrifying predicament, Graham saw his career blasted, his name dragged into unenviable notoriety, himself arraigned upon the charge of murder, tried, and possibly condemned to the electric chair.

All this he had brought upon himself by his precipitate philanthropy. Why could he not have been prudent and discreet, and called a policeman to take charge of the unfortunate girl and her affairs?

He groaned aloud in his dazed agony, great beads of perspiration breaking out upon his brow.

Would anyone believe his protestations of innocence, he asked himself wildly, with nothing but his own improbable story to explain the presence of the dead woman in his room?

He knew just how much credence he himself would give to so palpably fictitious a tale.

No; it was idle to deceive himself. Reputation, prospects, all were gone, and with the rest, whatever chance he might have had of winning Gladys Corlett.

But either this suggestion, or the reaction from his first numbed horror roused him to sudden action.

He caught the girl by the shoulders as though to stir her back by main force to life. With shaking hand he thrust the flash of liquor to her lips, and poured a generous quantity down her throat.

And whether it was his heroic measures, or simply the passing of the swoon, the ghastly rigidity of her features relaxed, she choked stranglingly over the fiery stimulant, then with an uncertain movement opened her violet eyes, and, after what seemed an interminable interval, sat up.

For a moment she gazed about in a bewildered doze, evidently not comprehending where she was, but her glance took in the pipes upon the table, the smoking jacket hanging across the back of a chair, the essentially mannish character of the room.

"What is this place?" she demanded. "Your own room?"

"Why, yes," stammered Graham, hardly recovered from his relief at her restoration, and completely taken aback at this surprising show of vigor. "Why, yes; but let me explain."

In his confusion he caught at the shoes and stockings she was holding with some sort of vague idea of hanging them before the fire to dry; but the girl snatched them back with a sharp exclamation, and sprang to her feet.

"Don't you dare touch me!" she cried, drawing herself up like a creature at bay. "Don't you dare interfere with me. I am going to leave this place at once, and if you attempt to prevent it I shall scream for help!"

She meant it, too. In spite of his blameless conscience Graham recoiled before the angry flash in her eye and the determined set to her lips.

It was a contingency that taxed his ingenuity. He was loath as ever to let this homeless girl face again the stormy night, especially under such a misinterpretation of his motives. On the other hand, it must be confessed, the prospect of having the household summoned there by a woman's shrill shrieks to find him in so compromising a situation was one from which he distinctly quailed.

While he hesitated uncertain what to do or say nature straightened out the difficulty for him. The fictitious strength which had been sustaining his companion suddenly gave way and she sank down upon the couch weak and trembling and hid her face in her hands.

With a compassionate impulse Graham stepped toward her and laid a hand gently upon her bowed shoulder.

"Look here," he said, "I only want to help you. I am a man and I've got a sister of my own, and if she were in your fix right now I couldn't mean to do more for her than I want to do for you."

Impressed in spite of herself by the earnestness with which he spoke the girl ceased her sobbing and turned her wide eyes upon him in a glance of doubting scrutiny.

"Why, then, did you bring me here?" she demanded. "No, no, I cannot believe that you are dealing honestly with me. If you were, you would have taken me to the sister of whom you speak."

"My sister?" exclaimed Graham. "Why, she lives 150 miles from here. Oh, I see," he suddenly comprehended, "you think this house is my home, eh? Well, it isn't. This is merely my boarding place."

"A boarding house?" she cried. "Then I insist that you place me under the protection of the landlady at once. That, I should think," with plainly reawakened suspicion, "would have been the first thing to suggest itself to you."

Graham hunrriedly explained the main objections to this plan, and at the same time took occasion to make clear the dilemma in which he had found himself upon the steps.

"In short," he concluded, "there were but two courses open to me, as I saw it; either to leave you to perish in the snow, or to brave convention, and bring you here.

"So, now that you are here," his tone changed again, as his glance fell upon her frail, woe-begone figure. "I beg that you will accept of my hospitality. If you think you are all right now and able to manage for yourself, I will withdraw. The door, as you see, has both a key and a bolt, so you will be safe from intrusion; and you must open to no one, or give any sign of being in the room, until I knock softly three times, like this."

His evident sincerity removed the last tract of doubt from her mind.

"You were good to me," she faltered. "Forgive me, will you, for having misjudged you?"

"But where will you go?" she questioned. "Did you not tell me that every room in the hause was taken?"

"Taken, so far as the possibility of putting you into one of them," rejoined Graham lightly; "but a man is different, don't you know. He can always find a corner to stow himself away in.

"Now, don't you bother about me," as he saw a protest rising to her lips. "I shall get along fine. What you must do is to get those wet clothes of yours dried, and take some rest, so that you will be able to tackle the problem which confronts you tomorrow."

Then, with a few further directions, he left her, and in his stocking feet stole noiselessly along the darkened halls.

Graham had spoken cheerfully in regard to his arrangements for the night; but, as a matter of fact, there was little else but a "corner" in which to stow himself.

The only plan he could hit upon was the occupy the general bathroom upon the floor above as his sleeping apartment.

It was a cold, cheerless, little den; but there was a dilapidated old couch there upon which he could spread out, and with his overcoat over him, he fancied that he could get along for the few hours yet remaining until daylight.

Locking the door, therefore, he tried to sleep, but it was a long time before he could close his eyelids.

The crazy old window sash rattled in the wind and let in a flood of icy air against which he found the overcoat a totally inadequate protection. The broken and twisted springs of the couch upon which he lay prodded him painfully at every move, and when he did at last drift off into an uneasy slumber it was only to indulge in a series of harrowing dreams in which the events of the beefsteak dinner, the Park avenue fire, and the rescue of the girl upon the stoop were jumbled up to his utter confusion.

One of the most vivid of these dreams was a vision in which he seemed to be on trial for the murder of the girl from Montclair, and Miss Bowen, as a stern judge, found him guilty, and for a penalty sentenced him to be buried alive in the snow upon her front stoop. Thereupon his comrades of the dinner, who seemed to regard the affair as a sort of jolly hazing frolic, bound him hand and foot, and, oblivious to his protests, shoveled over him the heaping drifts.

The cold seemed to bite into his very marrow; he could imagine the blood congealing in his veins; and although he insisted that such a punishment was cruel and unusual and contrary to the letter and spirit of the Constitution of the United States, no one would come to his assistance.

A rattling at the door interrupted his fancies. Some one was trying to get in, for the morning was already well advanced and the sunlight of a clear, crisp winter's day blazed in through the frosted panes of the window.

Graham gave a guilty start. He had intended to evacuate his temporary quarters before anybody in the house was up, but now a hasty glance at his watch showed him that it was a quarter after 8.

He must escape somehow, so he decided to leave the room at once.

He waited, accordingly, until the lodger at the door had apparently gone away, then cautiously advancing to the door, opened it and stepped out into the hall.

But to his discomfiture he encountered just the other side of the threshold, standing there wrapped in a bathrobe, the young man who had come to the house the day before, being introduced by the landlady as Mr. William Warwick.

"Oh," said the stranger, glancing at Bob in surprise, "it was you, was it? Thought Mrs. Bowen told me you had a private bath?"

"Why, so I have; but—er—the pipes were out of order and I came down here. Can't do without my morning tub, you know."

"Just so." The other's glance dwelled quizzically upon the overcoat and rumpled evening clothes and Robert, conscious of how far these were removed from customary bath attire, grew even more red faced and confused.

"Strange, too," drawled the man, a mocking light in his eye, "that I should have heard some one moving about in your room just now as I came by. You have no room mate, have you?"

For an instant Graham was staggered; then with quick presence of mind he pulled himself together, and faced the fellow's grinning impertinence.

"No," he rejoined, haughtily. "No, I have no room mate, but I occasionally bring a friend home with me to spend the night. I trust you have no objections."

And disdaining further parley he turned on his heel and stalked down the stairs.

He might have paid more attention to Mr. William Warwick, however, if he had known that the latter's return home the night before was even later than his own, and that happening to pass Graham's door at the exact moment the girl had recovered consciousness and voiced her spirited defiance, the new boarder had been impelled by curiosity to apply his eye to the keyhole.

CHAPTER V.

"WHAT CAN YOU DO?"

GRAHAM'S light three raps upon the door of his room were to his satisfaction promptly answered; and when he had entered quickly and turned the key in the lock he could not withhold a slight exclamation of approval.

There had evidently been no tardiness in this quarter, whatever might be said of himself. Not only was his guest of the night up and dressed herself, but she had also made the bed and tidied up the room.

Moreover, there was a marked improvement in her personal appearance. Her face was still pale, and she showed the effects of the ordeal through which she had passed; but her hair was neatly twisted up into a coronet of pale gold above her brow, her garments had been carefully dried and brushed, her shoes had been rubbed with a bit of rag, her hat and coat rested on a chair ready to put on. Manifestly her spirit still remained unbroken.

"Oh, I am so glad to see you," she greeted Robert as he stepped inside. "It seemed to me as though you would never come, and I must get away from here, you know."

She caught up her hat and coat as she spoke. "Can I leave now?" she questioned.

"Hardly." He did not care to risk the chance of her meeting Warwick in the hall, or possibly one of the old "tabbies" coming up from breakfast. "Besides, why such an immediate rush?"

"Oh, I must find work at once," she explained. "You have been more than kind," her voice trembled a little, and her eyes dimmed. "I did not know that any man could be so generous. But you must see, for that very reason, it would be impossible for me to impose upon you further."

"So?" Graham was rummaging in his wardrobe, and spoke to her now above a pile of garments and clean linen which filled his arms. "Well, just wait a minute or two until I make myself presentable, and then we will go into the matter."

With that, he vanished into the bathroom whence the sounds of a vigorous splashing soon betokened that he was making a hasty toilet.

"Now," he said, when he reappeared in a gray business suit, and smoking jacket, "I have found it an excellent rule never to discuss anything upon an empty stomach; so, if you will kindly step behind the door I'll see what I can do in the way of procuring breakfast."

He stepped then into the hall and by good fortune found Delia, the maid, with whom he was a prime favorite, just passing.

"Ah, acushla," he blarneyed, "I was just looking for you to give you that little gold stick-pin of mine you admired so much the other day. And since I am not feeling very well this morning, I was wondering if you couldn't bring my breakfast up to my room. I am sick, you understand, Della, but not too sick to eat. In fact, I think my appetite is a little stronger than usual; so if you can manage to get me a whole grape fruit and a double portion of everything else. I'll promise you it will not be wasted."

He evidently had not reckoned in vain upon the efficacy of the little scarf-pin; for when Della came back, her tray was piled high. She proved amenable, too, when Graham, truthfully informed her that he had not occupied the bed the night before, insinuated that it would not be necessary for her to come in and clean up his room.

"Shure, Mister Graham," she assured him, "'tis mesilf that's only too glad to be let outiv it, what with ould Mig Mitford a wantin' her furnitoor all polished up, a job that'll take the full iv me day."

Secure, therefore, from interruption, and promising to put the tray out into the hall when he had finished with it, Robert returned to his charge, and quickly laid out the table with a very tempting-looking repast.

She had declared that she was not hungry, and had protested against his ordering anything for her; yet he noticed that when the grape fruit was duly divided, and the bacon, scrambled eggs, and toast set before her, she needed no urging to partake of it.

He observed, too, that as she sipped her coffee the pensive droop to her mouth subsided, and her face took on courage and resolution.

"There are not exactly twelve basketfuls," observed Graham, as they finished, surveying what was left with some satisfaction; "but I dare say with what is here and my little teapot up in the cupboard you can manage to eke out a lunch."

"A lunch?" She glanced up at him, startled.

"Yes. You don't suppose I am going to permit you to go away from here without a cent of money in your pocket or any settled abiding place. It will take a little time for me to get some funds and secure you a suitable lodging, so you will have to wait here until I return."

"But——" she started to object.

"No," he held up a deprecating hand. "I may have bungled this affair abominably to date; but I am sure I am on the right track now. Please let me have my own way; I want to prove to you that I am not entirely an idiot."

"Bungled!" she cried. "I am sure no one could have done better under the circumstances. You have been so thoughtful, so considerate in every way, that I should be an ungrateful wretch if——"

"Then you will follow my guidance?" broke in Graham, cutting her short. "You will agree to do as I say?"

"Yes," she assented humbly. "You have shown yourself a friend, indeed. I feel that I cannot do better than trust myself in your hands."

"Well, then, he drew back his chair, "let us get at the straight of things. I am a lawyer, you know, and I am going to cross-examine you a bit. Suppose, in the first place, you tell me your name; for, strange as it may seem, I haven't yet heard it."

"My name," she answered readily, "is Hilda—Hilda Montgomery."

"And you come from Montclair, I believe you said?"

"Yes," adding of her own volition the name of her parents and the street and number of their residence.

"Now, then," suggested Graham, "don't you think the wisest thing for you would be to communicate with them at once, and, begging their forgiveness, ask to be taken back?"

But she shuddered and shook so at this proposal, crying that he did not know her father, and that the latter would never think of permitting her to return, that Graham concluded not to press the subject further at the time.

"Tell me about the man with whom you ran away, then," he said. "If you still wish to marry him, and will give me his name and address, I think," his jaw closed significantly, "I can possibly persuade him to take a proper view of his responsibilities."

"No, no, no," she insisted even more vehemently than before. "I never want to see him again. I don't even want to think of him. Unless there is some very good reason for it," she added appealingly, "I would rather not let even you know his name."

"Well, perhaps you are right," agreed Graham, not without a trace of disappointment. "There is a bare chance he might be somebody I know or might meet, and in such case I don't believe I could keep my hands off him—a proceeding which, however much to his deserts, might bring you into unpleasant notoriety."

"Yes," he reflected, "I guess it is just as well for me to remain in blissful ignorance. Indeed, I only mentioned him, because I thought it my duty in discussing the affair with you to cover all possible contingencies.

"But now," he proceeded, "since you won't return home, and decline to have anything more to do with him, what, may I ask, are you planning to do?"

"I shall work," declared Hilda proudly.

"Very good. But at what? Have you any special training?"

"I don't believe I exactly understand."

"I mean, have you ever done any special line? Are you by chance a stenographer, or dressmaker, or school teacher, or library assistant, or have you ever been to any of the schools where such things are taught? This is a town where experience is demanded, you know, and unless one can show credentials, the chances of securing a place are pretty slim."

She looked a little frightened at this.

"No," she confessed, "I have never been trained in the way you speak of; they did not teach such branches at Miss Ogilive's, where I went to school.

"I'll tell you, though," she exclaimed brightly, "I can go on the stage. I used to be considered rather good in amateur shows at Montclair. Once I played Pauline in 'The Lady of Lyons.'"

Graham could only regard her ingenuous confidence with pity.

"My dear girl," he remonstrated, "we won't waste time over that proposition. If you told me you had ambitions to run for mayor of New York on the suffragette ticket, I might try to show you your mistake; but I decline even to discuss your possibilities as a Juliet or a Camille."

"What do you want me to do then?" she demanded a shade mutinously; "become a housemaid?"

"Yes," he snapped; "a hundred times rather than see you tramping Broadway in the hopeless quest at the agents' offices, until you finally end up by carrying a spear in the third row of the chorus. But I suppose you would prefer that to wielding a broom, eh, or selling your hands in dish water?"

"Oh, no, no," she protested plainly afraid that she had offended him. "I have no false pride. I will gladly go into service, if you think that the best thing for me. I am ready to do whatever you say."

She looked so timid, so appealing that Graham's heart smote him for his brutality.

"It is not what I want," he explained more gently; "it is a question of what you are most competent to do. Do you think, for instance, you could satisfy a careful housewife in the matter of cleaning up a room, or broil a steak so that it resembles anything but a burnt chip?"

"I don't know," she quavered humbly; "I have never had to do anything of the kind."

Then of a sudden she broke down, sobbing dolefully that she was of no use in the world, and that nobody wanted her, and that she might just as well starve at once and be done with it.

"There, there, there," Graham remorsefully laid a hand on her shoulder. "I ought to be kicked for frightening you so with my foolish talk. Qualifications be hanged; it's grit and courage that win out in the long run, and you've shown that you've got plenty of both. Now, don't cry any more; but just rest quietly here today, and trust to me to see that everything comes out all right."

CHAPTER VI.

A MAN OF ICE.

ROBERT did not, however, particularly regret having so discouraged his charge with her prospects of earning a living; for that, it must be confessed, was exactly the result at which he was aiming.

Accordingly, as soon as she had controlled her tears, and he was able to give her some precautionary directions—mainly to avoid appearing at the front windows during his absence, and to make as little noise as possible in moving about the room—he left her, and hurried to the nearest telephone booth.

A short search of the directory revealed that Mr. Montgomery, of Montclair, was listed among the subscribers, and the connection having been made, a dry, rasping voice hailed from the other end of the wire.

"Mr. Montgomery," said Graham, deeming it wiser to give the firm-name rather than his own, "this is Rogers & Van Duyck, of New York. A respectable client of ours informs us that he has taken your daughter under his pritection, and——"

"I have no daughter," he was curtly interrupted.

"Eh?" gasped Robert. Could it have been possible that the girl was deceiving him after all, laying claim to a respectability she did not possess.

"No, sir," repeated the grim voice. "I have no daughter. I had one; but since she has chosen willfully to disobey me I no longer recognize her as my child."

"Oh," with better comprehension, I see. But yo do not fully realize the circumstances, Mr. Montgomery. The poor child was cruelly deceived by the villain who induced her to leave home, and when she discovered his real intentions and resisted him he not only abandoned her, but struck her down senseless in the street.

"There she would probably have perished had not our client of whom I spoke rescued her and given her shelter for the night; but you will be glad to hear she sustained no permanent ill effect from her experience, and seems all right this morning."

"I beg your pardon," and the frigid tone betrayed not a tremor of feeling. "I am neither glad nor sorry to hear what you have told me. I have simply no interest in this misguided girl."

"But, Mr. Montgomery," persisted Robert, "I still don't think you quite understand. Your daughter realizes now the mistake she committed, and is properly penitent. She is alone here in the city without funds or any means of making a livelihood. Surely you are not going to condemn her and cast her off for what was at the worst no more than a grave indiscretion? That would be unnatural, monstrous."

"Are you trying to instruct me in my duty, sir?" the tone was distinctly hostile.

"Not at all," urged Graham hastily. "I am simply appealing to your instincts as a father and your humanity as a man. Why, think of this poor girl's plight, Mr. Montgomery. She is scarcely more than a child, utterly unfitted to battle with the world, and already sorely punished for her unfortunate misstep. To pardon her now and receive her back would insure you her love and gratitude. To steel your heart against her may drive her to almost any lengths of desperation. For heaven's sake think, man. Are you willing to assume so heavy a responsibility?"

"I have already decided"—there was no change in the other's cold, even voice—"and I am not one to be swayed by emotional appeals. I made it plain to the young woman what she might expect in case she disobeyed my injunctions, and I see no reason to change my attitude simply because she has already begun to reap the reward of her transgression."

"But," pleaded Graham, "will you not take a little more time to reflect? Won't you at least——"

"No. So far as I am concerned the matter is settled and done with. When Hilda Montgomery left my house I washed my hands of her forever. If there is nothing further you wish to say, sir——"

"But there is," exploded Robert, his indignation mastering him at last. "I want to tell you that I consider you the most atrocious, cold-blooded tyrant that ever had ice water in his veins for blood! I don't wonder that the girl took any chance to escape from such a home. You are nothing less than——"

The buzzing of the receiver and the inquiring voice of central informed him that connection had been sharply cut off; but in his righteous wrath, Robert still continued to hurl a torrent of epithets at the instrument until he could think of nothing further to say.

He was still fuming when he reached the street.

"Talk about fatted calf for the repentant prodigal," he stormed, "this is a case where the only provender on land is icicles and snowballs. Surely, no one could have been more tactful and deferential in stating the matter than I was; but one might as well try to soften a block of granite with warm water. Why, if that old curmudgeon had his deserts——"

He came to an abrupt halt on the crowded street, his jaw dropping and his face grown blank; for the disconcerting question had suddenly suggested itself to him, what was he to do next?

It was manifestly idle to hope for any yielding or relaxation in the quarter he had just approached; and that resource having failed him, what was left?

Certainly, the girl couldn't stay on indefinitely in his room, even if he were willing to accept the bathroom couch as a regular resting place; nor in the present state of his income did he very well see how he was going to provide her with any other refuge.

Yet a regular lodging place and food she would have to have; and somehow he could not bring himself to the thought of turning so dependent and helpless a creature out upon the cold mercies of the world.

The flaming poster advertisement of a forthcoming article in one of the Sunday newspapers caught his wandering gaze from a bill-board across the street.

"Why not marry the girl?" it questioned in letters a foot long; and Graham gave a wan smile at the appositeness of the suggestion.

That would be a romantic and feasible solution, truly; but the trouble was that poor, little Hilda did not at all fulfill the requirements he had established for the future Mrs. Robert Graham. That place was definitely reserved in his mind for a glowing, dark-haired beauty, who answered to the name of Gladys.

No; some other less self-sacrificing plan would have to be evolved to provide for his protege. But what?

"An elephant on one's hands!" groaned Graham, distractedly. "Why, that isn't a circumstance. An elephant can always be shipped off to the nearest zoo, but what in the name of goodness is a lone bachelor going to do with a young woman who knows nothing except what she learned at Miss Ogilvie's boarding school, yet must be clothed, fed, and housed like a lady?"

The Continuation of This Story Will Be Found in Tomorrow's Edition of The Times.

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