

"THE CRIME OF THE CENTURY," A THRILLING DETECTIVE STORY. BY RODRIGUES OTTOLENGUI

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CHAPTER III. REBECCA POLASKI'S STORY.

Mr. Mitchel groped his way gingerly down into the increasing gloom of the stairway. At the third landing he passed some one whose sex he vaguely guessed by the fumes of whisky which assailed his nostrils.

"I wish to speak with Rebecca Polaski," said Mr. Mitchel. "She's busy," was the curt reply, and the man tried to close the door, but was forestalled by Mr. Mitchel, who thrust his foot between, remarking firmly:

"But I tell you I must see her." "Oh, vell, dot makes a difference!" He came out into the hall and closed the door behind him. "Why is dot you must see Rebecca? What do you want vid her?"

"I wish to speak to her about a matter of importance. I will not detain her more than ten minutes."

"Ten minutes! Holy Abraham! How do you suppose she can fool away so much time? She's got her livin to make, my friend. She couldn't afford to stop work for ten minutes. We are not millionaires down here."

"How much could she earn in ten minutes?" asked Mr. Mitchel.

This disconcerted the old Jew, and he hesitated before replying, but presently, with a cunning leer and rubbing his hands together after the manner of his tribe, he drawled out:

"As to dot, my friend, dot's her pizness, and it's not my pizness to gif away oder people's pizness. But she could make enough to pay a loaf of bread, my dear, and a loaf of bread is a good deal in dese hard times."

"A loaf of bread, eh? Let me see," said Mr. Mitchel, making a quick calculation. "A loaf of bread is 5 cents, and 5 cents for ten minutes is 30 cents an hour, or about \$3 a day. Is that what she earns?"

"What a man you are at figgers!" said the Jew slyly. "You ought to be a pawnbroker. But you're wrong, my dear. I didn't say a five cent loaf. She might pay a three cent loaf, ain't it?"

"Very well. Then she does not earn more than 30 cents an hour. Tell her to come out and talk to me, and I will pay her 50 cents for her lost hour."

Mr. Mitchel thought that a rest of even an hour might be joyfully acceptable to the poor sweatshop slave and would be cheaply purchased. But the greedy ears of the Jew were doubly attentive now that money was offered. With a deprecating gesture of his most expressive hands, he whined:

"Impossible, my dear. An hour, a whole hour, for 50 cents? You under-value de worth of de girls' time. Fifty cents for a whole hour! Impossible, impossible!"

"But you have just admitted that her time is not worth as much as 30 cents an hour."

"You're no pizness man, my friend. You're too rich to understand de leetle details of trade. Dirty cents an hour might be de wholesale price of Rebecca's time, but for one hour—dot's retail, don't you see?"

"No, I don't see. Explain yourself."

"Vid pleasure. I hires de girl py de month, so I get her time cheaper dan you can get it if you only want one hour. It's very simple."

He smiled blandly, as though making the most ordinary statement, but

"How many hours a day do you work?" he asked.

"About ten, though sometimes longer if I'm tired and don't finish up."

"What do you mean by extra work?"

"Sometimes he lets us take work home to do nights, and he pays us half price for that."

"What! You work ten hours for a day's task, and then he pays you half rates for overtime! Why should you get less for night work than for work in the day?"

"Well, you see, he says working in the night, when our eyes are tired, we can't do as good work. We only get the cheaper sort to take home."

Mr. Mitchel could find no words with which to express his feelings. The utter selfishness of such sophistry, the greed of the man who would thus swindle his poor employees, utterly amazed him. And the oddest thing was that the girl made no complaint, accepting her lot as a matter of course, a fact beyond dispute. Yet, observe her position—she worked ten hours per day for her slave driving master, earning enough per week to pay the greedy landlord for her shelter, the mother and sisters, by similar drudgery, finding the food and clothing for the family.

"What is the name of your employer?" he asked presently.

"Herman Polaski."

"Polaski? But that is your name. Is he a relative?"

"Yes, sir; my uncle."

Her uncle! Comment seemed superfluous. Mr. Mitchel paused to think, and the girl rambled on.

"Uncle Herman's been very kind to us. I don't know what we would have done without his help—starved, I guess. You see, father was sick a long, long time, and all the money we had went to the doctor and for funeral

expenses. Then we had nothing. So uncle gave us all work in his shop, though he said he didn't need any more hands and it was just taking money out of his own pocket to hire us. We don't earn much, but anyway we're lived on our wages for over a year now."

The girl's gratitude was in strange contrast with the greed of her father's brother, who had not hesitated to benefit by the distress of his relatives. Mr. Mitchel felt a great sympathy for this poor family of women and would gladly have opened his pocketbook in their behalf, but he realized the magnitude of this problem of aid to the poor. He had gone into but two homes. In one he had promised assistance, and in the other he found the same need, inviting the same remedy.

But were he to go on and visit tenement after tenement, home after home, how soon would his resources be at an end and how little would he have accomplished toward lessening the suffering on the great east side! He felt the helplessness of the situation more than he had ever done when theorizing about it, and for the moment he decided that he might better confine himself to his special object.

"I have heard that you saw the baby which was taken from the graveyard next door," he began.

"Yes, sir," she replied and then stared at him, evidently alarmed at his question.

"Tell me about it," he asked persuasively. "Tell me all that you know."

"You live in the back rooms?"

"Yes, sir," she replied, with little or no accent.

"Take me into them. I wish to have a talk with you." Then, as she hesitated and threw a half frightened glance behind her, he continued:

"Have no fear. You will lose nothing. I have arranged with your employer so that you may remain out an hour."

The prospect of so long a rest lighted her eyes with a momentary beam of pleasure, and Mr. Mitchel was more than repaid for the money given in her behalf. She led the way into the back rooms and, opening the shutters, disclosed a view of the graveyard, only a few feet beneath. She then dropped wearily upon an empty soap box and motioned her visitor to a seat upon the one chair, the cane of which was almost entirely torn away. The flat was about the same as the one which he had seen on the upper floor, though the window opening on the outer world let in light and air, which made the place so much the more cheerful.

How strange that what should be frost and most plentifully at the command of all should become an actual commodity through the cupidity of mankind! For one man erects a tall building, darkening the homes of others, and then sets a higher rental on those apartments in his own structure which are best ventilated and lighted. What wonder that the communists, socialists and other revolutionary sects find attentive audiences! Mr. Mitchel thought of this and sighed as he asked:

"What rent do you pay for this place?"

"Three dollars a week," was the reply, and then she added: "We could have the flat next door for two and a half, but it is dreadfully dark, though we could put up with that, 'cause we're mostly at home only in the night time, but there's no air except from the shaft, and the horrid smells made my mother sick."

So even on this ground floor there was an extra charge for a window!

"What do you earn in the shop?" was Mr. Mitchel's next inquiry.

"When I feel strong and well, I can make 75 cents a day in the shop, but mostly only 50, and maybe 25 cents more doing extra work."

Mr. Mitchel looked savagely toward the sweatshop, the proprietor of which had charged him \$2 for releasing the girl from her task when he himself paid her such a pittance for the day's work.

"How many hours a day do you work?" he asked.

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It was a baby's slip.

and wondering if the baby would be found and if the police would come and ask me questions, and that seemed so likely, 'cause our rooms open right on the graveyard. And I knew that if they asked me what I knew I'd just blurt the whole thing out, and then where'd I be? Locked up for a certainty till they found the man and made me identify him. Then I got another idea that made my blood freeze in my veins. Suppose nobody found the baby. It would die! It would starve to death! And wouldn't I be held for that? Wouldn't I have helped the man to kill the baby by not telling what I knew? So, you see, it looked like I'd have to go to prison anyway, but I thought I'd prevent the baby from dying, so I just made an excuse, and I went to our rooms, intending to throw it some food, but I couldn't see it anywhere, and when I thought it had crawled away where I couldn't throw food to it I just made my sick and weak. I was that scared I dropped in a heap on the floor and leaned against the window sill and cried. Then I happened to look up, and my heart gave a big jump, for there was the baby crawling from behind a tombstone. I called to the poor little dear, and she stopped and looked up at me and smiled. She seemed to know that I meant to help her. Then I got some bread and soaked it in milk, and I dropped it down. You ought to have seen the little thing come right for it, and pretty soon she had it in her hands and was sucking away for dear life. Then I went back to my work more light hearted."

"And you fed the child after that, did you not?"

"Yes, sir. I think she got to know me, 'cause when I'd go to the window to throw her the bread she'd be waiting, and she always looked up and smiled like, 'Oh, dear! I'd have given my life to go down and bring her up stairs, but I didn't dare. I was that afraid of the police. But at last I told Mrs. Griffin about my feeling the baby, and she told the policeman."

"Two things that you have told me are very important, Miss Polaski. You say, in the first place, that you saw the man's face and that you would know him again?"

"Anywhere. I would know him among a million."

"Very well. I may ask you to point him out to me at some time. The other thing of importance is that you say the man buried something behind one of the tombstones. I wish you to point out as nearly as you can the spot where you saw him digging."

She went to the window and indicated a headstone which stood in the shadow of the tree near by, and, taking the chance of being observed from the street, Mr. Mitchel stepped upon the window sill and dropped to the ground. It was not long before he found where the sod had been overturned and replaced. Scratching away the loose earth, his fingers came upon something which he drew forth and held up before him. It was a baby's slip, in one corner of which he found what he hoped would be a name. Instead it proved to be a tiny flower done in embroidery silk.

Returning to the house by climbing through the window, he showed this to the girl and asked:

"What flower do you call that?"

Without hesitation she replied: "A lily of the valley."

"A lily of the valley," murmured Mr. Mitchel. "And the valley was the valley of the shadow of death," he mused as he took his departure.