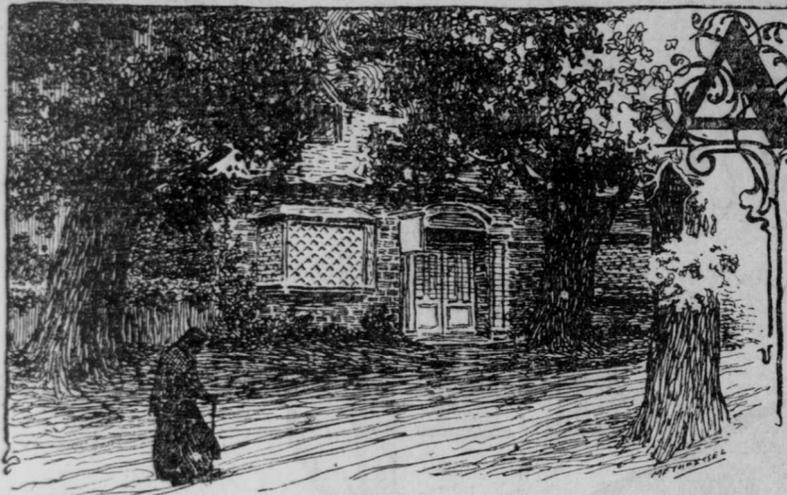


AT THE SIGN OF THE ONE POUND NOTE

BY HELEN MATHERS
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I stood high up on the village green, a cottage with lattice window panes, fronted by three magnificent oaks that stood close against its lintel and seemed to guard it jealously, and in all the years that I knew it I never saw a single customer go in or out or any indication of drink about the place, though against its wall was hung a faded board and upon it in still more faded letters was inscribed:

"The sign of the one-pound-note."

Often I had in my mind to invade that queer little hostel and call for a glass of mulberry wine, or raspberry vinegar, or some such old-fashioned cordial, but I pictured the ghastly face of mine host or hostess as a woman doing such a thing, in such a place, and only yidied when I came near it, weaving strange fancies about the place and forbearing to question as to who dwelled within.

One autumn day I stood watching the boys and girls who came pouring out of the village schools at the top of the green and betook themselves shouting to their play; a flock of geese waddled slowly toward the pool that lay on the other side of the road; the stones gleaming white in the God's Acre were divided by a low hedge from those bounding, happy youngsters. Away to the left rose the gray old Suffolk church, its squat ivied tower rearing itself into the blue and dazzling white of the clear October sky, and inevitably I thought of Frih's pictures. The wicked town seemed far away as I turned to gaze over the peaceful, old-world scene, at the wandering village street in which no two houses were alike, and yet human hearts were the same here as in other places, and pain came hither often. I knew, and sometimes want, but sin I never saw in broad daylight; no, nor sin's fairer, happier sister, love, for the uncouth gambols of the older lads and lassies on the green of evenings and Sundays could hardly be dignified by the most beautiful name in the whole language of man.

But that very afternoon at the Hall I chanced to intercept a look between a man and a girl that was an illumination to me, for here in this Arcadian spot was going forward the usual tragedy, and it is the oldest and cruelest one in the world, of a man resolutely fighting a girl for all she should hold most dear in life, since it is all of treasure that she ever has or is ever likely to have in heart and soul and body.

Ignorant, innocent, left to find out by bitter experience the knowledge of good and evil (for most mothers, may God forgive them, teach their daughters nothing, and with open eyes see them go blundering, like lambs, to the slaughter, and warn them not), what chance has such a one against the arts of a man of the world, moreover one so much older than herself, but she has insensibly slid with him into the intimacy one may afford almost to a beloved relation?

And the life of this girl of 20 was starved, here in this drowsy backwater where fate had set her in vicarious punishment for a spendthrift father's sins, living in a tiny house with a maddening mother and not one distraction or pleasure natural to her bright, fresh youth. Who could wonder, then, that she stretched out eagerly toward that mental sympathy which will make the desert blossom as the rose, and for the lack of which to sensitive souls the palace makes the cage?

I looked at the pair as they sat talking together about art, while the drone of my hostess and brother's neighbor sounded in my ear, and I understood why it was Mr. Stafford came so often now to the country seat he had once hardly deigned to honor, and angrily I realized that it was not the beautiful soul and spirit and strong brain that the man worshiped in the girl (not what pleases the understanding, but what pleases the eye is what the voluptuary loves), but just her loveliness—because she was like nothing so much as a deep, soft, full pink rose. Often I had kissed the girl for the mere pleasure of the softness of her skin, and indeed that exquisite feast of color which was not unmarked nor clear red and white, but pure velvety pink, almost blinded you to the sweetness and sense and spirit of the rest of her young face.

"It began with a chiblain," droned the hostess, and his mother would go on pontificating it, and his leg nas had to come off."

"And now he will feel that chiblain always," I said, absently, as I got up to go, knowing that Molly would walk back with me; and by the shade that instantly came over Mr. Stafford's features I knew that he had reckoned on a half-hour in the November dusk with her, and hated me accordingly. But I was delighted to see that she was not disappointed at his remaining behind when we went out into the grayness that almost hid the trees, wonderful trees, that sat like great ladies sweeping in great circles the sword of the park with their fur skirts.

She squeezed my hand and said I was welcome as flowers in May on one of my brief visits—that she had not known that I was in the village; and, indeed, I had but arrived the night before. She told me that she had seen hard at work, that soon she was going to town to study from the life in a big school, and she was very keen on it, and very full of hope and all the youthful ambition that goes so far toward achieving success.

"Mr. Stafford is so good to me," she said. "He brings me books on art from the Chace, and sends me wonderful drawings to copy. I don't know how I could have got through the long months here without them. Sometimes the want of some one to speak to was like a physical ache." She paused, and I knew how very, very sweet and satisfying the companionship of a clever man in such a place and

with such soul-starvation must have been to her.

"You know his wife?"

"No. She seldom comes to the Chace. I don't think he is very happy at home," she added, dropping her voice.

"You have heard the story?" I said rather bitterly: "did he tell you himself?"

"He's a man makes capital out of one little fault in a woman (usually of his making originally). It is a peg on which he openly hangs all his infidelities, his excesses; and the world condones his every infamy if he can only exploit the error of his wife as the cause of them!"

I felt the girl shrink a little from my harshness, and I hated the disagreeable task of disillusioning her, but I was playing Owen Stafford for her soul, and it should not be my fault if I did not win.

"My dear," I said, "when I see a wreck of a woman I always want to know what hands she has passed through and how they have used her; to what lengths may not jealousy and her wrongs have driven her? Owen Stafford is a man of taste, a man of fashion; I hear a great deal about him in town. And I do know this—that his wife is far more sinned against than sinning. He does not strike me as a man who could ever be true to one woman—his fancy would be excited by another, and another—for he is a beauty lover, and the world is full of beauty."

She walked silently beside me, and I waited anxiously for her to speak, fearing lest the glamour should be over her eyes and the mischief be done, for often nature sings as loud in the girl's heart as the man's, but in a voice which she knows not the true meaning, and if she be a real woman, and if she surrender herself to that tide of love which in its origin is divine, then is she a renegade to man's laws, and all the tears and repentance of a lifetime shall not wash the

for sometimes beyond all arguments, all experience, the inherent rightness of a girl will shine out triumphant, and you know that her instinct is absolutely true, and she will shake herself clear of wrong and loathe it without an instant's hesitation, and I knew that if ever Owen Stafford's attitude of friendship were removed and his true attitude realized toward her, his shrift would be short.

"I am sorry," she said slowly, without any bitterness or sense of personal application.

"Only a little girl who goes home at night."

I stamped my foot on the gravel in an apparently unreasoning rage, but alas! there was only too much reason in it. Yet how could I interfere? What could I do to protect her?

"My child," I said, "I am an old woman in comparison with you—will you take an old woman's advice?"

"Indeed I will," she said eagerly. "I loved you the very first moment I saw you—and I think we shall always be

she lived with her mother, an invertebrate person, in the mixing of whose brains some important ingredient had palpably been left out.

"Come and see me to-morrow," I said, as we reached the doorstep, and I saw that she half hesitated, for within all was dark and uninviting as a tomb—"I can lend you some new books, and would like to see your sketches."

"I shall be delighted," she said, adding, "I won't ask you to-night, for mother is in town."

"You are here alone?" I cried in as much amazement as if I did not know already what irresponsible, incredible fools mothers on occasion can be.

"Yes," she said, bravely; then, meeting my look, answered: "don't like it. I told mother so, but she could not understand it."

"But you have some old servant with you?"

"Only a little girl who goes home at night."

I stamped my foot on the gravel in an apparently unreasoning rage, but alas! there was only too much reason in it. Yet how could I interfere? What could I do to protect her?

"My child," I said, "I am an old woman in comparison with you—will you take an old woman's advice?"

"Indeed I will," she said eagerly. "I loved you the very first moment I saw you—and I think we shall always be

looked in at the uncurtained window, close to which Mollie was standing, and the light flared suddenly on Owen Stafford's face, dark, ugly, distorted by the passions that convulsed it, for not love, not passion, but instincts lower and deeper than passion were there, and I heard her utter a sharp cry of fear, for even her ignorance knew that this was not love. The match went out and hid the brute, and the terror of her sweet face, and terror is the most fatal emotion a woman can show at such a time as this, with a certain kind of man; often it makes but a wild beast of him, and it made one of Owen Stafford now.

I heard a stifled sound, knew that he had her in his arms, and instantly I dashed through the open door, calling out her name. I heard a strangled oath, and then Mollie rushed at me in the darkness, trembling violently, and clung to me as if she were mad with fear.

We were out of the doll's passage into the dark night in less than a second, and she never let go my hand as I pulled her up and across the green, and neither of us spoke till we were inside the door of the rectory.

Then by the light of the hall lamp I looked at her, and saw how the soft pink of her face was gone, yet for all the scared look, as if she had seen some frightful thing, there was nothing of the vixen about her, none of the outraged personal conceit of the modern girl, but I saw that she was mortally hurt, dis-

might have been, and hers was that strong feeling of betrayal in a priceless trust that is so apt to warp and put wrong a noble nature.

"I think our mothers ought to tell us," she said presently—"ought to open our eyes for us—gently, of course, for if we do not learn by other people's experience we are bound to do so by our own, and then it comes awfully rough on a girl, doesn't it?"

"Ever Mollie—poor little child," I said, my heart burning within me as I thought of that poor fondly, her mother.

"What shall I do?" went on the girl, "for I can't tell her. She would not listen when I begged her not to leave me in the house alone—she would not listen even if I told her this. Perhaps he will go away—for he knows that I cannot for some months; until my art lessons begin here I must stay."

"And I can do little to help you," I said, in deep vexation. "I am rarely here, and even if I lived in the place how could I protect you? And if I spoke to Sarah, she simply would not understand—or she would think that you encouraged him—it is so difficult to make a good woman understand a bad man. She nearly always blames her own sex. And the Owen Staffords always reckon safely on the girl's not telling. If she does, the world's blame is all for her—none for him."

"I shall be meeting him at every turn," said poor Mollie, "and how am I to con-

"And you never loved him—not the least bit?" I cried, for indeed, under all the circumstances, it would have seemed to me strange if she had not.

"What I liked—or loved, if you like to call it so," she said bravely, "is dead. How could I love what caused me such sickening fear, and what revolted me," and she shuddered with a sharp physical memory as she crossed her own threshold and went straight to the matches.

When we had gone all over the tiny place and seen that it was secure I kissed and left her, waiting till the chain rattled in the door and a light appeared in an upper window. I felt easier now about the girl, knowing that her best friend in the matter was herself, but my anger rose against the man, and I cast about in my mind for the best chance of seeing him alone and thrashing the matter out.

At breakfast next morning Sarah asked me if I would execute a small commission for her, and that I was to take a shawl she had knitted to old bedridden Mother Goodenough, who lived on the village green at the Sign of the One-Pound-Note.

Preoccupied as I was with Mollie's affairs, I took the shawl and went out with it, walking mechanically toward the green.

Suddenly Mollie's figure came in sight half way down the slope and as suddenly disappeared under the giant trees that sentinelled the little hostel, and at the same moment I saw Owen Stafford running quickly in the same direction and vanishing at the precise point where Mollie had gone.

For a moment I stood confounded. It looked so like an assassination, then some instinct told me they had been going to the One-Pound-Note, the only house behind those trees, and I hurried swiftly up and stood looking at the door of the ancient place, which had so often exercised my curiosity.

I heard voices within, one raised in entreaty, was Owen Stafford's and without a moment's hesitation I lifted the latch of the door and walked in, finding myself in a humble, sanded room, that no stretch of the wildest imagination could see soiled with the stain of a crime. The owner of the place, whoever it might be, was absent.

Mollie was standing with her back to me. Owen's face as I entered was grave, earnest, yet ashamed, and wore the look of a man pleading strenuously for himself, trying, as many a one has done, to make previous good conduct plead against one moment of mad folly, and I knew by her attitude that she was listening, that the living eyes upon her were effacing the memory of those others that had so terrified her, and that she was infinitely more in danger of him now than she had been then.

But that lightning impression I had of him before he realized my presence faded as his glance met mine and darkened, for I was his enemy, and well he knew it.

Mollie seeing that change in him, turned and colored deeply, and I took her gently by the shoulders and pushed her toward the door.

"I came—I came," she faltered, "to bring Mother Goodenough some patchwork pieces," and held out the little bundle to show me.

"And I brought her a shawl from my sister-in-law," I said, and shut the door on her and turned to face Owen Stafford.

"Don't try to rub out the impression you made on her yesterday," I said contemptuously, "for you never will. Why don't you try your arts on some one who can stand up to you? A girl of twenty with a criminally neglectful mother—absolutely alone in the house! You call yourself a man!"

"She suits me," he said (a man always thinks that a woman was made to his own especial order, till he happens to see one of a newer pattern that pleases him better, and I love her," he added, "I love her!" he repeated, doggedly, "if I were a free man I would make her my wife to-morrow."

"No doubt," I said, "because the best order of woman always attracts the worst order of man. She is dangerously attractive, and her very goodness and truth make the ruin of her all the more keenly desired by men of the world-wide type of Owen Stafford."

"You are very clever, very superior," he said, and I could not but admire the way he kept his temper, but the worse a man's morals as regards women, the better his manners always are; it is usually the reverse in other orders of infamy. "One would say," he paused and bowed, half-mockingly, "that you speak from experience, that you had been there yourself."

"Possibly," I said indifferently. "If you could flatter yourself that you are an individual and not a type, it would be more satisfying to your fastidious taste. But I warn you to let Mollie alone. You have your wife—but you have a daughter!" he started and changed color. "How would you like to know that a man old enough to be her father was pursuing your child? To be kicked out of his and the world's way as carrion when he has done with her?"

He winced suddenly, and I knew that he loved his daughter, who by special grace of God he wished to see exempted from the lot of girls every whit as pure as she.

"You hit hard," he said, and his very eyes were white.

"I mean to—Mollie," I said, "she has practically no mother. I can't protect her without shaming her, without advertising you to the whole neighborhood, who will blame the girl, not you. She has only her own inherent rightness of heart to protect her, and you are gifted with every art, every education that experience can teach. Go away—leave her! Do one good deed in your life—make a companion of your daughter, and try and be better to her poor mother, who loves you still."

"I can't go back to her," he said, and indeed I knew that no man ever looks willingly on the ruin he has made.

"Mollie has a heart of gold," I said; "she is what I would have liked my own daughter to be, for I have none of my own. Often I have thanked God I never suffered a woman-child into the world to suffer as I have done—"

He looked keenly at me, and a different and better expression came into his face.

"And so?" I said pleadingly, "leave me my little Mollie—and I will be made up to you with your own child on day. God has a strange way of visiting the sins of the fathers on the children."

He turned aside and stood looking out of the casement, and in the pause came a loud knocking from the stick of the old bedridden woman overhead.

"I went to the foot of the stairs and cried out: 'I am coming, Mrs. Goodenough!'" and then I came back and waited.

"You have conquered," he said, but he did not turn his head or let me see his face. "I will not try to see Mollie again, nor will I come to the Chace while she is in this neighborhood. But remember this—that I love her, and shall always love her."

The door slammed behind him. I picked up the shawl and climbed the stairs with it to the old woman, who garrulously told me how long years ago she had done a thriving business in the "One-Pound-Note," yet methought the best stroke that had ever been done in that poor place was when Owen Stafford got the victory over himself and from that day forth became a better man.

And Mollie? Thank God, there are good men, as there are good girls nowadays, and Mollie did not meet the right one too

really soulless, hapless creature white again.

While her mother took her dogs out for airings, and slept and pattered her life away, was this poor girl being imperiously swept by the experienced hands toward those rapids that must inevitably break her in pieces, while he, strong swimmer that he was, would gain the shore no whit the worse for his adventures?

No doubt he thought he loved her. Many a man dignifies by his glorious name what is not even worthy to be called passion (which is the very flower of life), and insouciantly offers that priceless treasure which every girl should guard jealously till, in exchange for it, she receives the lifelong devotion that many a true man knows well how to give.

But when Molly spoke I was shamed,

and I passed, then added firmly, "he deceived me, and I never forgive him."

That was all—but my spirits rose, and I loved the girl for her fearlessness and honesty. I knew that he was the making of a woman noble beyond even the power of man to mar. And I took the ungloried hand, strong as it needed to be for the work it had to do, and thought of my own boy, and wished that such a girl as this might be as my own daughter.

She stooped her head (she was tall and well grown) and kissed me, for she had always seemed to understand one another, tossed together with similar tastes, at intervals of time in this remote Suffolk village in which I did not sojourn but merely passed through.

A feeling of depression stole over me as we approached the tiny house in which

friends—always.

"Then don't allow any man to cross this threshold till your mother comes back. No man, mind-married or single, old or young."

"No one shall," she said, gravely.

"And as to your mother," I said with apparent irrelevance, "I should like to beat her. Don't come to the rectory in the morning, but to tea, and stay and spend the evening."

For in the day the house was in the eye of the village street—it was the darkness and night that I feared for her, and that only the right sort of woman ever gives and said: "I will come," and I kissed the smooth pink cheek, velvet soft as the petals of a rose, and left her standing there, fitting her key in the lock.

I had gone perhaps three hundred yards, thinking deeply, when I felt caught as in a cyclone, and some imperative instinct seized me by the shoulders and turned me sharp round on the path I had come and pulled me up outside Mollie's door.

It stood afar, and all was dark within, but I recognized two voices, and then I knew what had brought me back! Owen Stafford must have followed us at a distance, probably listened to our discourse, and with all the skill of a professional thief had slipped in as she entered and the very moment my back was turned.

"I can't find the matches," she said, and then I heard a match struck and

inspired, and I seemed to hear the tone of her voice in which she spoke of her father and said, "He deceived me."

"Do you feel equal to coming into the study?" I said, for my people would wonder if she came to the house and they did not see her, and she pulled herself together, and I opened the door and we went in, and found ourselves in a warm, lamp-lit room that breathed the very atmosphere of peace and home, yes, and of goodness.

For my brother was walking up and down with a kitten in his arms, listening to Sarah, who was reading aloud in that delightful voice which made it a treat only to hear her speak, and Mollie's hand twitched in mine. I knew what she was thinking—what did these kind souls know of man's wickedness? The rector knew himself, Sarah all men through him, and I saw the tears spring to the girl's brave eyes as the sharp contrast of this scene came vividly home to her.

"Mollie is all alone," I said, "and I have brought her to spend the evening"—and Sarah was intent on the bookmark that must be placed before rising to greet us, and my brother was short-sighted, and the girl's pallor, her slight disorder, passed unnoticed, and almost immediately I got her away upstairs to remove her hat.

But she was too plucky to let those tears fall, though I saw her hurt was very deep. For she had genuinely liked the man; he had been to her all that an exceptional elder brother who loved her

tried my voice and features—pretend to like him as I did before—when he has become ugly and horrible to me? His face to-night—she covered her eyes with her hand—"Can I ever forget it?"

"We must go down," I said briskly. "Meanwhile I shall take you home to-night and wait for her to lock your door, and I won't leave this place till I see you safe out of the wood—or, rather, Owen Stafford beaten off the premises."

Mollie put her soft cheek to mine and hugged me, and we went down together, and more than once I saw her glance wistfully around as if the cultured and sympathetic surroundings brought all too vividly before her the ghastly evening in the little dark house, with only her mother fast asleep for company.

And I was glad to see that Sarah warmed to the girl and made a perceptible stride toward a greater intimacy than had formerly existed between them, for the rectory would be a haven for Mollie to come to, and all its influences for her good.

"What a treat it is to meet a man like your brother," she said to me, as at 10:30 we went out into the darkness for the third time that day together. "His eyes, his voice—once could trust him blindfold."

"Yes, Mollie, he will try and see you and explain his conduct away. What will you say?"

"I shall tell him," said Mollie, very deliberately, "that I have been deceived in him, and I never wish to speak to or have anything to do with him again."

"TURNED TO FACE OWEN STAFFORD"

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