

THE BROKEN HOME.

TRUTH STRANGER THAN FICTION.

In San Francisco, on the north side of Fulton street, overlooking Mission Bay, stands a palatial residence.

The interior of the house is even more beautiful than its exterior, every apartment being in its way a gem of magnificence and refinement.

The library especially realizes the most perfect ideal of an elegant and cultured home.

And yet, at the moment we look in upon him—on August after, on, as he occupied his library—the proprietor of this wealth appeared of all men the most miserable.

He was Mr. Morton Preble, for many years a leading banker of San Francisco.

It was in vain that the broad bay-window at the south end of the room had been opened, giving ingress to the sunshine and the fragrance of rare flowers—in vain that the walls were hung with richly carved book-cases and paintings—in vain that soft couches and luxurious chairs had been gathered around him.

He lay on a sofa, in the depths of the green bay-window, the wreck of a once powerful man. His figure was thin and gaunt; his face white as marble; his eyes having an expression of woeful apprehension, of harrowing anxiety, of dreadful expectancy.

It was evident at a glance that no merely physical ailment had made him what he was.

By what withering secret, by what destroying affliction, had he been thus agonized? Thus haunted? He so noble and good! He so wealthy and distinguished!

As he moved restlessly upon his luxurious cushions the pretty clock on the mantel-piece struck five, every stroke seeming to fall like a hammer upon the heart of the nervous invalid. He aroused himself, struggling feebly to a sitting position.

"Oh, will this fatal day never, never pass? he murmured; "nor bring us relief?"

Noticing with a nervous start that he was alone, he touched a bell upon a table before him, and called:

"Helen, Helen! where are you? Before the echoes of his voice had died out a step was heard, and his wife entered his presence.

"I left you only for a moment, Morton," she said, advancing to the banker's side. "You were dozing, I think. I wished to send for the doctor!"

"She was a beautiful woman, of some six and thirty years, graceful, with broad white brows, and loving eyes, in which the brightness and sweetness of a sunny nature were still perceptible, under a grief and anxiety no less poignant than that evinced by her husband.

"The doctor!" he echoed, half reproachfully.

"Yes, dear," she said, in a calm and cheerful voice, as she drew a chair to the side of the sofa, and sat down, stroking the curls and forehead of the invalid with a magnetic touch. "He will be here immediately. Your last nervous crisis alarmed me. You may become seriously ill."

Mr. Preble bestowed an affectionate look upon his wife, but said dependently:

"The doctor? He cannot minister to a mind diseased! Oh, if those long hours would only pass! If I only knew what the day has yet in store for me!"

"Look up, Morton!" enjoined Mrs. Preble, with a reverently trustful glance upward through the open window at the blue sky, and as if looking beyond the azure clouds therein. "Let us appeal from the injustice and wickedness of earth to the goodness and mercy of Heaven!"

"I cannot look up, Helen," he answered, with a passionate tremor in his voice—"only down, down at the grave that is opening before me!"

Mrs. Preble continued to stroke his forehead softly, while she lifted her pale face to the sunlight streaming into the apartment.

"Look up, Morton—always look up!" he again enjoined upon the invalid. "During all these fourteen years of agony, I have not once doubted either the goodness or the justice of Heaven."

"Blessed are they that mourn; for they shall be comforted." I believe that we shall yet rejoice more keenly than we have mourned, and that we shall come to a glorious day of joy beyond all this long night of sorrow!"

The face of the invalid lighted up with an answering glow, and he murmured:

"Glorious faith! My wife, you are indeed a blessed comforter! Perhaps, after all, you are right!"

A knock resounded on a side-door at this juncture, and the next moment Dr. Hutton, the family physician, for whom Mrs. Preble had sent, entered the room.

He was an old man, portly in figure, with white hair and beard, but with a fresh and ruddy complexion, a pair of shrewd blue eyes, and with an exuberant boyishness of manner that set well upon him. He had a kind heart and a clear head. He approached the sofa, after greeting the husband and wife, and lifted the thin restless hand of the invalid, feeling his pulse.

"Quite a high fever," he said after a brief pause. "Worrying again, eh, Mr. Preble? You are worrying yourself out. Medicine will do you no good so long as your mind is in its present condition. I must give you an opiate."

"Not now, doctor," interposed the banker. "I cannot—must not—sleep to-day. I need to be broad awake now, for I cannot tell at any moment what the next may bring forth. I am looking for the culmination of all my years of anguish—for the crowning agony of the whole. Perhaps even now—Ah, what was that?"

He started up wildly, and then, as the sound that had disturbed him; was not repeated, he sank back again on his cushions, pallid and panting.

The doctor looked at Mrs. Preble with an anxious, questioning glance.

"It is the anniversary," she replied to his unspoken inquiry—the anniversary of our loss."

"Ah, yes," said the doctor. "I remember."

"Yes, it's another of those terrible days," cried the banker, in a hollow whisper. "Sit down, doctor, and I will tell you the whole story. I can think of nothing else to-day and am almost wild with apprehension and anxiety. Sit down."

Dr. Hutton drew up a chair and seated himself, his face expressing the double solicitude of a friend and physician.

"You know us fourteen years ago, doctor," said Mr. Preble. "We lived then where we do now, in a cottage on the site of this great mansion. There were but the three of us—Helen and I, and our three-year-old Jessie. And it was fourteen years ago to-day that our little Jessie was stolen from us."

"I remember it," said the doctor, softly. "Yet might she not have been lost, Mr. Preble? She went out to play in the garden, if I remember rightly, and was never seen by you again. She might have strayed away."

"So we thought for a whole year, doctor," interrupted the banker. "We never dreamed that she had been stolen. We searched everywhere for her, and offered immense rewards for her recovery. I employed detectives, but all to no purpose. When our little Jessie ran down the steps into that flower garden," and he pointed to the front of the house, "as if the earth had opened and swallowed her up, we never saw her again."

"She must have found the gate open, and wandered out," suggested Dr. Hutton. "She might have straggled down to the waters and been drowned."

The banker fixed his burning eyes upon the physician's face, and whispered:

"I said we never saw the poor child again. I did not say we had never heard of her. She was lost on the 9th day of August, 1854. For a year we thought her dead. But on the anniversary of our loss we received a written message concerning her."

"A message!" cried Dr. Hutton, starting.

"A mere scrawl—a single line in a hand evidently disguised," said the banker. "Here it is."

He produced a dingy scrap of paper from a drawer in the table, and held it up to the view of the physician who read as follows:

"August 9, 1856. Jessie has not Jessie."

Dr. Hutton looked, with a puzzled air, from the scrap of paper, which he turned over and over, to the countenance of the banker.

"I can make nothing of this," he declared. "It is merely a date, with the name of your lost daughter. It tells me nothing."

"Nor did it, at first," said Mr. Preble. "Then that name and that date, with the demon laugh connecting them, set us to thinking. A whole year we agonized over the dreadful problem, and then we received another message, which you shall see."

He thrust a second slip of paper, identical in shape and appearance with the first, before the gaze of Dr. Hutton, who read it aloud:

"August 9, 1856. Your Jessie still lives."

The physician started, as if electrified.

"Ah! this is something definite—something decisive," he muttered. "It convinced you that your daughter was still living?"

"Yes, doctor," said Mr. Preble, "and every anniversary of that day has brought as some message. The disappearance of the child, mysterious as it did, does not seem to me half so strange as that the villain who took her away could contrive to communicate with us every year since, and always on a particular day—the anniversary of that on which she was stolen—without our being able to discover who he is. And a still greater wonder to me is what can be his motive. It seems incredible. If it was stated in a novel many people would not believe it. But 'truth is stranger than fiction.'"

Mrs. Preble drew from her husband's breast-pocket his note-book, opened it to the proper page, and presented it to the physician.

Dr. Hutton adjusted his spectacles, glanced over the page, and then slowly read the group of entries aloud. The entry the first year is as follows:

"August 9, 1856. Jessie has not Jessie! And the next year it is:—  
"August 9, 1856. Your Jessie still lives! And the next:  
"August 9, 1857. She is in good hands! And the next:  
"August 9, 1858. She is well as ever! And the next:  
"August 9, 1859. I saw her yesterday! And the next:  
"August 9, 1860. She's growing rapidly! And the next:  
"August 9, 1861. She continues to do well! And the next:  
"August 9, 1862. I've seen her again! And the next:  
"August 9, 1863. She's becoming a woman! And the next:  
"August 9, 1864. Your child is thirteen! And the next:  
"August 9, 1865. She's lovelier than ever! And the next:  
"August 9, 1866. She's really charming! And last year it is:  
"August 9, 1867. My reward is at hand! And what shall we get to-day!"

The physician looked up and fixed his thoughtful gaze upon the bearded husband and wife.

"How did these messages come to you?" he demanded.

"Invariably by post," replied Mr. Preble. "Usually to the house, but sometimes to the office."

"And you have never seen the author?"

"Never!"

"The last of them is dated, I see, a year ago to-day."

"Yes, yes," faltered the banker, "and the time has come for another message. This is the 9th of August, 1868!"

"I see," said Dr. Hutton. "And this is the secret of your terrible excitement! You are expecting to receive to-day another of these strange messages!"

There was a brief silence. Mrs. Preble's hand fluttered in its task, and her face grew very pale. The banker breathed gaspingly. The physician regarded them both in friendly sympathy.

"We shall hear of her again to-day,"

said Mr. Preble, "and what will the message be?"

The mother verted her face. Her brave heart faltered as that question came in her soul.

"The writer of these letters I—unquestionably the abductor of your child!" said Dr. Hutton. "Have you any suspicion as to his identity?"

"Not the slightest," said Mr. Preble. "We have puzzled over the problem for many years, but we cannot guess who he is."

"Think," said the doctor. "Have you no enemies? I do not mean people with whom you are not friendly—every stirring man has plenty of these—but a downright enemy! Is there no man whom you know in the East who hated you? No one against whom you were called upon to testify—no one whom you possibly injured?"

The banker shook his head. He had asked himself all these questions repeatedly.

"I have no such enemy, doctor," he answered with sincerity of voice and manner.

"And Mrs. Preble?" suggested the doctor, turning to her. "Have you no rejected suitor who might be revengeful enough to desolate your home?"

"No," said the lady. "I was married early. Morton was my first love."

"This is strange—very strange!" muttered the doctor. "You are not conscious of having an enemy in the world, and yet you have an enemy—a hidden one—found in human form—who is working out against you a fearful hatred! And you have not the slightest suspicion as to who he is?"

"Not the slightest," declared the banker.

"My husband had a step-brother who might have been capable of this inhuman—but he is dead."

"The handwriting is not familiar?"

"No. It is merely a rude scrawl, as you see," said the banker. "It suggests nothing—except that it is evidently disguised."

Again there was a profound silence. "Our child is seventeen years old now," at length murmured Mr. Preble, his voice trembling. "She is on the threshold of womanhood. No doubt during all these years, she has yearned for us, who never allow her to be, as we have yearned for her!"

"But where is she?" asked the physician—and now his voice was broken by his deep sympathy with the agonized parents. "Where can she be?"

"Heaven only knows," answered the mother. "Perhaps in San Francisco—perhaps in some obscure hamlet in the interior, with some rude farmer, and under a name that is not hers! I think her abductor would have carried her to some lonely region of the interior, among the valleys and mountains. Yet I never see a young girl in the streets without turning to look at her. I never hear a girl's voice without listening eagerly, half believing that it may prove the voice of my lost Jessie!"

"Oh, put up heaven!" sighed Dr. Hutton, dabbing a flood of tears from his eyes. "Will this long agony never be over?"

"We hope so, and even believe so," answered Mrs. Preble, with the firmness of an unflinching trust in God's mercy. "The late message we received from our enemy seems to point to some kind of a change."

"True," assented Dr. Hutton, looking at the message in question. "It is unlike the others. It says that his reward is at hand. He means either that he intends to marry your daughter, or that he intends to demand money of you for bringing her back—or both."

"We shall soon know," said Mrs. Preble, with forced calmness. "To-day we shall have another message, no doubt. What will it be?"

The banker turned restlessly on his sofa, and his face grew even paler.

"Whatever it is, let it come?" he murmured. "Anything can be borne better than this awful suspense. Let it come!"

As if his impatient words had precipitated a crisis, a step was heard on the walk at this moment, and a ring at the front door followed.

"Another message!" breathed the banker.

A servant soon entered, bearing a letter, which he extended to Mr. Preble, saying:

"The bearer is in the hall."

With an eager gaze, the banker glanced at the superscription of the missive.

"It is from Jim!" he faltered. He tore the envelope open. It contained a slip of paper, of well-known shape and appearance, upon which was scrawled a single line, in an equally well-known hand-writing, which the banker exhibited to his wife and the physician.

This line was as follows:—"August 9th 1868. At six o'clock!"

A shock of wonder and horror shook the three simultaneously.

"Will call!" cried Mr. Preble, starting to his feet, and glaring wildly around.

"Is coming here?" cried Mrs. Preble, also arising.

"It seems so," said Dr. Hutton, his eyes again reverting to the message. "He will be here at six o'clock, and see! It is six already!"

Even as he spoke, the clock on the mantel-piece commenced striking the appointed hour, and at that instant heavy footsteps resounded in the hall, approaching the library.

"It is he!" cried the doctor, also arising.

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