

UNCLE WINTHROP'S WATCH.

CONTINUED.

I SHOULD not hesitate to take my oath in a court of justice that they were his."

"The semblance was certainly very striking," said Miss Weston, "but of course it was only a semblance."

"I am not so positive on that point," remarked Perham. "Are you sure that your uncle was not on one of the trains at the time of the disaster?"

"I am not absolutely certain. He wrote me from Rockport, stating that he would await my arrival there."

"He may have been called away; you know that he is not infrequently subject to sudden business calls."

"It is possible, but still very improbable," said Miss Weston, a slight expression of alarm in her tones. "If he had been on the train ours run into, should we not have met with him if alive, or have found him among the wounded or the dead?"

"He certainly was not among those who escaped," was Perham's reply. "My injured foot prevented me from doing anything in the way of clearing the wreck and rescuing the sufferers, and your attention was principally devoted to the women; therefore, we may not have noticed him in the general confusion that prevailed."

"If what you suggest is correct, and uncle was on the train, what has that to do with the watch in question?" asked Miss Weston.

"Very much. You very well know, or have read, that on all occasions of this kind there are plenty of men ready to take advantage of them, and make the pretence of assisting a cover for plundering the sufferers."

"And you suspect that our late fellow-passenger to be one of those vile characters, those fiends in human shape?" asked Miss Weston, with not a little warmth.

"If," rejoined Perham, "mind you I say if your uncle was unfortunately in the train, and if the watch we saw was his, to what other conclusion can we arrive?"

"If and if! What a contemptible poltroon is that if, Mr. Perham!" exclaimed the lady, with spirit, revealing an entirely new phase of character to her astonished auditor. "I say to you, if all your suppositions should prove correct, nothing but his own acknowledgment would convince me that the gentleman would be guilty of such an act!"

"You have great faith in one who is an entire stranger to you, Miss Weston," said her companion, ironically.

"I have undoubted confidence in him," said Miss Weston, ingenuously, her face slightly flushing as she made the admission.

"But do you not see," she added, with much acuteness, "that you are making him out a fool as well as a knave?"

"How so, pray?" asked Mr. Perham.

"Would it not be the very height of folly in a man who had robbed another, to openly display his plunder in the very neighborhood of his criminal act, thus courting detection?"

"He might have made the exposure unwittingly," was the ready rejoinder. "But here we are at the hotel," he added, looking out of the carriage window, "and in a short time our suspicions will be strengthened or set at rest."

"Your suspicions are not ours," was the pointed remark of Miss Weston, as the carriage drew up at the ladies' entrance.

On entering the hotel, Miss Weston immediately sought information of her uncle. She had experienced an increasing anxiety in regard to him since the watch had been the object of conversation, and the suggestion been made that possibly he might have been on the train at the time of the disaster. She had fully expected that he would have been in waiting for her at the station; still, as she knew that he was aware of her having an escort, his absence had not much surprised her. He would surely, she thought, for he was very punctilious in such matters, be at the hotel to receive her. But he was not there, and it was with a mind filled with painful apprehensions that she made inquiries in regard to him.

The servant whom she had sent to the office for that purpose had not been long absent when the landlord made his appearance. They were well acquainted, Miss Weston being an old guest of his.

"A telegram regarding your uncle, Miss Weston," he said, tendering her an envelop.

"Regarding my uncle! He is not here then?" exclaimed Miss Weston, as, with trembling hands and pallid check, she hastened to open the despatch.

It was dated that morning, and contained but few words. The message read as follows:

"Mr. Winthrop has just been brought home severely wounded. He is not considered in immediate danger. Return at once."

"When does the next train pass through for New York?" asked Miss Weston of the landlord, as she passed the telegram to her friend Miss Leighton.

"There is one due at midnight," replied the host.

"Please have a carriage in readiness, Mr. Jones, to take me to the station in season to meet it," said the young lady, with a surprising degree of calmness.

"My dear Clara, you will not think of starting to-night," said Miss Leighton. "Why not remain until morning? There is an early train."

"I must go by the first train, Annie; nothing would induce me to miss it."

"But you cannot go alone," persisted her friend.

"If Miss Weston will permit me to accompany her—" Mr. Perham commenced saying, when the lady hastened to interrupt him.

"You are very kind, Mr. Perham, but I cannot think of imposing such a task on you. I have been accustomed to travel alone, and I have no fears but that I shall get along very well."

"There is a gentleman stopping at the hotel who will take the midnight train," said the host, "and who will, I doubt not, be glad to receive Miss Weston under his protection. He is a perfectly reliable gentleman."

"Thank you, Mr. Jones. Be kind enough to mention the subject to him. I will endeavor not to incommode him."

The time intervening before the train would be due seemed to Miss Weston interminable. Her impatience to be on her homeward way, her suspense respecting the condition of her uncle absorbed her entire being. It was with difficulty her friends persuaded her to partake of the needed nourishment to sustain her on her journey. Miss Leighton tried to induce her to take a little rest, but she declared that sleep was out of the question, and that her only relief was in motion.

There was no paper published in Rockport, but the passing trains brought the journals from the distant cities. The papers received that evening were eagerly scanned by our party. They contained telegraphic reports of the disaster, and in the list of the injured Miss Weston read, "Charles Winthrop, New York, seriously." That was all. It afforded her no more information, nothing more satisfactory than her own telegram, and for a moment there was a feeling of vexation at the meagreness of the accounts. An "especial" to one of the journals gave a few incidents relating to the disaster, but there was nothing having reference to her uncle. This paragraph, however, caught her eye and riveted her attention:

"Great credit is due to a young gentleman, Henry Peabody, who, though suffering from a painful wound, by his self-possession and energetic efforts rendered efficient aid in removing the dead and relieving the sufferings of the injured."

Miss Leighton called Mr. Perham's attention to the paragraph, on which he sneeringly remarked:

"Relieved the sufferings of the injured! Yes, and undoubtedly relieved them of their purses and watches, too!"

Miss Weston, who had been pacing the apartment slowly to and fro with a nervous restlessness, paused in her walk in front of the speaker, and said, with restrained vehemence:

"Mr. Perham, your insinuation is as ungenerous as it is unjust, and I must add, unbecoming, in its fullest sense, of a—"

By an evident effort she checked herself, and left the sentence unfinished. The sharpness of the rebuke brought the blood to the young man's brow.

"You are severe, Miss Weston," he said, with a smile which poorly concealed his mortification.

The moment the words escaped Clara's lips, she regretted their utterance. Although, with her convictions, she believed the reproof was well merited, was she called upon to administer it? At another time she would not, perhaps, have been betrayed into it, but just then she was in a peculiar frame of mind. The suspense and anxiety to which she was a prey had so wrought upon her nerves as to render her morbidly sensitive. Naturally she was of a remarkably placid disposition, and was very circumspect in her regard for the feelings of others. Had the relations in which the two stood towards each other been different, in fact, she would have shrunk from expressing herself so unreservedly; but their nature was such as to excuse, in a measure, her freedom of speech. A brother of her uncle Charles Winthrop had married a widow lady, and Edward Perham was her child by her first husband. Hence, though there was no consanguinity between Clara Weston and Edward Perham, a sort of cousinly familiarity existed.

Until a comparatively recent period their intercourse had not been marked by the reserve of formality that now characterized it. They had been accustomed to address each other by their given names, but now "Clara" and "Edward" had given place to the more chilling and ceremonious "Miss" and "Mr." The cause of the estrangement it implied we will speak of more particularly further along.

The midnight hour for which Clara had so impatiently awaited at last arrived, and accompanied by the gentleman who had so kindly taken her in charge, she started on her homeward journey. Her home was with her uncle, one of the merchant princes of New York. The orphan child of a deceased sister, Mr. Winthrop had adopted her at an early age; from nearly infancy she had been a member of his family, and, being childless, he had come to bestow upon her all the wealth of his parental affection. She, too, with her growing years,

cherished for her aunt and uncle the full measure of filial devotion. From them she received all the tender care and solicitude of parental love, in the enjoyment of which, and the many advantages bestowed by wealth, she grew up to womanhood.

The death of her aunt, when she was in her seventeenth year, was the first great sorrow that befall her, that of her mother occurring at too early an age to leave a lasting impression. After her aunt's death she assumed the control of domestic affairs, and, fortunately, she had received such culture from Mrs. Winthrop as to eminently fit her for the position she was now called upon to fill; for among all her acquired accomplishments, those of a housewife nature had received a due share of her attention.

As was very natural from their quasi-cousinship, a close degree of intimacy existed between Edward Perham and Clara. In their younger years he had the "run of the house," dropping in at all hours sans ceremonie. And yet, notwithstanding their close companionship, Perham was never a special favorite of hers. In many respects they presented a marked dissimilitude of character. Clara's disposition was very genial, his was cold and impassive; her tastes were highly refined, his cast in a coarser mould; she was affable and unassuming, he cynical and supercilious. In a word, all her instincts reached to a higher altitude than his were capable of attaining.

As they grew older this dissimilarity became more decided, or more apparent to Clara, and her regard for him consequently diminished. But as she developed into the bloom of womanhood, Perham became more devoted and ardent in his attentions, and finally he openly aspired to her affections, in which he was encouraged by his own family. Reluctant to wound his feelings, Clara affected not to fathom his intention, but so persistent did he at last become, despite of the discouragements Clara took good care in a quiet way to offer as checks, that she began to dread his appearance, while a growing feeling of aversion began to gain ascendancy in her mind, which she manifested with a studied coldness and reserve toward him. She had not the least faith in the sincerity of his love. She, Clara Weston, was not the object he sought to win, but the prospective heiress of Charles Winthrop was the prize that allured him.

There was one annoyance to which she was subjected, and which at last, from the mortification it occasioned her, awoke her resentment. This was his ridiculous assumption that he alone was entitled to her favors; that any little civilities or courtesies she might bestow on other gentlemen were an encroachment on his prerogative. On all such occasions he was wont to manifest his displeasure by a sulphemess of demeanor, and not unfrequently by discourteous treatment of those who appeared to have won the good graces of Clara. Hence the ill-humor he betrayed in the cars because of the friendly interest at once established between Clara and Henry Peabody. On that occasion his manners were more offensively supercilious than usual. Hitherto Clara had borne these impertinences without remark, but when Perham sought to cast a doubt on the character of Peabody, it aroused her as Perham had never before seen her aroused. This only nettled him the more, and led him to deery Peabody in severer terms.

By so doing he betrayed a sad lack of wisdom. He had not the shrewdness to perceive that in placing Clara in the attitude of defender of the accused, he was only the more strongly enlisting her interest in his behalf. The scathing words wrung from Clara in the room of the hotel cut deeply, but he was wise enough not to reply to them. He resolved, however, that he would leave no means untried to prove to her that the suspicions he entertained against Peabody were well founded.

During her homeward journey, Clara had ample time to think over all that had lately transpired. Although filled with anxiety on her uncle's account, the subject of Peabody and the watch constantly obtruded on her thoughts. She would soon learn whether or not her uncle's watch was missing. If it should prove that it was, there was no doubt but that it was in Peabody's possession. What then? Did it necessarily follow that Perham's conjecture was correct—that the former had stolen it? And yet, after all, were his suspicions unreasonable?

As Clara leaned back in her seat pondering these questions, a vague doubt swept across her mind. But as she summoned before her mental vision the image of the stranger, as she scanned anew the features bearing the impress of truth and probity, and in imagination caught the tones of his genial voice, her wavering faith was re-established. It seem almost like sacrilege to associate him with those who prowl amidst scenes of disaster, prey-like among the dead and the wounded. No, no; she would rely on her instincts—she would believe him innocent until, as she had said to Perham, his own confession extorted conviction.

On the afternoon of the second day Clara arrived home, completely exhausted in body and mind. At the station inquiries had been made by the gentleman who accompanied her as to the nature of her

uncle's injuries. He informed her that though they were severe, from what he could learn they were far from being considered fatal. This was a great relief to her, for she had anticipated the worst.

On reaching the house, she found that her uncle was suffering from a compound fracture of one of his limbs, and from other injuries received at the time of the collision. He had received all the care and attention that the most eminent of the medical and surgical profession could render, one of whom was then present. Clara's first impulse was to visit her uncle, but the physician informed her that he had just administered an opiate, and that it was absolutely necessary he should remain undisturbed. He did not make known that the patient just then was laboring under a high fever, and that his wandering mind rendered him incapable of recognizing those around him.

As there was really nothing then requiring Clara's services, she was recommended by the physician to seek that rest so much required before she took her place as nurse by her uncle's bedside, as it was her expressed determination to do. Rest she indeed required. For the last four or five days she had been, with brief intermissions, travelling in the cars; she had passed through the horrors and excitement of a railway disaster, and for the two previous nights she had been able to obtain but little if any sleep. Nature demanded repose, and although she fain would have resisted, she was reluctantly compelled to yield to it.

When Clara the next morning visited the patient's bedside, she could hardly recognize in the haggard fever-stricken face that she gazed upon, the pleasant features of one from whom she had but recently parted. The prostrate helpless form, the bandaged head, the wild and vacant look, presented a spectacle that brought tears to her eyes.

But she was not one to permit feeling to incapacitate her for the duty in hand. At the time of the disaster, she had won by her coolness the favorable notice of Peabody amid scenes calculated to try the stoutest nerves, and now, as then, she exhibited the same traits. Suppressing all signs of outward emotion, she at once gave her attention to the duties of the sick chamber. For these ones had been engaged; but Clara well knew that there were manifold trifling services, so grateful to the patient, that affection would be prompt to render, but which a professional nurse would be very likely to overlook.

The housekeeper that morning had informed her that her uncle's watch was not to be found when he was brought home, and his condition was such she could not question him in regard to it. Knowing what Miss Weston did, it may well be supposed that the fact she had learned was of peculiar interest.

All through the day, burdened as it was with other matters, the subject of the missing watch was constantly recurring to her mind. On one occasion in particular, it was pressed upon her attention with redoubled force. Frequently in his delirium Mr. Winthrop would indulge in a rambling incoherent discourse, principally relating to business matters. On one occasion he seemed to be holding a discussion on some branch of political economy with a fellow-merchant, in the course of which he remarked, with a good deal of animation:

"You very well know, my friend, that if you would find the absolute strength of a cable, you must seek for it in the weakest link. Now, then, the excess of our importations over our exports, and the placing of our bonds abroad, form the weak link in our chain, as will be demonstrated to our sorrow when the test is applied. But, bless me, I shall lose the train!"—What's the time? My watch is gone!

The last sentence sounded in Clara's ears with startling emphasis—"My watch is gone! How gone? Into whose hands had it fallen? Of that she had but little doubt. How came he by it? This question staggered her. If she could but fix for a moment the wandering mind of her uncle to the subject—could elicit the slightest information that would afford a clew by which she could unravel the mystery in which the missing watch was involved, the perplexing doubts that now agitated her would, one way or the other, be set at rest, to the great relief of her mind. Acting on the thought, she went to the bedside and said:

"What has become of your watch, uncle?"

There was a momentary gleam of sanity in the eyes of Mr. Winthrop as he turned them on his niece, while he promptly said:

"My watch? I gave it to the young man—the noble fellow who saved my life." The next moment his mind was all adrift again. "But I shall lose the train if I stay talking here," he said, hurriedly. "I shall see you again soon. Good-by, good-by!"

He gave it to the young man, the noble fellow who saved his life! What a cloud was lifted from the spirits of Clara Weston as these words fell upon her ears! She comprehended it all now. Her confidence had not been misplaced—her instincts had proved trustworthy. The smile of satisfaction that lighted up her features gave to her face an expression akin to angelic beauty.

But why this deep interest in one almost

a stranger—the acquaintance of but a day? Ah, but the experiences of years, how often are they concentrated in a single day, in a brief hour! How rapidly fate weaves her spells! In a day, in an hour, ties are knit and tangles broken, estrangements caused and estrangements healed, in those limited periods events have their birth which give a coloring to all the after-life.

Little dreamed Henry Peabody, as he pursued his lonely journey, of the unjust suspicions attached to him, and of the deep interest, at least, in one heart, which he had awakened. Had he been cognizant of them, we may fairly suppose that he would not have exhibited that tranquility of mind which he did. He had felt for a time a little low-spirited after parting with his late fair fellow-passenger, but cheerfulness rather than sadness was the normal condition of his mind, and he very soon threw off the slight feeling of depression. His was a sanguine temperament, and hope whispered to him of many fond possibilities in the future.

As yet he had not determined on his career in life. He had graduated at an unusually early age at one of our highest institutions of learning, ranking well in his class. He had, also, gone through the regular course at the law-school, although he had not decided to become a disciple of Coke and Blackstone. He believed that a knowledge of jurisprudence, and the discipline of mind to which he would be subjected in its acquirement, could not fail to be of benefit to him in whatever calling he should elect to pursue. At present his mind gravitated between the legal profession and mercantile pursuits. Having youth, energy, a good constitution, and well-grounded principles, his chances of success were favorable in whatever undertaking he should resolve upon.

When the accident occurred he was on his way to the West, where, with a limited inheritance carefully husbanded as a "nest-egg," he proposed to look about him, ready to take advantage of such opportunities as might offer. Fortunately the injuries he had received did not retard his journey. Had he been of a superstitious or despondent mood, he might have looked upon that accident, at the very outset of his career, as an augury of evil, but he was neither. It was simply an accident, which, as he laughingly observed to a fellow-passenger, "all railroad travellers, in these break-neck days, should regard as a matter of course."

Oftentimes Henry regretted that he had not ascertained the name of the gentleman who had persisted in his taking the watch, literally forcing it upon him. In the confusion incident to the disaster, the opportunity was not afforded him; indeed, he had no particular reason for seeking it. When the watch was pressed upon him he was on the point of requesting it, but the sudden starting of the train prevented. Also he regretted that he was ignorant of the place of residence of his *tete-a-tete* in the cars. She had informed him that she intended to spend the summer in Rockport, but had given no hint in regard to her home. He knew that it was somewhere in the East; that was all. He breathed something like a sigh as he thought of the slight chance of their ever again meeting; still, he had a feeling, born of hope, that their parting was not final. But when, where, and under what circumstances would be their next meeting were altogether beyond his divination.

About this time there prevailed what was styled the "Western fever" in several localities. All classes and ages were affected by it. The great West was regarded as the famed Eldorado, and scores of young men flocked thither filled with golden dreams, too many of which, it is feared have proved, or will prove, but little better, if not, indeed, much worse than leaden realities. Peabody had taken the disease in a mild form, under the influence of which he started for, and, as we have mentioned, was now on his way to this wonderful region.

We do not propose to follow him throughout his route. He visited many ancient cities—that is, cities which sprang into existence well along in the nineteenth century—and embryo cities, and finally selected Chicago as the most promising place in which to pitch his tent. Before doing this, however, it became necessary, in order to perfect his plans, to visit New York, in which city he found himself some five or six months after the reader's first acquaintance with him.

Late one evening, as Henry was returning to his hotel from a call on a college mate, not being familiar with the locality, he became involved in a labyrinth of streets all of which seemed strange to him. Pausing a moment, he selected one of four or five which diverged from a small opening, supposing it to be his correct route. The night was dark, and the gas lamps far apart. There were no open shops on the street in which he could ask directions. Blocks of tall houses arose on either side, intersected by gloomy courts, or dark narrow alleys leading to unknown regions. Now and then an underground saloon, emitted a dim light through its dingy-curtained windows, whence came the sound of drunken revelry. Concluded next week.

Ladies traveling across the plains carry their hair in their pockets to avoid being scalped.