The Tenant . . . OF THE . . . Narrow House

By HOWARD FIELDING.

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CHAPTER I.

The telegraph operator came out of his office with a sealed envelope in his hand. He had just received a message; and that didn't happen every day, in Williston. The event was of sufficient importance to be noted by the men who were standing on Captain Henry Thompson's steps. Captain Thompson was the village undertaker, and his shop was directly opposite the telegraph office. There was languid expression of baseless speculation regarding the telegram, and it developed into active interest when the operator began to walk across the street straight toward the little group.

He gave the telegram to Samuel Ames, one of the old residents of the town, a man much respected for his excellent qualities, and pitied for his misfortunes, which had been many. Mr. Ames took the message with a hand that trembled a little. He looked carefully at the envelope, and then anxiously at the man who had given it to him. The telegrapher averted his eyes. This pantomime, which would have been incomprehensible to a stranger, meant much to those who saw it. News in Williston is mostly bad news. The town is so far out of the way that good news, traveling much slower than the other kind, rarely reaches it in time. A telegram is a thing to be afraid of. Williston women, who had sons in the city, had been known to faint at the sight of such an envelope as that which Samuel Ames held. Therefore the old telegraphers had formed the habit of writing "good news" in big letters over the address when the contents was not very distressing. Those words were what Mr. Ames' eyes had sought and had not found.

"Perhaps it is all for the best," said the telegrapher. "It's about Ned."

Mr. Ames tore the envelope open, and laboriously read its contents. Then he looked straight ahead of him for thirty seconds; and perhaps he saw the weather-beaten building on the other side of the street, but more likely it was a little boy's face that grew, and changed and vanished.

"Ned's coming home," he said, handing the telegram to Captain Thompson. "You'll do what's necessary, Henry. I must go and break the news to mother."

Captain Thompson bowed gravely. Not a word more was spoken, but two of the men quietly took their places beside Mr. Ames, and walked with him up the street toward his house.

"He Saw Ned Ames Alive."

When the three were beyond hearing, the telgrapher said:

"Ned Ames is coming home at last, and he couldn't do better than come as he does."

There was no dissenting voice. It was the opinion of all present that Ned Ames was better dead than alive.

It must be admitted that the young man had done much to justify this condemnation. His boyhood had been diligently employed in getting out of one scape into another. At twenty he was a drunkard; a year later he narrowly escaped the penitentiary. Then he fled from the town, and for five years, up to the time when this story opens, his whereabouts had been unknown in Williston. Rumor had located him in a dozen prisons, and had accused him of every crime in the calendar. No one hoped to hear any good of him except his mother, a woman beautiful in spirit whose children should have been incapable of evil.

"Just what did the telegram say, Henry?" asked one of those who had witnessed the scene which has been described.

"He died in Boston, of diphtheria," responded the undertaker. "His brother Frank was with him at the last."

"How'd Frank find him?"

"The telegram doesn't say. The body will be here on the boat tomorrow. Frank is coming with it."

Frank Ames was Ned's elder brother. He lived in Boston, and was so prosperous that it was even reported that he had sent money home. Certainly he spent it lavishly when he visited Williston in the summer. His parents were proud of him, but they loved Ned's degraded memory better than the living presence of the other. Thus you may know true love; that it is thrown away.

Ned's funeral was very impressive. There were a hundred reasons why it must be so. First, there was the mystery which had surrounded the young man. Would any record of his five years' wandering come to light beside his coffin? Then there was great curiosity to hear what the minister, Rev. Eliot Warren, would say. To speak at the funeral of such a man as Ned Ames is always difficult. If good alone could be spoken of the dead there would not be much to say in this case. But beyond these mere generalities was a special difficulty far deeper, far more painful. Ned Ames' name had been connected with a sorrow which had broken Eliot Warren's heart and had made his hair as white as snow in the early autumn of his life.

That was the other Williston mystery. What had become of Ned Ames? What had become of Charlotte Warren? One of those questions had been answered, at least, in part. Nobody expected an answer to the other. There was never a disappearance more complete than Charlotte Warren's. A pretty girl who "didn't mean any harm," who "would have been quiet enough if her mother had lived to look after her;" those were the comments which Charlotte's conduct had excited during her last few years at home. And so kindly was the feeling behind the words, that when the secret came out, when the girl's absence from home could no longer be explained by any supposition that did not blast her name, there was no one who had the heart to claim a prophecy fulfilled.

Gossip had wearied itself with that mystery. The girl was not dead. She had written to her father, and had begged him to forget her. He had exhausted his resources in the endeavor to find her, and had failed. Upon whom should the blame fall? At first there was mention of young Dr. Robert Maxwell. He had seemed to be smitten with the girl, and had left town rather suddenly about the time of her disappearance. But he had returned, and had cleared himself of suspicion. His temporary absence had been easily explained. Though Charlotte had left behind her what might be called a confession, it was so vague as to leave even the sin itself in doubt. There were some of the townspeople who stoutly maintained that the girl had run away to go upon the stage. But when all the evidence had been discussed a thousand times, Williston rendered a verdict that Ned Ames knew something about it. Charlotte had smiled upon him in spite of his disgrace; and her disappearance succeeded his flight by less than two months.

In view of these facts, an address by Rev. Eliot Warren beside the coffin of Ned Ames should be worth hearing. Would his plea for the forgiveness of the sinner ring hollow and false? Would he dare to openly condemn, when he knew that everyone within sound of his voice would be thinking of his daughter?

The Ames house was crowded, though it was so large as to hold nearly half the population of the town. The choirs of the orthodox and Unitarian churches, united for this most exceptional occasion, were stationed in the hall. Mr. Warren had not come. A whisper ran about that he had been unable, at the last moment, to make up his mind to it. This most interesting rumor was set at rest presently by the news that he was coming through the yard. With him were his younger daughter, Anna, and Dr. Maxwell. The recent announcement of the engagement of these two had been received in such a way as to prove that the old suspicions really had been laid at rest.

Samuel Ames stopped Dr. Maxwell in the hall, while the pastor, with his daughter, entered the parlor.

"Mother hopes you've thought better about that," said the old man, speaking of his wife by the usual endearing term. "I hope you'll let her see him, if you think he—he wouldn't be too much changed."

His tone was indescribably pathetic, conveying another sorrow than his own. His eyes had that peculiar appearance of excessive dryness noticeable in New England people when they mourn, as if the race had seen so much trouble that generations long since gone, where there is no such thing, had used up all its stock of tears.

"I can't permit it," said the young doctor, firmly. "You must think of the great danger it would involve. Although the coffin is metal-lined, I advised you against a public funeral. I'm sorry to grieve Mrs. Ames, but you know I told her all about this yesterday morning when your son's body was brought here."

"Couldn't it be done at the cemetery where there'll be only us?" pleaded the old man. "We don't care about the risk at our age."

"Don't permit Mrs. Ames to go to the cemetery," rejoined Dr. Maxwell, earnestly. "It's as much as her life is worth on such a day as this. There's a terrible wind, and the light snow is blowing in clouds. She must not—"

"But she will," responded Ames. "I can't prevent her. She will stand by her son's grave today. It is useless to protest. Hush! The service is about to begin."

The voice of the pastor was heard, and all other sounds ceased.

"We commend to Thee, O Lord, the body of Thy servant, that, being dead unto the world, he may live unto Thee; and whatsoever sin he may have committed through the frailty of his mortal nature, do Thou in Thy merciful loving kindness blot out forever."

His voice trembled with the fervency of his supplication. It was a prayer for the forgiveness of sin; and it was followed by an address which proved to every one who heard it that the spirit of perfect forgiveness had descended from on high to dwell in the heart of the speaker.

If there had been no more to mark the day, surely the words of that good man would have made it memorable in Williston. There was music—which had been the only influence that had ever seemed to turn Ned Ames' soul toward higher purposes—and the best promises of Scripture; a last prayer, and then the coffin was borne out to the hearse. Mrs. Ames followed it, leaning upon her husband's arm and her son's. Frank Ames—a tall, dark and rather handsome man, with a deeply furrowed brow—seemed to be much moved. Indeed, he showed more grief than either of his parents.

Few followed the hearse to the cemetery. It was a bitter day. Dr. Maxwell openly advised that only those men should go whose presence was absolutely necessary. As he was not one of these, he emphasized his own advice by refraining from the ordeal. He insisted upon taking Anna Warren to her home, and he exhausted much persuasion upon her father, who was obdurate and would brave the weather.

The grave had been dug through the soil which the cold had turned to stone. Into this "narrow house" the coffin was lowered, though Mrs. Ames had fallen upon her knees in the snow to beg for a last look in her son's face. Samuel Ames would have yielded, violating a direct promise which he had given to Dr. Maxwell, but Frank, though terribly excited by this painful scene, preserved his coolness sufficiently to control the course of events, until a new and surprising influence changed all.

A stranger had been observed among the little party in the cemetery. He was a man of middle age, plainly dressed, and he seemed to know no one except a boy named Horace Riddle, with whom he stood apart. The boy came of one of the poorest families in the town and was known as a ne'er-do-well, which facts made his companion of less interest. No one gave him more than a passing glance.

But just as the coffin touched the bottom of the grave this man stepped forward.

"I sincerely ask your pardon," he said, "for interfering in a matter with which I have no right to concern myself; but if it is at all practicable, I would advise doing as this good lady requests."

There was that in his tone which excited a dreadful curiosity. It was so evident that he held something in reserve.

"Why?" cried a half dozen men at once.

"Because," said the stranger, "this boy informs me that he saw Edward Ames alive in this town yesterday."

The boy instantly spoke up and confirmed this extraordinary statement.

It is needless to describe the consternation which these words caused. Men lost control of themselves. The coffin was rudely dragged out of the grave. Rev. Mr. Warren and Frank Ames pleaded in vain for reasonable investigation. Everybody else counseled the immediate opening of the coffin. And the strangest part of the whole situation was that Horace Riddle's word was not worth a penny in the town. If he had told his story without the backing of this mysterious stranger, nobody would have listened.

Seeing that nothing could be done to quell this excitement, and that Mrs. Ames' agitation was rapidly approaching the point where human nature would endure no more, the pastor gave his sanction to the opening of the coffin, he himself assisting.

The outer wooden lid was easily removed. There was a loud cry from those who were bending over the coffin. The metal sheath was revealed, and a glance showed that it had been cut and wrenched.

"We shall find no body here!" cried one of the men.

At the same moment three others lifted the metal lid which was scarcely fastened at all.

"Yes! There's a body here. He's here, poor fellow!" exclaimed he who had spoken before.

The body was covered with an ordinary white sheet. It was gently withdrawn, revealing the face of one who, through the frailty of her mortal nature, had transgressed, but had come home at last—the face of Charlotte Warren.

(To be Continued.)

BERNHARDT AND SARDOU.

Caprice Denied to Mediocrity Is Permitted to Genius.

The following anecdote concerning the great French actress and the equally renowned playwright is vouched for by the correspondent of the Courier des Etats-Unis: The two who have achieved the greatest triumph in "Gismonda," M. Victorien Sardou and Mme. Bernhardt, were at sword's points in the beginning. This dislike dated from "Daniel Rochet," which Sardou gave to the Comedie Francaise after his nomination to the French academy. Sarah Bernhardt expected that Sardou would select her to create the role of heroine in the play, but he chose Mlle. Bertet instead. Hence the anger of Mme. Bernhardt. When the actress and the author met the former passed on the other side, the latter pulled his hat down over his eyes. Each murmured something not at all complimentary to the other.

Then Sarah Bernhardt left the Comedie Francaise, went to America, where she made her first triumphal tour, and returned to France. Upon her arrival in Paris she entered into negotiations with Raymond Deslande, manager of the Vaudeville. She asked nothing better than to play there. But what should she play? She did not wish to return to classical roles; she wanted an entirely new play, which should bring out all her qualities.

"There is only one man who san write the play you want," said Deslande. "That man is Sardou."

"Sardou!" cried the actress. "Such a disposition—incapable of doing justice to an artist; moreover, irritable, brutal, a man who runs up against everybody who—"

"Very well," replied Deslande, "let us say no more about it." He went to see Sardou and told him that he must have a play for Sarah Bernhardt.

"Sarah!" exclaimed the writer "Sarah! Such a disposition! Crabbed, disagreeable, quarreling with everybody who—"

"Very well, very well, it is quite understood."

And three months after Sardou read "Fedora" to Sarah, who, radient, threw herself on the author's neck in the presence of Deslande.

"Ah! Deslande," said Sardou, "what did I tell you? How gentle she is! how sweet! how adorable!"

"And he!" rejoined Bernhardt. "How amiable he is! how he appreciates real talent, and how obliging! Embrace me, Raymond!"

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