

THAT WOMAN'S SECRET.

CONCLUDED.

"WHEN," continued Mrs. Elmore, as we will now call her, "my husband arose to his feet and made this request my heart almost ceased its beating. I feared, I believed that he was about to confess that he had attempted the life of the girl who had rejected him. But no! Ah! Heaven, no! I never before had realized one iota of the baseness of the man! Standing there, with hypocritical tears upon his face, Egbert Elmore denounced me as the would-be murderess of Agnes Leighton, he testified to having seen me put a white powder in her wine glass while the attention of the company was otherwise directed. He said that I had long been jealous of her; that I had uttered threats against her. I sat there benumbed, stupefied, powerless to reply, till suddenly all became dark and I fell to the floor. Would that I had never arisen! Oh, how can I tell the miseries of the next wretched month! Let me hasten on with the shameful story. A package of arsenic was found in my pocket, which, Heaven knows, I never placed there. An effort was made to keep the matter a secret; but, through the base machination of Egbert Elmore, who feigned the deepest grief, and played the part of a base hypocritical villain throughout, all was made public; and this 'Scandal in High Life' became the town talk. I was tried for the crime in a court of justice; but I will not, I cannot, dwell on this! There was much perjury—a wretched creature being put upon the stand who swore he sold me the deadly drug—and a general prejudice against me in the public mind from the first. The bitter end of it all was a sentence to a weary term of years in the State Prison. Oh, God!"

Mrs. Elmore paused, deeply affected. "Of what interest is this story to me or to my friend, Bentley?" Major Heath said, with a sneer, having fully regained his composure. "My good woman, if you assert that I am this man, Elmore, I shall fear your troubles have turned your brain."

"Do you still deny that you are Egbert Elmore?" the woman demanded, turning to him with a glance under which, in spite of himself, he quailed.

"But," he replied, "I—I have heard of this affair before; and happen to know that Elmore has been dead several years."

"I supposed him dead until lately," returned Mrs. Elmore; "but when I saw you, base wretch, I knew that he still polluted the earth with his presence."

"Bentley," the major cried, turning to his host with a menacing glance, "This woman is mad. Summon a servant to eject her from the premises; or," he added, in a whisper, "I'll proclaim your secret to the household. Have her ejected at once."

"I will not," returned the banker, in the same low tone. "I wish to hear more of this narrative; for I remember that when the remains supposed to be those of Egbert Darrell were washed ashore, his friends announced that his real name was Elmore."

With a bitter curse the major turned away.

"Madame," added Edward Bentley, addressing Mrs. Elmore, "proceed, if you please."

"After my committal to prison," continued Mrs. Elmore, "my husband became more than ever dissipated, plunged into all manner of vice; and only a month after the conclusion of my trial, left his father's home forever, cursing the parent who had done for him all that mortal man could do, who had borne with his faults until all patience was gone. He became a professional gambler; and changed his name to Egbert Darrell. At last, one night, he suddenly disappeared, and it was believed that he had left the city to avoid paying his debts, which were enormous. But a few weeks after his disappearance a body supposed to be his, was found at the foot of pier—East river, and buried by his relations. But this body was not his, for he still lives."

"Just Heaven, I thank thee!" the banker exclaimed. "I am innocent of that terrible crime. Oh, what a burden of remorse is lifted from my soul!"

"Father, what do you mean?" Edith Bentley cried.

"Edith, for years I have supposed myself to be the murderer of Egbert Elmore. This man, whom I now know to be Elmore, procured his introduction to this family and to society under the name of Major Heath, by threats of exposing my crime; and which he pretended he was an unseen witness. But, thank God, I am innocent and a free man once more!"

"Bentley!" exclaimed the major, whose voice was still firm, though his face had grown ghastly, "you're a craven fool! you have ruined yourself! I am not Egbert Elmore, I tell you! Did you not yourself throw him, insen-

sible and bleeding into the river? has he been seen by mortal eyes for ten years? was not his body found, fully identified by those who knew him well, and buried? How then can I be he? I tell you, Bentley, you're mad! the thing's impossible!"

"I am firmly persuaded that you are Egbert," returned the banker, "and I have no doubt that all will be made clear in the course of an investigation which shall be immediately begun."

"Fear not, sir," said Mrs. Elmore, "I will, ere many minutes, confront this man with such proofs of his identity as will leave no possible room for dispute or doubt. But I have not nearly finished my story. Before my trial was over I discovered a fact that filled my cup of misery to the brim; I was destined to become a mother. Oh God! what agony I endured when the disgraceful sentence of imprisonment was pronounced upon me; and I thought that my child would be born within the walls of a prison; its mother a miserable, disgraced woman; its father a guilty wretch shunned by all who were good and pure. But, thank God! my babe was not destined to be born under a prison roof. Through the untiring efforts of old Mr. Elmore I was pardoned ere I had served four months of my time. But, alas! I was disgraced, ruined! I could not return to my former home, I could never again mingle in the society to which my husband had introduced me; could not meet my former fashionable friends, many of whom believed in my guilt and had deserted me in my hour of trouble. Old Mr. Elmore, who had been my friend throughout the wretched affair, and who had, at last, publicly disowned his son, would have given me a home, but I could not accept it. My mother had died of a broken heart, or I might have found shelter with her. I secured lodging in a secluded spot in Brooklyn, and there my child, a boy, was born; and there, for months, I lived under the assumed name of Clayton, my mother's maiden name. My very existence was a secret to all my former friends, even to old Mr. Elmore, who would have befriended me, but whose sympathy I rigidly denied myself, and whom I never met after our parting at the prison door."

"This tale is false, woman," interposed Major Heath, who was evidently laboring under great excitement. "No child was born; if so, where is he now?"

"Of his present whereabouts you should know best," Mrs. Elmore said, sternly.

"What do you mean?" exclaimed the major.

"I will explain," replied Mrs. Elmore. "I had a hard struggle for life. Poverty oppressed me; and though I toiled from early morn till late at night I earned but a scanty living. For myself I cared not; but for my babe, my poor boy, my heart bled. Must his childhood and youth be embittered by poverty and privation? must he to whom rightfully belonged all the blessings which wealth and a willing hand could bestow, be crushed by the iron hand of want? These thoughts were very bitter to me; but bitterer still was the reflection, that sooner or later, the knowledge must come to him that his mother was a disgraced criminal, the former inmate of a prison, his father an outcast from the society of the good and pure. Many were the hours I spent in thought upon the subject; weary, wretched hours, the memory of which is a torture. At last I determined upon a plan which, though it would separate me, probably forever, from my boy, would, I believed, secure him a home, an education, and an honorable position among men. I determined to leave the child at the door of his grand-father's house, with a note imploring old Mr. Elmore to receive the babe and care for it as his own."

"And you did so?" interposed Mr. Bentley, deeply interested and affected.

"I did."

"The child was received and kept?"

"He was, sir."

"And the name he bears is Walter Elmore?"

"Yes, although neither he nor his grand-father suspected that he had a rightful claim to it."

"My God!" exclaimed Major Heath, evidently much agitated.

"The child was received, adopted and treated in all respects as a dear son by Mr. Elmore," continued the woman, "though he could have had no suspicion of Walter's intimate relationship to himself; for that I was a mother was, of course, unknown to him. Walter grew to manhood, and became all I could have desired. During his childhood I often met and conversed with him, when he was with his nurse in the public streets; and as he passed from youth to manhood my face was not an unfamiliar one to him. From unguarded remarks which I at different times made, he learned that I had some knowledge of his parentage. Of late years when we have met he has endeavored to learn this secret from me, but in

vain; my lips were closed. I had fully determined never to disgrace him, and blight his honorable manhood by acknowledging myself his mother. But events have lately transpired which will enable me to remove the stain which has long disfigured my good name; which done, I will make this secret known to the world, and lift the burden from my poor boy's heart."

"But, madame," interposed Mr. Bentley, "do you not know that Walter Elmore is—"

"I know all, sir," Mrs. Elmore interrupted, "and, will speak of his disappearance shortly, and explain it."

Major Heath started violently, and half arose from his seat. But in an instant he regained his composure, and sank back with a sneer upon his lips.

"And now," Mrs. Elmore continued, "thank Heaven I can, at last, prove my innocence of any attempt to poison Agnes Leighton, and can produce the guilty party."

"Can this be possible?" exclaimed Mr. Bentley.

Mrs. Elmore summoned from the adjoining room the coachman, John Douglas.

"This man," she said, "your present coachman, Mr. Bentley, was, at the time of that dreadful affair, a servant in Mr. Elmore's family. He saw Egbert Elmore put that package of arsenic in the pocket of my dress. This aroused his suspicion, for he had seen the label of the package, which told its contents; and he watched my husband at the dinner table. He saw him mix the poison with the wine which he handed Mrs. Leighton. He made Egbert Elmore acquainted with what he knew, but by threats and bribes was induced to keep his knowledge a secret. And so the trial went on, and by the testimony of false witnesses, and the suppression of John Douglas's evidence, which would have saved me, I was convicted of the crime, and sentenced to the State Prison. I had never dared to hope that the truth would in time become known, but at last my innocence is to be made manifest. This man, John Douglas, it seems bitterly regretted his crime and instituted a search for me, after my pardon, with the intention of confessing all and cleansing my sullied reputation. But he could learn nothing about me after my departure from the prison. Long years ago he gave up the search in despair, having relinquished all hope of ever seeing me again. But Heaven was merciful, and we at last met. Are you ready," she added, addressing John Douglas, "to swear to the truth of the statement regarding this affair, which you have made me?"

"I am, madam; and also to the identity of this man who has been called Major Heath, as Mr. Egbert Elmore."

The face of the entrapped villain was livid, and he moved restlessly in his chair, but he did not speak.

"It is well," said the woman, "Egbert Elmore, you tremble; but I have not yet exhausted the catalogue of your crimes. Do you remember the events of the night of August 16, 18—"

"What do you mean?" the man cried, in a voice which sounded harsh and unnatural.

"I mean that on that night you stole the infant child of Mark Leighton from her cradle, and took her to the house of a woman named Van Dyke, in East Broadway, where, for eighteen years after, she lived. Do you deny this?"

"Curses on you!" was the only response.

"And, in further pursuance of your foul scheme of revenge on Mark and Agnes Leighton, you assisted Ralph Marsden in abducting the young girl from her home and placing her in a gaming house owned by himself and a man named Percival, on Twentieth street. Ah! Egbert Elmore, you had begun to congratulate yourself that your complicity in that crime was to remain a secret, had you not?"

Since Marsden's arrest for the murder of Laura Odell, he had shown the possession of that sort of honor which exists among thieves, and had not mentioned Major Heath's name in connection with the affair. And as he (the major) had never entered Jared Percival's house, and had not, as the reader will recollect, been recognized by Mara on the night of the abduction, he had become certain that his share in the crime was not destined to become public. The first thought of the major, or, as we will now call him, Egbert Elmore on hearing his wife's words, was that Marsden had broken his silence and betrayed him.

"I deny it!" he cried, hoarsely.

"Marsden lies!"

"Marsden has not spoken," the woman said, "but Mrs. Van Dyke has confessed all."

The man uttered a terrible oath.

"And, in addition to all this, Egbert Elmore, I accuse you of having one month ago, sent to your son, Walter Elmore, a note, in which—"

"Enough!" cried the man, springing from his seat; "say no more, woman. The game's up, and you have won it."

He would have rushed from the room; but a man's form blocked the doorway. As Egbert Elmore looked in this person's face he recoiled, and cried, almost shrieked:

"Walter—Walter Elmore!"

"Ay!" exclaimed his wife; "Walter Elmore, your son, whom Heaven would not permit to perish by your murderous hand."

The man's nerves had received a terrible shock by this confrontation with his supposed victim, and for several moments his frame quivered like a leaf. But, as his mind comprehended the situation, he regained, with a supreme effort, his self-control, and said:

"Since he is my son, I am not sorry he escaped. But let us end this scene. Ellen, you're a smarter woman than I ever believed you. I admire you, 'pon honor I do. But I regret that I must deprive you of the pleasure of my company. Adieu!"

"Stop, Egbert Elmore, you cannot go!" cried Mark Leighton, who entered at this moment.

"You would detain me!" the villain cried. "You had better not; for your own sakes you had better not. Think of the disgrace of an exposure. Think—"

"No consideration shall prevent justice being at last done, and these terrible wrongs atoned for!" exclaimed his wife.

Egbert Elmore glanced wildly around for some means of escape. The one doorway was guarded by his son and Mark Leighton. But there remained one means of egress. With lightning rapidity he rushed to the window, threw it open, and leaped to the pavement, twenty feet below.

"He has escaped us!" Mark Leighton exclaimed.

"No," said Walter, hastening to the window, "he does not arise from the pavement. He is injured!"

The two men rushed to the street. Egbert Elmore was evidently severely injured, and was unable to move. They bore him into the house and sent for Dr. Oakley, who soon arrived. After a brief examination, he said:

"His leg is broken, and he has received such serious internal injuries that I fear he cannot live long."

"My God!" exclaimed Egbert Elmore, who overheard the words. "This must not be. Doctor, tell me there is some hope; I cannot die!"

"Do not agitate yourself, sir," said the physician. "I fear your hours are numbered. I will give you a soothing draught, which will alleviate the pain you now feel, and I would recommend that you settle all your earthly affairs, and make your peace with Heaven."

"Oh, Egbert!" exclaimed his wife, bursting into tears, "all the sorrow you have caused me is now freely, gladly forgiven."

"And," added Mark Leighton, "will you, in this solemn hour, refuse to make this poor lady the only restitution in your power by confessing all, and restoring to her her good name?"

There was a short silence, broken by Egbert Elmore, who said:

"Leighton, I will do as you wish."

A confession of the attempted murder of Agnes Leighton was hastily written, and to it Egbert Elmore appended his signature.

A servant at this moment entered, and handed Mark Leighton a note which bore the address, "Major Heath." He handed it to the dying man.

"Read it Ellen," Elmore said, handing it to his wife. She tore open the envelope, and read as follows:

"MAJOR HEATH:—I have been mistaken for Richard Carroll, the Bank of England forger, and arrested. Come to me at once, and bring Bentley. I want you both to identify me as Rodney R. H."

"Too late!" exclaimed Egbert Elmore. "Poor Carroll, I am powerless to aid him now."

"Then," said Mark Leighton, "this man whom you have called Rodney Heath, and for whose sake you would have murdered your son—"

"Is no other than Richard Carroll, who forged a draft on the Bank of England for five thousand pounds, a few months ago. But Leighton, when I made that attempt on my son's life, I did not dream of the relationship existing between us, you must remember. I looked upon him as a nameless stranger, who had crossed the path of my adopted son, Richard Carroll; and who had also occupied the place which rightfully belonged to me in my father's house, and whom for both reasons I hated. But listen, and I will give you a brief account of my doings for the last ten years. I have no further need of concealment."

"Egbert," cried his wife, "spend the few moments left you in other thoughts than these. Forget your wretched past and prepare for the future."

"Ellen," was the reply, "it is too late for that now—do not pursue the subject but listen: When you Bentley, threw me, insensible and bleeding, into the river, I fell in close proximity to a boat containing several river thieves, who were about landing with a quantity of

booty. These men rescued me, and took me to their head-quarters, a miserable den in the lower part of the city, where, for weeks I lay in a critical condition. The residents of the house did not know who I was, and they made but few inquiries. But they nursed me back to life; and one of their number, who had some knowledge of surgery, one day performed an operation upon me, raising a portion of my skull which pressed upon the brain, and thereby restoring me to consciousness.

"From that time my recovery was rapid. I soon learned from the newspaper that a body supposed to be mine, had been found in the river, and buried by my relatives. No one questioned the fact of my death. The thought arose in my mind, why not remain dead to the world? Why make my existence in the land of the living known to my former friends? My father had disowned me; I was tabooed by good society, distrusted by my companions at the gaming table on account of certain sharp practices I had indulged in. In short, my reputation with every one was as bad as it could be, and my occupation was about gone. To be sure, if I declared myself, I might recover the six thousand dollars, of which I had been robbed, and punish the thief—pardon the term, my dear Bentley—but, on the other hand, I should be again obliged to shoulder a debt amounting to double that sum.

"After a careful consideration of the matter, I concluded to leave Egbert Elmore undisturbed in his grave. My newly found friends were professional thieves; I joined them in several of their expeditions, and when I accumulated a few hundred dollars, I emigrated to London. There for ten years I remained, practicing my old profession with varying success. When I heard of my father's death, I thought of returning, acknowledging my identity, and claiming the property; but I soon learned that he had, by rash speculation lost it all. So, still I kept my secret.

"About five years ago a friend of mine visited America, and I asked him to make inquiries regarding Edward Bentley, describing you, my dear boy, and giving him such particulars as I thought would prevent the possibility of a mistake. Whether he really made inquiries or not, I do not know, but if he did, he was misinformed, for he returned with the information that you, Bentley, were dead.

"I was disappointed, for I hoped that you had grown wealthy in the five years that had passed; in which case I confess, I intended to return to New York and bleed you. But, my dear Bentley, as your worldly possessions increased, so did your fame, and a few months ago I learned that you still lived, and had become a millionaire. I then matured the scheme which I afterwards carried into execution. Richard Carroll was my best friend; he had saved my life, he had often shared his last shilling with me. Now he was in trouble; he had forged a draft on the Bank of England, and the police were after him. I was grateful to him for the favors I had received at his hands, and I offered to assist him in escaping to America with me, and to share with him the golden harvest which I expected to reap.

"I did not, however, reveal my secret even to him, for there was a possibility that he might at some future time, turn against me, and I would not put myself in his power. I informed him of such portions of my history as I thought best, but left him in the dark as to my identity, and to this day he does not know my real name. I told him that I possessed a millionaire's secret which was worth to me money, position, everything. I offered to share all but the secret with him. He gladly agreed to this. It was necessary that he should change his name. I agreed to give him mine—that of Heath—and to introduce him to New York society as my son. To this, also, he willingly consented. I furnished him with a disguise. I succeeded in putting the police completely off the track, and sent them to Paris in search of him. That they have at last caught him astonishes me. The day we arrived in New York, Carroll and I accidentally saw your daughter. He took a fancy to her. I determined he should marry her, knowing that such an alliance would be mutually advantageous to us. The rest you know."

He paused, exhausted with the efforts he had made.

Two hours later he died.

And now but little remains to be told. Walter Elmore and Edith Bentley were married a few weeks after the occurrences we have just recorded; and at the same time Henry Oakley led to the altar Blanche Leighton—she whom, until now, we have known as Mara Sydney. They have been married several years, and two happier couples cannot be found in New York City.

Mrs. Elmore, the terrible secret which had so long shadowed her life removed, became a quietly happy woman, whose presence was, and is, a sunshine to all around her.

Edward Bentley, too, is a wonderfully altered man; joy has taken the place of regret; gratitude of remorse.

Alice Leighton is shortly to be married to one eminently worthy of her, having long since conquered her affection for Ralph Marsden.

Richard Carroll, alias Rodney Heath, was returned to England, where he was sentenced to a long term of imprisonment which he is now serving.

Mrs. Van Dyke disappeared from the city immediately on receiving the five hundred dollars, which it will be remembered Mark Leighton promised to pay her.

Ralph Marsden committed suicide in his cell before the time for his trial had arrived.

Jared Percival was soon released from duress vile and left the city. And now to the story which has grown from our pen into our heart, and to you, dear reader, we bid a reluctant farewell.