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FOR THE BLOOMFIELD TIMES.

A STRANGE FRAUD;

—OR—

A Mystery of New York City.

BY F. DELACY.

"DIDN'T he feel annoyed at this?" the sailor asked.

"If he felt any annoyance he never showed it. Mr. Waldron is one of those self-poised men that preserve their equanimity under all circumstances. Besides he had the free spending of the estate; what more could he desire? And then he prospered in business—having plenty of capital at his back. If any ever doubted John Waldron's love for his wife they must have had all their doubts dispelled when Mrs. Waldron, two years after her father's death, wilful as ever, attended a ball too thinly clad for the weather, caught a violent cold, which brought on galloping consumption, and the physicians pronounced her case hopeless.

"Her husband's grief was most heart-rending. He watched her night and day, heedless of rest or food, until he was nearly worn to a skeleton, and when she died, as she did in a week, they carried him out of the room in a dead faint. He struggled out for the funeral, and then took to his bed, and it was six months before he was himself again.— Then, as if a fatality shadowed the house, the little girl fell sick, and it was soon reported that she was dangerous.— You ought to have seen the distant relatives flock around—for if she died, they would take all, leaving Mr. Waldron nothing.

"Yes, I see," said the sailor, smiling with a serenity rather out of keeping with the solemnity of the narrative he was listening to.

The shopman, however, intent upon his story did not perceive this.

"Fortunately," he continued, "the child did not die; though the doctor gave her up at night, in the morning he was surprised to find a sudden and great change in her, and in a week she was running about the house as brisk as a bee. The sickness affected her brain for a while, and she was quite light-headed. Indeed, one of the servants told me she appeared to be another altogether, and did not recognize those who used to pet her, and she kept continually crying for her mother, but that all wore off after a while, and she grew stronger and brighter every day, until she became what you see her now."

Thanking the shopman for his story, the sailor threw away the stump of his cigar, and bent his steps once more towards the Farrell estate.

"Let me see," he muttered, "it is now about the time that your fashionable swells are taking their dinners.— Guess I'll give one of them a call."

He reached the house, entered through the ornamental iron gate—strode heavily along the tressalated walk, up the white marble steps, and gave the door-bell a vigorous pull.

"Is Mr. Waldron at home?" asked he, when the door was opened.

"He is," answered the servant, with a look which seemed to say "you need not have pulled the bell quite so hard, sir."

"Tell him a gentleman wishes to see him on business."

The easy assurance of the sailor awed the servant into respect, so she showed him into the parlor, and went to call Mr. Waldron. The sailor surveyed the luxuriant furnishings with a grim smile as he settled himself comfortably into an easy-chair.

"He'll come down handsomely, to stick to all this," he said, apostrophizing his own reflection in the splendent

plate mirror that filled the space between the two windows opening upon the balcony.

The door opened, and Mr. John Waldron entered the room. Perhaps the reader may feel a little curious to know what kind of a man this Mr. John Waldron was of whom he had heard so very much. He was tall in stature, full six feet, sinewy and well-proportioned, a frame combining grace and strength with the polish of well-bred society.— Delicate white hands, with long tapering fingers, a seal ring upon his little finger of the left hand—a topaz.— Regular features, a long, straight nose, square chin, and small mouth. Deep blue eyes, with just a glint of steel in their expression—a broad white forehead, and a profusion of light curly brown hair, with full beard and whiskers two shades darker in color. A firm, self-poised man, carrying dignity in every motion compelling respect. A man to lead the masses and one not easily turned aside from the settled purpose of his soul. A man of wealth—it was apparent in every movement. Looking at him, you could readily understand how he had won the heart of Lillian Farrell—you would wager that no woman could refuse him. There was but one defect in his whole appearance—the eye; it looked as if the man might be treacherous, yet no man had ever found him so. The sailor who knew the world, gauged him rightly, in one comprehensive glance, as he entered the room.

"A tough customer this," he muttered pithily.

"You wish to speak with me?" asked Mr. Waldron, urbanely, with a cursory look at the stranger.

"I do," answered the sailor. "I know who you are, and as I do not wish to take advantage of any man, let me tell you who I am. My name is Robert Nobbles, commonly called Bob Nobbles; p'raps you have heard of me before."

"I never did," answered Mr. Waldron with a smile. "What is the object of your visit here? Scarcely to beg, I should judge from your appearance."

"Oh, no, I've only come to borrow," answered Nobbles, drily.

"To borrow?" exclaimed Mr. Waldron, in some surprise. "My good man I am neither a pawnbroker nor a usurer; and moreover, this is my private residence, and I am not in the habit of transacting business here."

"Are you sure this is your residence?" asked Nobbles, unconcernedly.

Mr. Waldron colored slightly, and his smooth forehead wrinkled into the least perceptible frown.

"It is mine to all intents and purposes," he answered, haughtily, "although it nominally belongs to my daughter Lillian."

"Are you sure she is your daughter?" asked the imperturbable sailor.

Mr. Waldron started as though he had been stung.

"What do you mean?" he gasped.

"Do you know the large elm tree that stands by the river's bank?" continued Nobbles in the same strain. "Do you know what is buried at the foot of that tree?"

Mr. Waldron grew ghastly pale; his limbs seemed to fail him, and he sank into a chair, grasping its back convulsively with his white fingers. Nobbles surveyed him with a grim smile of satisfaction.

"Who are you, and what do you know?" demanded Mr. Waldron, hoarsely, of his strange visitor.

"I have told you my name is Nobbles: rated on the ship's books as an able-bodied sailor; and now I'll tell you what I know. Strange things sometimes happen in this world, and one of them once happened to me. This is how it happened. Fourteen years ago" Mr. Waldron shuddered—"ah! I see you have a good memory—I was mixed up with a party that used to visit vessels in the harbor at night, and help themselves to any trifles that might be lying around loose."

"River thieves?"

"Exactly. Well, one night the police chased me, but I escaped by swimming to shore, and hiding myself among some trees that grew near the water's edge. When the pursuit was over, and I had time to look about me, I discovered that I was in the grounds belonging to some fine estate. While I was thinking, how I could best

make my way to the road, footsteps approached, and I crouched behind the trunk of a tree to escape observation.— Just then the moon, which had been obscured most of the night, burst away from the clouds and shone out brightly. By its light I saw a man approaching, carrying a spade in his right hand, and a bundle under his left arm. I thought at first that it was the gardener, but the moon's light was quite strong, and I saw that he wore a gentleman's dress, and not that of a laboring man. My curiosity was excited at this discovery and I watched him closely. He proceeded to the foot of a large elm tree, laid down the bundle, and commenced digging a hole in the ground with the spade. He did this very hurriedly, glancing around nervously every now and then every time the wind rustled among the branches of the trees. When he had dug the hole deep enough to satisfy him, he placed the bundle carefully in it, bent over it with a strange action which I could not understand then, but comprehended afterwards, and hastily shoveled back the dirt, replaced the sod carefully, and hurried away."

"And you were there and saw this?" demanded Mr. Waldron, restlessly.

"How else could I tell it to you?" asked the sailor.

"True."

"I never was so surprised at anything in my life. My first thought was, that some valuable jewels had thus been hid away there for safety, and as I was in the appropriating line in those days, I determined to possess them. I dug up the turf with the long knife I carried—a kind of safeguard against the police you know—and scooped out the dirt with my hands, trembling all the while in my eagerness to discover what had been buried. I soon reached the bundle and drew it forth. It had a strange feel about it, which I didn't altogether like, and I shuddered as I unwrapped a soft kind of little blanket that was wound about it. It was neither gold nor jewels. I was younger then and unused to such sights, and my legs fairly shook under me and my hair stood on end as I looked at it. It was the dead body of a little child!"

John Waldron covered his face with his hands and his strong frame quivered.

"What did you do with it?" asked he, removing his hands after a short pause, and showing his face as unmoved and placid as ever.

"Returned it carefully to its grave, replaced the earth and turf as I had found them, and then made my way to the road, reached the ferry and returned to New York. But I treasured the circumstance in my memory."

"To make it profitable at some future time," said John Waldron drily.

"Exactly," responded Nobbles, in the same tone. "There was a girl in New York that I loved better than my own life, but she preferred another to me and married him. I met her the next day, and she thinking that I bore her ill will for the slight she had put upon me, accuse me of stealing away her little girl. I thought nothing of the circumstances at the time, but it has come back to my mind with a significance lately. The city had got too hot hold me on account of the river robberies, so I shipped on board a vessel bound for foreign parts, and sailed away. I'm back but twice in all that time, for the roving life pleased me—and strangely enough made an honest man of me—that is to say, honest as the world goes, for we are all rogues in the grain, you know. I had almost forgotten that strange burial, when yesterday, scarcely two hours landed from Calcutta, up steps the living image of my old sweetheart, Nance. I couldn't help speaking to her, and when I did she informed me that her name was Lillian Waldron, which quite flabbergasted me. But I was never slow in following up a wake, and putting my ideas together. I soon came to this conclusion: Lillian Waldron lies buried at the foot of the big elm tree in yonder grove, and to keep the Farrell estate in your hands, you stole the daughter of Nance Burke, and passed her off as your child."

"You have made a very good story of it," said Mr. Waldron. "What do you seek to gain in this matter?"

"Five thousand dollars for silence," said the sailor resolutely.

"Ah! and if I should refuse to pay you this money—if I should treat your

demand with the contempt it deserves, then what?"

"I would denounce you."

"Possibly—but do you think your words would be believed? What proof can you advance?"

"The child's skeleton beneath the elm."

"It is no longer there."

"You have removed it?"

Mr. Waldron smiled placidly. Mr. Nobbles' countenance fell. He knew how little chance his words would have against a man of John Waldron's wealth and position. He pondered a moment and a sudden thought brightened the gloom of his face.

"The mother, Nance Burke, is still alive, keeping an apple stand on the corner of Fulton street and Broadway, she will recognize and swear to her daughter. I saw her yesterday."

"She saw Lillian the same day you saw her, and did not recognize her as her daughter, though they conversed together for several moments," answered Mr. Waldron coldly.

Bob Nobbles looked bewildered.

"So you see, my good man, your case is not quite so strange as you fancied," continued Mr. Waldron, placidly.

"Have you anything further to say, sir?"

"Not a word," cried Nobbles, rising wrathfully; "but you'll see what I'll do. I will bring Nance here to claim her daughter."

Angrily he strode into the hall, but he did not understand the catch of the front door, and Mr. Waldron came politely to his assistance and ushered him out, watching him as he hurried down the street.

"He can do nothing," he mused:—"absolutely nothing but create a scandal, which will die away in a week.— My darling's little skeleton lies upon her mother's breast in Greenwood; no one will think to look for it there.— None knew what the box contained which I deposited there when I had the tomb opened. I would not have minded a thousand or two, to have kept the fellow's mouth still, but the possession of so much money would only have made him talk the more. You cannot buy the silence of fellows. But I must be beforehand with him."

Calling his coachman, he ordered him to harness up as speedily as possible.— Leaving his dinner untasted, much to Lillian's surprise, who never knew such an occurrence to take place before, he got into his carriage and was driven rapidly to the ferry.

Bob Nobbles' wrath and the long story he had told made him dry, so he paused at a saloon on the way to refresh himself. Men of his temperament require quite a deal of refreshing when once they commence, so it was quite late in the evening when he got to Nance's apple stand on the corner of Fulton St., and Broadway. To his great surprise he found the stand empty and Nance absent. He thought she must be sick, so he determined to call at her lodgings, which he had discovered the day before, as she had lived in the same old house for years. Her rooms were locked—Nance was not there. Her next door neighbor, however, afforded him some information, which was conclusive, but not satisfactory. A fine gentleman had brought her there in a carriage, and after packing up her dresses and what few valuables she had, she had gone away with him.

"Tricked, by jingo!" growled Nobbles, as he stumped down into the street again. "He has bought her up instead of me. I am sold to a certainty. I cannot prove anything without her evidence, and he's fixed that by this time. He's a deep one—too deep for me. Well, I have found my match for once—no chance for that five thousand—guess I'll let it slide—might get to Sing Sing on some old offence."

So Bob Nobbles floated around New York, sailor like, until his money was all spent, and then shipped for a long voyage again. He was probably lost at sea, or died abroad, for he never again returned.

John Waldron's carriage stood before his office in Wall street, and in his private room poor Nance sat beside him, bewildered at the strangeness of her position.

"You said you would return my daughter to me," pleaded Nance, gazing wistfully around the room.

"So I will," answered John Waldron pleasantly, "all in good time. Have patience: there is much to be told you. She is not here but at my house in Green Point. I wish to explain some matters to you before you see her because you must meet as strangers. You appear to be a woman of good sense, and one who would not willfully destroy your daughter's prospects in life. Listen to me; let me acquaint you how you became deprived of your child, and beg of you to be guided by my advice."

"I will do whatever you say, sir," she answered meekly, "for so good and great a gentleman like yourself would not advise me to do anything wrong."

"Great I am, no doubt," he responded with a proud smile, "but good—ah! that's another matter. I must tell you my history, my good woman, so that you will understand my position, and I shall tell you things I never once dreamed would pass my lips to mortal ears. I came from a proud family and as poor as they were proud. Reverse of fortune had reduced our once proud estate to nothing, until at twenty-six I found myself alone in the world, with only a tolerable education and my quick wits to help me to the wealth I was determined to acquire. The road to fortune is a rough one, and few reach it without the aid of accident or influence. I had no influence, I trusted to the chapter of accidents. Nature who had been so lavishly kind to me, pointed out the way. I was determined to marry an heiress; I had the good fortune to attract the attention of Miss Farrell.— True, her reported wealth first drew me towards her and I spared no points to gain her love. In this I was successful beyond my hopes. It was a great triumph for the poor broker's clerk to have gained the prize from his wealthy and aristocratic competitors. Nor was my love altogether mercenary, for though her fortune was the first incentive to seek her heart and hand, when that heart was mine, my love had become so intensified I would have married her without a penny."

It was strange that this strong and wise man of the world should thus pour out the very secrets of his soul to a simple and ignorant woman. It appeared to be a relief to John Waldron to let down the mask of placid reserve he had worn so long, and make a full confession.— There had been a dreary monotony all these years in his mind, and it was like opening a long closed room and letting in the daylight—it purified his soul.— She sat and listened without comment, too much astonished, indeed, to speak, and he continued:

"We were married much against her father's inclination. From the first he guessed my motives and distrusted me to the last. He made his will in such a manner that I could never obtain possession of his daughter's property, if such had been my desire—though it never was. I was satisfied to have control of the income, which amply supplied our wants; besides, the business in which he settled me, began to prosper and pay me well. Indeed by prudent speculation, I now possess enough to buy the Farrell estate twice over.— But I was still a poor man when he died. Lillian and I lived in perfect union. She was not without her faults, the trivial ones of a spoiled child, but I was patient, never exacting, for her heart was kind and good and she loved me tenderly. The birth of our child cemented our union with endearing bonds. Then came the clouds of sorrow after all this sunshine of happiness. My wife was stricken down by the destroyer's hand and taken from me. I cannot describe to you the crushing weight with which this blow fell upon me. Had it not been for my darling little one I should have gone mad, and given up all. I rallied my senses for her sake. She too sickened, and then indeed the world looked blank. Lured by the news of her illness, as vultures scent carrion from afar, relatives I had never heard of, harpies who knew the tenor of the Judge's will, began to gather, offering their condolence in public, but secretly gloating in anticipation of their division of the property. My fortune hung upon my child's life, for my business had not then assumed a lucrative form—her death would be ruin to me. I should be hurled from my position and see strangers in the home which the memory of my lost wife made a hallow—"