

Who is the Thief

by Elizabeth Campbell

Mrs. Van Ansel was a proud and haughty woman—proud of the old Dutch name which her husband had left her—proud, also, of the one son and daughter who bore the same name, and proud of the money which she had brought that husband when they were both young, and which was now swelled to about three times its original bulk—making her one of the richest widows in that very aristocratic and exclusive village in which she dwelt, the principal street of which was also so honored as to bear the late Mr. Van Ansel's name.

Rupert Van Ansel was a gay, handsome, genial lad of twenty-two, and any mother might well be excused for being proud of him. He had never cost her one heart-pang, from the day he was born until that on which a governess arrived for his little sister Gertrude; and though Mrs. Van Ansel perceived at once how much he was smitten with the pretty face and graceful figure of Miss Sherman, she could not find it in her heart to reprove him for it—to make such an apparently harmless thing the ground for a first quarrel with her boy—for she argued to herself it must be harmless; Rupert could not have any serious intentions toward “that girl,” and it would in time “blow over,” if she did not fan the flickering flame into an undying blaze. Mrs. Van Ansel, you see, was wise, after her generation.

However, as there really seemed a probability that Rupert's admiration was quietly fanning itself into a blaze, aided by the increasing sweetness and loveliness of Miss Sherman, who only became more charming on more intimate acquaintance, Mrs. Van Ansel determined to bring an enemy into the camp.

She wrote to an old friend of hers, Mr. Bowler by name, to bring his daughter, and pay her that long promised visit. Mrs. Van Ansel became very wise in her generation, and manifested it in this movement. She was well aware that Mr. Bowler, with all due respect for the old Dutch name, would willingly have it changed in her case to his own more humble cognomen; and though she had no idea of gratifying him, she contemplated with some little triumph the effect which her meditated flirtation would have on Master Rupert. She knew, too, that Katie Bowler was a brilliant beauty—a girl skilled in the art of winning away other maiden's lovers—and she did not doubt but she would succeed in breaking the silken string that bound the rich heir of the Van Ansel's to the humble governess.

“Then,” thought Mrs. Van Ansel, “when I see him wavering between Kate Bowler and this Sherman girl, I will place before him the alternative of Miss Bowler for a wife, or Mr. Bowler for a father.”

Clever Mrs. Van Ansel! Does anyone doubt Mrs. Van Ansel's cleverness, and ask—Why did she not send away this troublesome governess and so get rid of all this bother? For two reasons: Miss Sherman suited her so well as the governess of Miss Gertrude that she seemed to have been born for that special purpose; and to have sent her away would have been to send her son in hot pursuit after her—a search which would never have stopped till he had found her, and would only have increased his passion a thousand fold; therefore, clever Mrs. Van Ansel!

The Bowlers—father and daughter—arrived, and were warmly welcomed by Mrs. Van Ansel. Nor was Rupert failing in the duties required of him; he was too gallant, and too appreciative of handsome young ladies, to pass them over with neglect; and Katie was very handsome—he acknowledged it at the first glance. She was rather tall, but admirably proportioned in figure, and her hands were quite marvels—her arms and shoulders were the whitest it is possible to imagine. Her eyes were dark and deep, and shaded by long black lashes; and her lustrous hair—so dark, so wavy, so plenteous—only served from its midnight blackness to bring out more vividly the ivory whiteness of the brow from which it was rolled away, and the snowy whiteness of the graceful neck it touched in its loosely knotted beauty, at the back of the small and shapely head.

“Quite a beauty for a dark woman,” Rupert pronounced to himself; and then, in contrast to this brilliant girl, rich with the loveliness of the sunny, tropic South, arose the vision of sweet Mabel Sherman—the slight, perfect form, the dainty hands, shaded by ruffling of old lace, the pure, sea-shell complexion, so vividly brought forth by the close-fitting black dress; the faint rose alternately blooming and fading on the rounded cheeks, the sky blue eyes, and the rippling golden hair, pushed back from the fair brow, and tumbling in a shower of radiant, careless curls about her neck.

“Dear little Mab.” thought Rupert. “What woman could make me forget her, even for a moment?”

Could Mrs. Van Ansel have heard this unspoken promise of fidelity to her governess, she might not have been so well pleased with her little plot as she felt herself at liberty to be; to her eyes everything seemed proceeding in the right direction; and she congratulated herself in no measured terms on the success of her scheme.

But though Rupert rode out with Miss Bowler, and admired her handsome figure in its admirably fitting black riding habit—though he listened to her lively sallies, and applauded them with laughter—though he waited upon her in a great many little ways—he still found time to slip into the school-room, to look over Gertrude’s French exercises, and to whisper in the small, pink ears of Mabel Sherman.

But a change had come over the governess. The advent of Miss Bowler was not without effect upon her; and in the hour that she thought she discovered Mr. Van Ansel’s devotion to the new arrival, she also discovered the free entrance she had given him to her own heart. She found that his image was enshrined there as something too sacred to be thought of except on rare and happy occasions; and on making this discovery, these occasions became less happy and more rare. Yes, the governess loved her mistress’s handsome son with all the devotion of her warm little heart; and bitterly reproaching herself for having extracted any serious meaning from his kind words, his pretty little compliments, his often tender looks, she resolved to smother her secret forever, and close her heart against him in all the future time they might be thrown together.

Rupert knew too little of womankind to comprehend this new phase of Miss Sherman’s conduct; and, fearing she had in some way received a slight from either himself or his mother, renewed his attentions and redoubled his kindness; but he did not dare to whisper his admiration of her anymore, fearing to alienate her still farther—though he could not help telling himself that she

had not seemed offended at first with his doing so. But the kinder and gentler Rupert became, the more frigid and distant grew Miss Sherman, till at length she held him at an almost unapproachable distance.

Rupert was completely puzzled. Mrs. Van Ansel was not slow to perceive a portion of these changes—she saw the coldness (indifference she called it) which had sprung up between her son and her governess; but she did not see the uneasiness Rupert suffered in consequence. Mrs. Van Ansel, you must remember, was only wise in her generation—she did not see through everything, though she generally thought she did.

“Rupert,” said Mrs. Van Ansel, one day, “I am going to give a party. I don’t think we are quite gay enough for Miss Bowler. You know she is accustomed to a great deal of society.”

“Of course you know better, mother, than anybody else, in all such matters,” was the dutiful reply; “and if you say, ‘give a party,’ of course that is the correct thing to do.”

“You were always the best of boys, Rupert; and now, just tell me who you think should be asked.”

“Well, there are the Van Wycks, the Holdens, the Trowbridges, the Livingstons, the Grahams, and ever so many more. You know best. The names I have mentioned are merely suggestions.”

“I will put down every name you have mentioned, Rupert. That will give us a goodly supply of gentlemen, but we must not be without an equal number of ladies. Just name a few whom you think will be most congenial to the taste of Miss Bowler—you probably understand her preferences better than I do,”—this last with a sly look and a manner intended to rally him upon the subject. It passed off without effect, however, for Rupert was busily seeking among his memory of female acquaintances for such persons as would be likely to meet the exigencies of the case.

“There are Miss Elliott, and the two Canley girls, and Emily Grey, and Miss Sherman—“

“Miss Sherman? Who in the world is Miss Sherman?” Mrs. Van Ansel interrupted; for she never dreamed that Rupert could have the hardihood to mean the governess.

“Gertrude’s governess,” returned Rupert, very coolly; and thereupon ensued a discussion which finally terminated in the first quarrel that had ever taken place between this mother and son; it was terminated by Rupert’s leaving the room in high displeasure, throwing back over the threshold a Parthian dart of this form and substance:

“Do as you please, mother—only bear this in mind, if Miss Sherman does not make one of this party, I will not so much as enter the house.”

This was an unlooked-for blow to Mrs. Van Ansel, and showed very plainly that Rupert had not become so indifferent to the governess as she could have wished. What was to be done? She knew that he would keep his threat—the Van Ansel’s never broke their word, given for good or

evil; and so, reverting to her original tactics, she resolved not to oppose him; and Miss Sherman was invited to be one of the party. Not only that, but Rupert urged the invitation, which the governess seemed at first inclined to refuse; and urged it so eloquently that Mabel, looking shyly up into his eager, earnest face, felt a thrill of joy at the tone of his voice, and allowed her heart to throb with the olden gladness as she thought that perhaps he loved her after all.

“I will join the rest of your mother’s guests,” she said, in a voice so low that Rupert was forced to bend his head to catch the words, and in his gratitude he snatched the little white hand to his lips and passionately kissed it.

“Thank you—thank you!” he said, and hurried away; and then Mabel kissed that same hand again and again, till forced to hide her blushing face between pink palms, and she thought in a flutter of joyful triumph, “He loves me, he loves me! Oh, my own, my dear one, and I to doubt him so cruelly!”

At first Mabel had some little difficulty as to what she could wear at so grand a party as Mrs. Van Ansel’s; but having submitted her wardrobe to the inspection of Gertrude, she was at length persuaded to select a very pretty puffed tuile—the only dress at all suitable for such an occasion that she possessed. And very pretty she looked in it—so pretty, so graceful and so ladylike, that Mrs. Van Ansel was quite reconciled to her appearance in the handsome parlors, especially as she made herself very useful in playing upon the piano when everybody else was tired and wanted to carry on innocent little flirtations under the cover of music.

A few days before the party Mrs. Van Ansel had drawn a large sum of money from her bankers; and though she had used it quite freely for the expenses of her party, there still remained a goodly sum—several hundred dollars, in fact—in her upper bureau drawer, of which she herself had the key.

On the morning after the party this money was missing, and Mrs. Van Ansel was positively certain she had not removed it, nor had she left the key out of her possession—what had become of it? She did not make the matter public in the house, but quietly took Rupert into her confidence.

“Now, my son,” she concluded, “it is clear that there is a thief in the house.”

“Whom do you suspect, mother?”

“I will not say at present, Rupert, that I suspect anyone; but I wish you had not been so imperative about Miss Sherman being invited to join my guests. The dress she wore was a very expensive one—it never cost less than fifty dollars; and how was a poor governess to afford such an expense—not in an honest way, I’ll be bound.”

“Hush, mother—silence! I will not hear Mabel so unjustly suspected—so cruelly wronged!”

“Mabel!” exclaimed Mrs. Van Ansel, scornfully. “I think my son forgets himself.”

“Perhaps I do, and I beg Miss Sherman’s pardon if I took too great a liberty with a name for which I have every respect.” And Rupert left his mother, holding his head very high, and feeling, it must be confessed, mighty high and powerful, and determined to champion the lady of his love to the last breath of his existence, if necessary.

And so ended the matter of the theft for the present.

Mrs. Van Ansel, however, bethought her of a trap by which she might catch the thief; she drew some more money from her bankers, and then, having taken some pains to make the circumstance known in the household, she concealed it in the same place as before—first taking the precaution to mark the bills, and resolved to be awake all night and watch for the thief. But the long hours of the night wore on, and toward morning Mrs. Van Ansel fell into a deep sleep. Rupert, however, was more wakeful, and filled with uneasiness (though he did not doubt his love for a moment) by the suspicions of his mother against Mabel; he was sitting up, looking out on the moonlight night, his lamp out, and solacing himself with a cigar, when suddenly he heard a faint rustling and a low footfall in the hall. He stole on tiptoe to the door, and saw a female figure, robed in black, gliding along; over her face and head was thrown a black lace shawl which he at once recognized as Mabel’s, having many a time seen it on her. With a shudder and a sickening horror upon him, he stole out after her, and saying to himself, “she is a somnambulist—nothing more,” he followed the figure with steps even lighter than her own. Horror! She stopped at his mother’s door, and, softly pushing it open, entered. He did not dare to follow her; but the door was so left that he could watch through the crack without danger of being discovered. He saw this woman approach his mother, who lay quietly sleeping, and saturate a handkerchief she held in one hand with the contents of a bottle which she held in the other; and then when he saw the wet handkerchief laid across his mother’s face and felt the faint odor of chloroform he turned sick at the sight, for he knew that there was too much premeditation to admit the idea of the perpetrator of the act being a sleep-walker. His first impulse was to spring forward and arrest the deceitful wretch; but he had not the courage to confront himself with the woman he had so loved and know that she was a thief; and yet—even yet—there might be a mistake, and he would have to watch her through to the end.

Having satisfied herself that Mrs. Van Ansel was beyond the power of giving any trouble, this woman deliberately searched the pocket of her dress for the keys, and having selected the one which opened the bureau-drawer, she speedily possessed herself of the roll of bank bills, which she hid in the bosom of her dress; and then gliding over to the bed again, snatched away the handkerchief. Rupert shrank back against the wall on the opposite side of the door to that which she would pass, and presently she came out, hurried along the hall, and stopped after a little while at the door of the governess’ room, which was situated at the head of a short flight of stairs. Rupert watched her from the bottom of these stairs, having followed her at as close a distance as he dared, saw her enter, and heard the sound of the key softly turning in the lock.

It was enough—what farther proof could he desire? He groaned aloud as he staggered back to his room, and, dressed as he was, threw himself on the bed, but not to sleep—to lie awake till the morning sun shone in upon his pale and haggard face, and then to hope—to pray that it had been all a dream.

He was almost persuaded that it was a dream when he found himself at the breakfast-table. Mrs. Van Ansel did not allude to the loss of the money, though she had already discovered that it was gone. Mr. Bowler's puns and jests were unusually frequent. Miss Bowler was radiantly handsome in her crimson morning-robe. Gertrude was lively and mischievous as usual, and Miss Sherman was as sweet and pretty as a June rose in her light-figured muslin dress. She was putting off mourning at last, partly because she had worn it so long, partly because Rupert had said she was too fresh and bright to wear somber colors.

"It cannot be that she is guilty," thought Rupert, meeting her clear, innocent eyes, as she raised them to his face in bidding him "good morning," and then dropped them quickly again, coloring beneath his earnest gaze.

"That is not the color of guilt," he thought; "it is the flush sent to her cheek by a pure, true heart that knows it has done nothing to forfeit my love. I will never believe in her guilt till I have acknowledgement of it from her own lips. Guilty—she! Sooner would I believe myself a thief. I am the victim of some horrible nightmare."

Rupert would have questioned his mother if she had sustained a second loss; but she eluded him, and immediately after breakfast ordered the carriage and paid a hasty call to all the leading tradesmen in the village.

The day passed without incident of any kind; the next wore away in like manner; on the third day the head clerk from Messrs Black and Goodman waited upon Mrs. Van Ansel.

"Come with me, Rupert," said his mother, as she went toward the parlor, "this man probably brings news that may concern you."

Rupert followed her with the same sick dread and horror that had fallen upon him while he watched through the crevice of his mother's door on that wretched night forever stamped upon the tablets of his memory.

"This note was handed me in payment for some small purchases made this morning by your governess, madam," and the head clerk of Messrs. Black and Goodman placed a bank-bill in the hands of Mrs. Van Ansel. It was a five dollar note, and marked—she recognized it at once, and said so.

"That is all, thank you, Mr. Tibbetts," and she gave him another bill for the same amount. "I shall know how to deal with this young person; and you will oblige me by not making the circumstance public. Good morning."

"And now, my dear son," continued Mrs. Van Ansel, turning to Rupert, when the door had closed after Mr. Tibbetts, "I hope you see through the horrible deceit and depravity of this girl."

"Mother," returned the young man, "I never will believe her guilty till she confesses herself so in my presence."

“You shall be convinced,” said Mrs. Van Ansel, coldly. Then ringing the bell, she requested that the servant who answered it to send Miss Sherman to the parlor.

In a few minutes Mabel entered; she blushed a bright rosy red at the sight of Rupert, and half looked for a reprimand from his mother—but a very different one from that awaiting her.

“Miss Sherman, you did some shopping at Messrs. Black and Goodman’s this morning?” questioned her employer, sternly.

“Yes, madam.”

“You gave this note in payment of the goods you received?” continued Mrs. Van Ansel, holding out the bank-bill.

Mabel bent forward and looked at the bill for a moment.

“I gave a five dollar bill,” she returned. “I don’t know whether it was that one or another.”

“Mr. Tibbetts has just been here, Miss Sherman, and gave me the bill I now hold, as the one you presented to him—it is useless for you to deny it.”

“I have no intention to deny it, madam—if Mr. Tibbetts says that is the bill, of course it must be so; but, pardon me, may I know the reason of this cross-questioning?”

“Yes, Miss Sherman. A week ago some hundreds of dollars were taken from my bureau—I suspected you at the time—”

Miss Sherman turned scarlet, and then became deadly pale; and Mrs. Van Ansel went on:

“I then placed a small roll of bills, *all marked*, amounting to fifty dollars, in my usual receptacle for money, and on the next morning it was gone. The bill which you gave Mr. Tibbetts this morning was one of the marked fifty which you appropriated to yourself.”

Miss Sherman leaned on the chair beside her for support; she seemed fainting, so deadly, ghastly pale she had become, and for some moments she could not command her voice sufficiently to make it obey her will.

At last she said:

“Then I am to understand, Mrs. Van Ansel, that you suspect me of having stolen your money?”

“I am assured of it, Miss—have I not the proof?”

“Do *you* believe this, too?” asked Mabel, turning to Rupert.

“No, Mabel,” he answered, earnestly; “no mere circumstances will make me believe anything so vile of you—while your own lips do not condemn you, my heart never will.”

“Oh, God bless you, Rupert!” cried the poor governess, falling at his feet, and covering his hands with tears and kisses, for she felt that he loved her truly and nobly to believe her word against such overwhelming evidence—did she but know how terribly convincing was the evidence he had against her, how much more she would have loved and honored him for his unshaken faith in her innocence.

“I am innocent, Rupert,” she sobbed, “indeed, I am innocent. Here are all my keys, madam,” she continued, rising, and turning with dignity to Mrs. Van Ansel, “search every drawer, trunk and corner in my room. Although, God help me! that may not avail to clear me in your eyes; for whomsoever found the means of placing that marked bill in my pocket-book has, doubtless, thought of other ways to fix the guilt upon me.”

Mrs. Van Ansel took the keys, for she felt convinced that she would discover further evidence against Mabel; and she was enraged to perceive that Rupert still persisted in his belief of Miss Sherman’s innocence. She took the keys very sharply, and went to the governess’s room, while Mabel remained, quietly weeping; and Rupert stood a little way from her, not knowing how to comfort her.

Presently Mrs. Van Ansel returned, a triumphant smile upon her face, and twenty-five dollars of the marked money in small bills, in her hand.

“Not in either drawers or trunks, of which you were so ready with the keys, Miss Sherman,” she sneered, “but quickly tucked away between the two mattresses of your bed. Silence—not a word. I am now but too well convinced of the return you have made for the confidence I have placed in you. Keep the money—the rest of that you have stolen, and which you have, doubtless, safely disposed of; and be thankful that I don’t let the law take its course, as I should, but for the scandal and talk it would bring about my name. Leave my house this instant, and take care that you do not tax my forbearance by taking too long about it.”

Mabel made no reply to Mrs. Van Ansel. She felt how useless it would be; but she turned her tearful, eloquent eyes upon Rupert,

“Remember,” she said, “I have your promise to believe my own unsupported word against any evidence whatever. I am innocent; and by my faith in the justice of God, I know that my innocence will yet be made clear to all. Farewell.”

And now the governess was gone; and Mrs. Van Ansel never referred to her in any way, but left the events which had caused her expulsion to work their own way upon Rupert; she did not know how much more dreadful were the proofs he had of Mabel’s guilt than she was herself aware of; but she saw that in the absence of that sweet, fair face’s own testimony to its owner’s innocence, Rupert was sorely tried by what had taken place, and racked by doubt. There were times when he was almost ready to acknowledge that Mabel had deceived them all. He grew pale and thin—night after night he sat up till the dawning morning glimmered in through the open window. But

this sort of thing could not go on for long without producing some effect. The immediate consequence of Rupert's night vigils by an open window was a severe attack of neuralgia in the face; and then how tender, how thoughtful did Kate Bowler become! How she sat hour after hour by his side as he lay upon the parlor lounge, tortured with pain; and when he felt better, read to him with her rich, musical voice, from his favorite books; or smoothed his brown hair back from his brow, and laid her soft white hand upon his aching face.

Mrs. Van Ansel smiled to see the course their love was taking, and did not doubt what the end would be.

"Are you in such great pain today, dear Rupert," asked Miss Bowler, as the young man uttered an exclamation forced from him by a sudden sharp twinge.

"Oh, it is agonizing!" he exclaimed, and pressed his hands tightly over the aching face.

"Excuse me one moment," said Miss Bowler. "I know something that will relieve you for a time, at least;" and she hurried away, returning almost instantly.

Rupert was relieved for a moment, and removed his hands from his face to look at her. She was pouring some liquid from a bottle she held in one hand, upon a handkerchief which she held in the other, and the pungent, sweet odor of chloroform stole in upon his senses. Heavens! It was the very attitude, the white hand with its glittering ring—(Mabel wore no such ring, and he was such a madman as not to have thought of that before!) The very handkerchief—the self same bottle!

He started to his feet with a loud exclamation, and seized her by the wrist.

"You are the thief, then," he said, swinging her round with no gentle force, till her face confronted his, "and you dared in the face of Heaven to let the branding suspicion lie upon that innocent, helpless girl. So, Miss Bowler, you have not a denial framed ready for those lips that can no doubt lie as well as those white hands can steal. But it would be useless, quite—I watched you on that night, when, mantled in Miss Sherman's shawl, the use of which you doubtless stole for the occasion, you entered my mother's room, and after drugging her with this precious mixture, stole the marked money—I watched you enter Miss Sherman's room where you doubtless repeated the act of lulling her senses to sleep while you secreted as much of the spoil as you thought fit to leave there, and placed the marked bill in her pocket-book, taking away an unmarked one of the same value, I'll be sworn—and I could be so blind as not to see through it all before—so cruel as to dare suspect my innocent darling."

At the beginning of Rupert's vehement words Miss Bowler had dropped both handkerchief and bottle upon the carpet, but speedily recovering her self-possession she contemplated taking a bold stand, and denying everything—but as Rupert proceeded she saw that he knew too much, and her courage completely abandoned her. She uttered a succession of loud shrieks, and fell into violent hysterics. Mrs. Van Ansel and several of the servants came hurrying into the room; but Rupert sent them all about their business; and motioning to his mother to help him, the two assisted Miss Bowler to her room.

Mrs. Van Ansel was speechless with surprise and indignation when she heard Rupert's accusations against Miss Bowler. She thought he must be mad and to convince him of it she began an immediate search of her favorite's trunks and bureaus. This at once restored Miss Bowler, but she did not dare to ask her to desist, for such a request would awake suspicion that would be as bad as the worst proofs that could be found; and she feigned no surprise when Mrs. Van Ansel presently drew forth two ten dollar bills of the marked money; and all the first lost sum.

"Yes, I stole it," she said, insolently, "take it—it is yours. The first sum was taken according to papa's orders; he said it could make but little difference whether he helped himself to a trifle of your fortune before or after the marriage ceremony that was to have made you his wife." Mrs. Van Ansel darted a withering look upon the bold speaker, but it had no effect. "As to the other matter, you gave me carte-blanche as to the means I should take to separate your son from your daughter's governess. Of course I couldn't confide my scheme to you, lest your scruples of honor or conscience, or what you please, might be in my way."

Mrs. Van Ansel made use of this pause to affect a dignified but hurried escape. She didn't leave her room till Mr. and Miss Bowler had taken their departure.

Rupert lost no time in setting about means for discovering the whereabouts of Mabel; and after repeated failures he, as a last resort, inserted a notice among the "Personals" of a widely circulated daily paper.

"M.S., GOVERNESS.—Return or send your address. It was all a cruel mistake, and full justice shall be done you if you will but give us the opportunity of communicating with you—the real thief has been discovered. R.VAN A."

After a week's insertion of the above, Rupert was at last rewarded by receiving a note from Mabel Sherman. She gave her address, and permission for him to call; but refused even to enter the Van Ansel mansion again till she had received an ample apology from its mistress.

Mrs. Van Ansel was so disgusted with the result of her scheme, and so innately just withal, that she did not long hesitate to make the required apology—she also sent a warm invitation to Mabel to return and resume her position as Gertrude's governess. The apology was accepted—the invitation was respectfully declined; as Rupert and herself had made other arrangements.

When Mabel again entered the Van Ansel mansion it was as the wife of the son and heir of that name; and that, too, with the full consent of Mrs. Van Ansel, who quickly perceived that the surest way of regaining the love and esteem of her son, which she so nearly forfeited, was by receiving his wife as a loved and honored daughter. So you must acknowledge that notwithstanding the failure of her play, she knew how to make the most of things; therefore, say I once more, clever Mrs. Van Ansel!

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