

The One False Step

“Do you now, Walter, it is exactly one year today since we first met? Just of it. One year today!”

“Yes, Ella, darling; and one year hence we’ll be old marri—”

But here a dainty hand was blushing applied to the daring lips. And the glowing prediction remained incomplete. The subject was changed with a promptness that seemed a simultaneous inspiration, and along the summer lane the handsome pair joyously jaunted in their cosy basket phaeton.

Walter Carleton was a rising young merchant, the junior member of a New York firm. He was of British birth, and his dark complexion, crisp, ebon curls, and deep black eyes he derived from his Castilian mother.

Ella Goodrich was an Una-like creature, in the first flush of her gorgeous womanhood. She was a dark-bred blonde, and the only daughter of old Dr. Goodrich, of Kirkland.

Walter had received his earliest heart-wound from the dart of Ella’s beauty at a Saratoga hop, and since then the course of their love had run as smoothly as two enthusiastic hearts could make it. Dr. Goodrich, besides closely observing the young man, had made the necessary inquiries respecting him, with the result of thoroughly satisfying his amiable partner and himself on the propriety of their daughter’s choice.

It was really a pleasant afternoon—late in the summer—and the grey pony with the basket phaeton and the pair of turtle doves jogged along with a sort of “sober certainty of waking bliss,” as Milton happily phrased it.

The miles flew by on angel’s wings, and when Walter consulted his watch, lo and behold! It was within a few minutes of the Kirkland dinner hour; and they were a good five miles away!

“We must make all haste back,” cried Ella, “pa dislikes to wait for dinner, Rufe, old man,” this to the grey pony, you must put your best foot foremost;” whereupon Rufe’s mistress proceeded to admonish him with rein and whip.

Now Rufe had not been used to this cavalier treatment, and he began to protest against it by manifold head-shakings, tail-switching, elephantine hops and snortings, and generally by moving forward rather slower than before. Whereupon Ella scolded the perverse brute, and Walter took the whip and administered a sharp cut across the foreleg. This was enough. Rufus instantly performed some compound circus trick, and cleverly separated himself and the shafts from the body of the phaeton. Before you could say Jack Robinson the pair of lovers were rolling in the dust, and “Rufe” was complacently regarding the havoc he had made. Dusted and discontented, Walter and Ella regained their feet more scared than hurt and amused than vexed.

Ella said there was a blacksmith-shop a short distance off, and thither Walter ran while she watched the wreck and told "Rufe" what a disreputable old villain he was.

When Walter returned with the mechanic. A tall, bony-looking man with huge red whiskers and an immense Panama hat was talking to Ella. And not merely talking; it seemed to Walter that the man was annoying her, and attempting to take her hand—a liberty she seemed to repel with indignant energy.

"Well, be friends, anyhow, Ella, if you won't shake hands," he of the red whiskers was saying, as Walter, with flashing eyes and vengeful looks, unseen approached.

"Stand off, sir!" cried he, pushing the intruder violently aside. "By what right do you presume to annoy this young lady?"

Ella uttered a little scream. The man staggered, and nearly fell; but regaining his equilibrium, he quickly faced round, and fiercely fixed his reddish, chestnut eyes upon his assailant.

"Walter Carleton, as I'm a breathing sinner!"

"Dr. Farjeon?" with a violent start and change of color. "Good God, you here! I beg your pardon for my rudeness. I did not see your face; it was so unexpected. Why, how in the name—I mean how on earth did you ever turn up here?"

"O, that is easily explained," said Dr. Farjeon, with a meaning look. "You see, after we parted at Liverpool dock—"

"Ah, yes, just so," said Walter, nervously. "Ella, my dear, Dr. Farjeon and I are old acquaintances—friends and all that, you know. Doctor, I shall be glad to meet you; that is, confound this mishap; we must get it repaired, and get home at once, mustn't we, Ella?"

Ella looked with speechless surprise at the chilling effect the doctor's sudden appearance had upon her lover. It had completely transformed him, crushing his gayety as one crushes a flower in the hand.

With a supercilious "good bye, Miss Goodrich," and "I'll see you this evening, Walter," Dr. Farjeon proceeded on his way; when, with a mortified look, Walter said:

"Why Ella, whatever is that man doing here?"

"If you had not interrupted him, he would have told you soon enough, the hateful, detestable fellow," she replied. "He lately bought pa's practice; and has come prowling about our house and persecuting me ever since; but today I had him feel how intensely I

despised him. How on earth did you ever form that Jack Sheppard-looking sawbone's acquaintance?"

"Merely professionally in Europe," replied Walter dryly.

Walter's attempts at cheerfulness during the homeward drive were spasmodic failures; and after dinner a gloom settled upon him which Ella vainly sought to dispel. He said he had a slight headache, attributable, probably, to the shock in the afternoon drive.

Just as night was closing in, Dr. Farjeon was seen walking in the direction of the house, and somewhat abruptly Walter uttered some unsatisfactory explanation and joined him. The two men proceeded toward the hemlock grove, and Ella, watching from an upper window, could see that the doctor gesticulated threateningly, and that Walter, her darling and chivalrous Walter, seemed to make piteous appeals to the other's forbearance!

"What can it mean? Oh, whatever can it mean?" sobbed the yearning young heart, as she stood, weary and wretched, watching the retreating forms till they melted into the darkness.

In about an hour Walter returned. He was almost boisterously cheerful. There was triumph in his eye and satisfaction on his brow. Next day was Saturday, and Ella and he spent a delightful day, notwithstanding that he informed her business would call him to the city on Monday, but only for a few days. After that he said he would return and spend a whole uninterrupted fortnight at Kirkland.

On Sunday evening the two lovers attended the village church; and as the congregation were dispersing, a lad in a slouch hat that almost concealed his features, suddenly approached Walter, and, with a quick and dexterous movement, placed a note in his hand, and disappeared. The action was so sudden that the messenger had vanished before the young man had recovered from his surprise; and although Ella was close by his side, she neither saw the envoy nor the missive he delivered.

Walter was taciturn and reflective at the supper table, and later in the evening he said he thought he would walk over to Albany before bed time, sleep at the Delavan, and get the early boat in the morning. Ella was clearly vexed and disappointed, but she bade him an affectionate adieu notwithstanding.

The next morning she rose later than usual, and on reaching the breakfast table found great excitement. The parson and the village druggist were there, so was the ancient Miss Neddleton, the scandal purveyor of the place.

"Pierced through the brain from ear to ear!" cried the spinster.

"Well, not exactly," said the druggist, "the ball seems to have entered the highest portion of the forehead rather to the left of the medial line, and proceeded downward through and to the base of the skull."

“That seems very extraordinary, doesn’t it?” put in the parson. “I should have fancied the ball traveled the contrary direction—upward—and that the poor fellow was shot from behind.”

“But there is the ball lodged as described,” said Dr. Goodrich.

“What has happened, pa?” cried Ella, unable longer to bear the cruel suspense.

“Doctor Farjeon has been murdered!” cried the parson, the druggist, and the spinster in chorus, “murdered at ten o’clock last night by an assassin, who escaped from the surgery window.”

“O, she’s fainting!” cried her mother, rushing to her; “poor darling how the horrid news has shocked her!”

When she recovered she was in her room with her parents. Once alone, she thought long and earnestly of the tragedy; the mysterious relations between her lover and the murdered man, the sudden departure last night of the former, and his strange fits of gloom since he first met the doctor. But O! it couldn’t be. It was monstrous—it was cruel—it was unpardonable to mix Walter, even in imagination, with such a crime. No, no; it wasn’t Walter. That was certain. She would at once write to him, and tell him what a terrible crime had been committed. Of course he would want to hear about it from Kirkland before he read it in the newspaper. She wrote a long letter to Walter; and while she was engaged on that pleasant task the police and idle villagers were scouring the country for the assassin. More than one had seen him enter the doctor’s house the preceding evening and could generally describe his appearance.

It was twilight when Ella started with her letter to the post office, half a mile distant, and it was almost dark when she reached the outer grounds of the Kirkland homestead. As she approached the gate, hidden among a clump of maples, a man’s form, with outstretched arms, darted before her, and said in a hollow voice:

“My darling Ella!”

She looked an eager, wild look; her heart gave one sickening heave, and, with a sensation of choking, she gasped:

“O, my God, Walter! Say it wasn’t you—say it wasn’t you!”

He put his arm around her, and led her unresistingly into the heart of the shrubbery. Then, with a tremulous earnestness, but with despair in every tone, he said:

“So help me, Heavenly Father, Ella I am not guilty of—murder!”

She was stricken dumb. Every sense of her being was concentrated in hearing; and she gazed fixedly at his pallid face when the moon came out, and held his right hand in both of hers, while he whispered his strange, sad, terrible story. Briefly, it was this:

When a fatherless lad he was placed in a Liverpool banking house, where he was a favorite. Gradually he mingled in “fast” society and frequented the gambling table; and once, in a terrible strait, he had forged his patron’s name. Stricken down with sickness immediately after, and fever and delirium supervening, he raved incessantly about his crime. Dr. Farjeon, then a graduate, attended him, and possessed himself of the facts of the crime, and when he recovered brought the patron to the penitent’s bedside. He was pardoned on the condition that he would leave England forever. Dr. Farjeon was mortified at this display of magnanimity, and when he parted from Walter, said

“Be careful in America, or I may have to play the detective in another role.”

“You know,” continued the fugitive, as the sobbing girl hung on his neck—“you know how we met; but you do not know that when we were alone the same night he threatened to expose what he termed my “antecedents,” unless I would pay him \$5,000 hush money. He said that he passionately loved you, Ella; that you laughed at him and despised him, insomuch that he literally raved and cursed at the prospect of our happiness.

“Well, last evening, as we left church, a lad put a note in my hand; and, when alone, I opened it and found it an imperative command to meet him at his house between nine and ten. That is why I met you—“

“Well?” she eagerly cried.

“I went. He insolently told me I must “come down” with \$20,000 within a week, or he would brand me before the world. I was greatly excited. I could not raise so much money, and I called him opprobrious names. He seemed to think I meant him personal harm, and, being naturally a coward, he drew his pistol. I seized it, and in the struggle it was discharged when both our hands were above our heads. You know the result. I jumped from the window and fled, I knew not whither.

“Then it was only a dreadful accident,” she burst out. “You have committed no crime. It was not your fault.”

“Ah! Ella, dearest, who but yourself will believe—will be convinced of this?”

“Where is the note—the note he sent you last night? That will show something,” she eagerly said.

“Lost, Ella.”

The unhappy maiden uttered a despairing cry and fainted away, and almost at the same moment two officers sprang through the branches and arrested Walter Carleton for the murder of Simon Farjeon.

“Appearances are certainly very much against the young man.” Dr. Goodrich was forced to admit to his wife, as they observed some symptoms of recovery in their daughter’s brain fever. “Still some explanation may be forthcoming. I can’t believe young Carleton a deliberate murderer.”

The prisoner’s lawyer was working like a beaver. Yet he was unable to account for the disappearance of the note, or to discover the messenger who had delivered it at the church door. If with either turned up it would explain the prisoner’s motive in visiting the doctor that night, while the direction of the wound, as well as the pistol, which was the dead man’s, would probably be sufficient to acquit the prisoner.

The coroner’s jury fully committed the young man after they had heard the evidence of the two officers who arrested him, and who overheard his damaging confessions to Miss Goodrich. Everybody admitted that it would go hard with him, when an unexpected clue came to light.

There was an idiotic lad in the village who had a mania for stealing—especially articles of wearing apparel; and whenever poor Willie Webster was sent out of doors with a parcel he was pretty sure to be overhauled by the first villager he met.

One morning, at the stage to which our story has reached, the lunatic lad was observed by the parson to leave the residence of the late doctor with a large bundle. Visions of a wholesale kleptomania rushed through the holy man’s brain, and he speedily pursued and captured Willie. The poor fellow’s story was straight enough. Sally Mabane, the doctor’s servant, had given him the clothes for himself, and they weren’t the doctor’s clothes either; they were Sally’s clothes. Sally’s own clothes, and nobody else’s.

The parson steered the lunatic and the bundle back to Sally Mabane’s presence, and sharply cross-examined her. Albeit she was a tough customer, the clergyman plied her with the terrors of the judgment day, and the undying worm and quenchless brimstone fire—until she wilted and made an open confession. She had several times worn these boy’s clothes on the late master’s business. In fact, he had procured them for her. She had worn them the last time on Sunday night, when she delivered the note to young Carleton. She wept violently when the parson said he did not believe her story, and threatened to have her arrested.

“I assure you, sir, it’s all true,” she said, weeping violently; “I haven’t told no lie, sir, here is the very letter I took the young gentleman, sir; I saw master write it, and I know it by that mark on the inside, for I saw him write it; it was lying in the surgery open, just like that (showing how) when I saw him lying dead.”

When the trial came on Sally Mabane's evidence and the fatal Sunday-evening letter led to Walter Carleton's acquittal. But the Liverpool story of the one false step that plunged two young hearts in misery and produced this blight and desolation also came to light. He never married Ella Goodrich, for there was an earlier and later taint upon his name—a forger and a homicide.

On the second anniversary of their acquaintance the lovers rode in the basket phaeton behind Rafe for the last time. And the next day she entered a monastery, and he sailed for South America.

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