

The Forger's Wife

The night was rainy and dark. The ceaseless patter of rain drops broke dismally on the quiet streets, and mingled with a weird echo to the sound of the rushing tide as it came from the river. Out into the darkness came, too, a wail—low—sad—despairing. It was not the echo of passionate grief, but as if the heart cried out in cruel pain at its sense of hope bereft and life made desolate. It was such a cry as sometimes breaks above the coffin-lid, or mingles with the rattling clods when love and life have parted.

It was a low, ruinous room, ill-kept and damp. The spider wove his web on the bare walls, and the glare of the lightning flashed through the shutterless windows. There was a pile of straw on the fireless hearth, and an infant's cradle beside it. But it was not this that made the salt tears come in my eyes. Above the cradle a woman sobbed her life away. The lips of the mother pressed like an angel's caress the brow of the child, and then cried out in agony.

"You must not grieve so," I said, and attempted to lift her up. "There is yet hope that he may escape; all is not lost yet."

[But] she heeded me not, and the passionate grief went on.

I felt a sympathy for this young creature I could not control. I had arrested her husband on a charge of forgery. Mr. I—— was even then conveying him to prison.

A few days before, a check for several hundred dollars had been passed and the money realized. It was subsequently ascertained to have been a forgery. We had adopted the usual means of discovery, and waited patiently for the forger to commence spending the money. From the [description] given us, we thought him some reckless youth whose extravagance would be the means of his detection. Not so. Days went by, and we could get no clue to his whereabouts. By some means, it is not necessary now to relate, my suspicious fell upon a young man I had frequently seen upon the street, never apparently doing anything, but ever seeking employment. There was a wild, frightened look about his face that might have been caused by crime, and yet be despair. At all events, he answered the description, and the night I have described, I had followed him home and there arrested him. As soon as I entered the door, his face turned pale and an expression of bitter anguish swept across his countenance. I do not know why, but before a single word was spoken, my heart felt a reluctance I could not account for in making the arrest.

"You are my prisoner!"

"I know it," he said; and turning around placed a pocket-book in my hand with the remark: "Here is the money."

"Why do you do this?" I said. "You are criminating yourself."

"I know it, but it is some reparation for the crime I have committed, and I make it. I could not use the money after I obtained it."

His wife stood by, pallid with fear, and her great blue eyes looking eagerly first into my face and then into his.

“Oh! what has he done? It cannot be crime, sir! he would not do wrong! he would not do wrong.” And she flung back the long fair hair from her head and clung to her husband as if shielding him from some great peril, she knew not what, yet feared, menaced him.

“Yes, Mary, I am guilty of a crime; but God only, and you, know my temptation. We were penniless, sir, my wife and I; and our little one cried for bread. I sought work, day and night, but found it not. I could have perished with hunger, but I could not see them die.” And the man’s strong frame shook like a child’s.

It did not take me long to learn that they had come to the city, many weeks before, from a distant State. Educated and refined, they had been reared in luxury and knew not the poverty that so suddenly and overwhelmingly beset him. Family dissension springing from their marriage had exiled them from home and friends, and this was the result. Still I had no alternative, and I was compelled to arrest him. It was then, as Mr. I. led her husband away, that he bitter grief broke out.

“He has returned the money,” I said, “it is possible they may not prosecute him. Then all will be well.”

“But he did it, sir; he did it, Mr. F.”

“Yes, I know, under the pressure of a cruel necessity.”

But this did not appear to console her at all, and I left her determined to send some one of her own sex to stay with her. For this purpose I hastened as rapidly as I could to the house of a lady [nearby,] and stating the circumstances to her begged that she would go and offer such consolation as she could. The lady went, but when she got to the house it was empty—the mother and child were gone. I did not know this until the next evening—not, indeed, until her husband’s release; for as soon as the circumstances were made known, the parties interested declined to prosecute the case. When I was informed of it, however, I was sure some dreadful evil had befallen her. In her sorrow and distress that she had died a suicide, and it was so. A few days afterward her body was found floating in the river, clasping in her arms her child. The sense of disgrace had wrecked her mind, and the dreary roar of the river had beguiled her to death. One prayer, perhaps—one shriek of anguish—one cry of regret, and the cold waters had closed above her. We buried her tenderly, the worn and weary husband mourning at her grave. Two weeks later he laid in one beside it. Not name marks their resting place, but the willows weep above them, and the wild flowers grow on their breast.

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