

## *The Fugitive*

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The events recorded in the last sketch were still fresh in our minds when the, sudden disappearance of the young lady excited the surprise of the entire community. The exposure of her lover had overwhelmed her with grief. It was supposed, however, that this would be transient. A young and virtuous girl, educated and refined, could not long cling to one whose baseness was so obvious. She would soon laugh at her infatuation, and be glad of her escape, her friends thought, and left her in peace. Indeed, many supposed that she was influenced now more by mortified vanity and a sense of her humiliating affection than aught else. What was their surprise, then, at her evasion!

For several days nothing was said about it, and her family thought her still in the city. But her protracted absence finally excited alarm, and Mr. I. and myself were at length appealed to. We concluded at once she had gone to join her lover. This opinion was still further confirmed when it was ascertained that she had carried with her a large sum of money.

“You had better let her go,” I said to her father.

“I cannot; she is my only child! She must be traced and brought back!”

“But this cannot be done unless you consent to make an affidavit against her for the larceny of the money. No one can compel her to come back unless you do.”

He consented to this step with a good deal of reluctance, and with the necessary papers for her arrest, I started in pursuit. It is unnecessary to trace all my wanderings. Suffice it to say I found them at last—married.

Only a few months had passed since this spoiled and petted child of fortune had reigned a belle in her native city. When I saw her, the innocence and freshness of her young girlhood were yet around her; no care had lined the pure white forehead, and no trace of distress had fevered her cheeks; her eyes were bright with laughing visions of the future, and her parents’ love-like sunshine fell around her. Now, all was changed. In that brief time she had passed under the wand of the enchanter. Innocence had been transmuted into guilt; and blackness and clouds and settled on a life where erst the radiant sunshine played.

I had seen her husband the day before in a fashionable hotel. I took pains that he should not recognize me, and followed him home. The next morning I waited until he left the house and went in.

The lady was sick, the servant said to my inquiries, and I could not see her. I thought, perhaps, it might be simply a desire to avoid an interview with a stranger, and insisted upon being shown into the presence of her mistress, as my business was of importance. While I was yet talking with the girl a door opened from an adjoining apartment, and the fugitive stood before me. Tall and queenly still, the elegant figure could not be disguised in the coarse robes that clung to her person. Her face was haggard with grief, and her long, unkempt hair fell like a veil over her

shoulders. She was still beautiful, although distress had quenched the fire in her eyes and whitened into lilies the roses on her cheeks.

“You wisht to see me, sir?” she said, scanning me curiously and with a troubled expression as if she was conscious of having seen me before, but where she could not remember.

[“]Yes, Madame,” I rejoined; “I have traveled a good way for this interview, and trust you will not disappoint me.”

“You are Mr. F——, of New Orleans, are you not?” she asked, with a tremor in her voice.

“Yes, madame, that is my name,” I replied, “and I bring you messages from your family.”

[“]Come in.”

The room was poorly furnished, and wore a faded air, as if sympathizing in the condition of its occupants; but this would not be noticed while receiving the graceful courtesies of the lady, given, it is true, with a weary air and a heart sickness that no effort of the poor girl could disguise.

“You see me sadly changed, sir,” she said with a weary smile.

“Indeed, I do, madam, and I am sorry that it is so. It is of that I wished to speak with you, and to prevail on you to return with me to New Orleans.”

“It is too late!”

“You are mistaken; your friends grieve at your absence, and would gladly welcome your return.”

“You do not know all!”

“I know that you have been deceived; but that is not criminal. The baseness is with the betrayer, not with the betrayed.”

“I know that; I have tried to delude my own mind and heart with the sophistry that I am only a victim; but it is not so. Listen, and I will tell you!”

I was infatuated with that man. His hold on my affections was not such as young girls usually give to a lover. There must have been some strange affinity in our natures, for knowing his guilt I still loved him. I saw him not as he was. I put behind me all his evil, was resolutely blind to his criminal practices and utter dishonor. I thought of him only as the brilliant man of the world, his graceful courtesy and brilliant wit. I have seen him the admired of all our circle, the courted, fascinating Chrichton of society. I thought he was honorable and good; my ambition was fixed to become a countess. Like poor Pauline, I listened to his stories of castles and wide demesne, of lordships and principalities, until sense and honor faded in the glowing visions he created. I had then become a tit instrument to help him in his evil deeds. I became a criminal too. Many of the

jewels stolen were reft by me. Together we pile our vicious calling until discovered and exposed by you. Why should I remain behind when he had gone. My peace was destroyed, my reputation would soon follow it. What should I do? It seemed as if my brain would madden, my reason [wreal] in the agony of that bitter struggle. I could not confess my crimes. It would kill my parents. Oh! if you only knew how often in the visions of the night I have seen their pitying glances, their love reproachful words, their sorrow and distress, and then awaken with bitter sobs to find it all a dream, you would pardon me that I feel unable to endure any longer a position so full of humiliation. I determined to seek my partner in iniquity. I came here and found him.

The story of the poor girl was told with many a broken sob and tears that came from the heart. My own fell fast as I listened. I thought of the grieving parents far away; of her clouded life, with every hope and blessing wrecked before the blossoms of her youth were gone; how could I help but pity them and her? I could not hope now to take her back. Their paths, in life divided from that fatal night, and sin and shame forbid them to meet. I told her why I had come to see her—told her all.

“Tell them you saw me,” she said. “Stay! take this picture with you, but say I died;” and the sad smile grew wintry, the [lilies] crept back into the cheek which thoughts of home had flushed, and blinding tears shut me out from sight.

I left her alone in her despair.

Yes, alone! looking back on the sunlight of youth—looking up to clouds and despair. The hopes of her youth were gone, and joyless, futureless, the visions of life had faded and fled.

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