

Rescued

Time went on, and the events of the last chapter had been lost in the busy whirl of quickly succeeding duties. It is true I had not forgotten the curious lives of the strangely wedded criminals; but their history had become a memory only, and if I thought of them at all, it was as one might remember a shadow or impressions that had faded with a dream. But still I had not lost the sense of pity with which I viewed the kindly nature thus easily immolated and degraded—the regal woman upon whose life the shadows of pursuing evils clung thick and fast. It only needed the occasion to bring all back as vividly as once I had felt them.

The occasion came at last! One night Mr. K—— came to me, troubled and uneasy. He held in his hand a paragraph cut from a Northern journal, in which the arrest of a noted criminal was noticed; and the mysterious disappearance of his wife some time before. It was darkly hinted that she had fallen a victim to the man's violence, and had no doubt long been dead. She was an only child, and although cast off in life her fate revived the affections of her parents. Her fate must be discovered, and her murderer punished.

I tried to reason him out of the idea. I could not. Remorse added poignancy to the stings of conscience, and the thought that he might have saved her and did not rendered keener his regret.

“Find out more for me,” he said, “the fate of my child. You have done much for me, but do this as well. None know, Mr. F——, so well as you the habits of the man—none can trace him as you can do.”

What could I do? To refuse him would but augment his distress. Still I felt my mission almost hopeless. Months had elapsed, and the clue, if any had been left to her strange disappearance, had been lost long since. Yet, as I said before, I could not refuse, and Mr. I—— accompanying me, we started out on the difficult pursuit.

It was necessary to go to New York. It was from there she had disappeared—there her career was known as well as here—a criminal, yet shunning crime—the consort of an outlaw, yet loving the ways of the good and virtuous, and, by her bright presence and example, casting the sunlight of beauty into many a dark place and over many an evil deed.

It is useless to recite the means we adopted to discover a clue to the way in which she at last disappeared. It would add but little to the interest of the narrative to show how night after night we flung ourselves into the midst of men who walk by darkness and are inured to crime; to tell of the dark thoroughfares we traced and the fearful dens we saw; the companionship of men who had flung aside every humanizing trait and took pride in instincts more savage than the brute. Like the currents of a river are the currents of the human tide that ebb and flow in the city; but, unlike the liquid stream, these currents grow dark and dense as they sink below the surface—muddy with many an evil deed and thought, thick with the lees and dregs of horror. Although a year had fled, yet a trace of the being we sought still lingered in this darksome tide—still flashed and fevered, as the lightnings flash and fever on a dark sky; still left her ray of sunshine there, as the sun sometimes leaves it on the bosom of the cloud.

Step by step we traced her—difficulty after difficulty besetting us at first, and then more easily. Finally we learned that she had left the city in company with her husband, who in a few weeks had returned without her. He had long grown tired of her entreaties to abandon his evil life, and curses and revilings had repaid at last her long devotion. It was the dead sea fruit turning to ashes on her lips.

He said to his friends that she was dead—when or where she died, none could tell. But one man—a creature she had been kind to—told us that Mr. H’s mother, a woman as evil as her son, had gone with them, and that she too remained away. This was a clue indeed. We could work now, and did. The tangled skein unraveled slowly, but it drew us nearer and nearer up to the end. One after another the difficulties faded, and as the weeks sped on we drew nearer home—at last to the old house where her husband had been last arrested!

Inquires soon revealed the fact that it was inhabited by an old woman who guarded a maniac. Now all was clear. The man had grown tired of his wife, yet feared to kill her. On his last visit to New Orleans he discovered this old house, knew how perfectly it would subserve his purpose. Pretending to carry the grieving woman once more to see her native city, and the old familiar scenes that lingered so lovingly in her memory, she was beguiled to the house that was designed as her living tomb. Here a cell had been prepared for her, and into it the fair girl was thrust remorselessly. Time and distress wore quickly upon the tender frame, and almost shattered her reason. A lurid fire had crept into the hollow eyes, and the rounded body shrunk to a skeleton. Few could recognize the beauty of her early girlhood in the horror of that desolate house and noiseless prison cell. It was no longer the stately, fascinating woman whom we rescued from death, but a creature gray haired and aged before her time—rescued at last. Pitying faces bent above her as she lay trance-like in the long swoon that followed her release; but the lethargy and darkness fled at last, and the exile came back to the home she had fled from long years before; back to her parents’ hearts and love; back from paths of evil into paths of peace. Here let us leave her—a wanderer come back to the fold.

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