

## *Under the Froth*

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Few know the varieties of life in a city—still fewer have seen its many phases of guilt and folly, its pride and extravagance. One is hid by a mantle of darkness—the other flashes in deceptive light. But to one who has passed from beneath the froth and foam where the evil abides and the pure is unknown, to the glitter and brightness which gilds the votaries of society and fashion, an experience is found which no mere observer can acquire. Such a career would derive an interest, not from its strangeness alone, but the folly it has met with and the duplicity it encounters.

I will tell you of a case in point. It has not been many years since the strange disappearance of a prominent merchant aroused popular inquiry to an unusual extent, and revealed at last a crime which for adventurous boldness, impudence, and successful cunning, is almost without a parallel.

It is useless to name the parties, since there are those still living who will recognize the facts, disguise the characters as I may. It will suffice to describe the person I mean as a bachelor, who, by the practice of severe economy and the employment of great natural sagacity, acquired a large fortune. The taint of selfishness, however, clung to him, and the proverbial reputation of a miserly character excluded him from society. He had no friends, and men were loth to recognize him as an acquaintance even. He felt all this, and resented it as men will resent the merited opprobrium which their misdeeds alone excite. If his heart ever stirred with generous sympathies no one knew it. If it ever recoiled from the practice of injustice, or awoke to a sense of pity, none had known it, and the weary old man trod silently his pitiless path, brightening no life, and no eyes growing glad at his coming.

He lived in an obscure street, and one night his life would have fallen a sacrifice to his wealth but for the heroism of a little girl—a child friendless as himself—a waif cast adrift to float with the froth and foam. Men lay in wait for him to rob him of his gold or sacrifice his life. The child had heard the plan, and watched to tell him of his danger. It saved him. It opened his heart, too, to a kindly thought, and made it human, with grateful sympathies. The next day the little waif was looked up by the miser, and from that hour cared for as his own. He clothed and fed her with unstinted hand. The riches years had been spent in acquiring were lavished upon her with reckless prodigality. The little frame house he had lived in so long was torn down and a mansion rose in its stead. The neglected child soon grew into a beautiful girl. The best masters were supplied her, and her mind, early developed, acquired intelligence with astonishing rapidity. He sent her to Europe, and after finishing her education there, she returned, to burst upon society like a meteor—radiant as a queen, beautiful as an Undine, the reputed heiress of a millionaire.

The old man, growing feeble day by day, watched the career of the young girl as a father. His riches were no longer his idol. The beautiful image that was enshrined there now had excluded all else, and his faded eyes grew bright, and a smile like sunshine crept to the wintry lips in her presence. But, one night, the old man disappeared. It seemed as if the earth had opened and he had sunk into its bosom. So utterly was all trace of him lost, that a chill of horror went through the community, and men who had loathed his life instituted the most persistent inquiries for some clue as to the manner he had died or been lost.

In this state of public excitement Mr. I. and myself were sent for by the young lady.

Seated in an easy chair, clad *a la negligé*, but with exquisite taste, I saw for the first time the beauty whose loveliness had been the theme of the youth of the city for months. I could pardon the old Roman for the loss of the world if the wiley Egyptian resembled this dark-eyed, dark-browed enchantress. Beautiful beyond anything I had ever seen, fascinating as an houri, she rose to receive us:

“Are you Mr. F.?”

“That is my name,” I replied, my eyes still resting upon the wondrous beauty of the woman’s face and form.

“I have sent for you and Mr. I. to see if you can assist in unraveling this strange mystery,” she said in a voice that trembled with emotion. The low utterance sent a shiver through my frame. I felt they were too liquid—too low and tender for real emotion. I was suspicious of the beautiful lady from that very instant.

I concealed my feelings, however, and begged her to give me all the particulars she could. This she did readily. She knew little seemingly, but all she knew was soon at my service.

On her return from Europe the waif had brought with her an Italian waiting maid. It was a strange taste many thought that youth should select age for such companionship. Yet was the lady’s maid an old woman. To me she looked like the duennas I had read of in romance. She had eyes, too, like a basilisk—restless, glittering eyes, that made one catch his breath when he encountered their burning glow. If there was ever an evil woman this Italian was one. Evidently Mr. I. and myself had made an unfavorable impression on this person. She didn’t like us. One day I overheard her urging her mistress to discharge us from the case.

“I must employ them—public opinion will have it so—to dismiss them would excite suspicion at once.”

“No good will come of it.”

The lady shrugged her shoulders.

“I can’t help it!”

What did this mean? There was a mystery here too unknown and unsuspected. I began to think we had been on a false scent all along.

I [communicated] what I heard to Mr. I. He thought as I did, that the words implied something concealed.

Many and various were the devices we resorted to to obtain access to the house. Sometimes we vended charcoal, sometimes we carried a grinder and sharpened knives; many a *billet doux* did I

give into the ladies' hands, as the messengers of some of her suitors; and then I would go as the bearer of bouquets. We surpassed even Vidocq in our disguises; but our efforts were gradually unraveling the mystery.

I knew now where the miser was.

A few days afterwards I visited my client again.

“Well, Mr. F., have you any news?”

“Yes, Mademoiselle, I believe I have.”

My reply was wholly unexpected, and the blood receded from her face on the instant.

“Sir!” she faltered.

“Yes, I believe I have. I think I know where your father (she called him so) is.”

The fear that had momentarily seized her had now passed away. She had had time to reflect. In that brief moment she seemed to judge it impossible for her secret to be known.

“Oh, I'm so glad! Tell me quickly. Where is he?—does he live?”

“I believe he does, or did last night, and it is somewhat singular that you do not know where he is, since I saw him last in your presence,” I replied, fixing my eyes upon her paling cheek.

“My presence!” she muttered hoarsely.

“Yes, in the last room of the third story of this house. Mademoiselle, I know your secret. Your father may have been sane or insane when you locked him in yonder room. *He is insane now*, and the law will not punish you for depriving him of his liberty. Still it would have been better had you dealt more openly with me. As it is, I can only claim my reward and retire.”

“And my secret!” she gasped.

“Is safe with us. You are our employer, and, besides, no good is to be had from exposing you.”

How or when the old man died I never knew, but the lady still lives, and this recital may yet meet her eye.

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