

The Forger

by Caroline Conrad

His name was Julian Desoix, a French sounding name, but he certainly had an English face, a fair, fresh, beautiful countenance, with eyes of azure, and clear as crystal, and yellow, clustering hair that a woman might have envied him, it was so soft and lustrous.

He was the handsomest man I ever saw. If I had been a woman I should have fallen in love with him. Being a man I hated him the moment I beheld him, because Amy Leisle was hanging upon his arm and looking up at him with that angel smile of hers, which had been my heaven ever since I could remember.

Desoix was a comparative stranger at Rushbrook—an artist, he called himself—a man with no antecedents that he would tell; that is, he never talked of himself, nor could be induced to. As for his being an artist, though he had a lot of pictures and easels in his room at the hotel no one ever saw him touch a brush.

He did not seem a happy man either. He seldom smiled, and there was almost always a look of anxiety and apprehensiveness in his handsome blue eyes.

Feeling that he was my rival I watched him a great deal before I was aware of it, and simply from jealousy at first. But I soon became satisfied that the man had a mystery in his past somehow, and I jumped to the conclusion that it was something wrong. For Amy's sake I decided that I must fathom that mystery. But I did not know where to begin.

One day I saw a notice in an old paper of a forgery that had been perpetrated by a young man of good standing in society. The young fellow was missing, but the detectives were after him, and though they had no clew at present to his whereabouts, it was thought they must soon discover him, as he could not have left the country. Then followed a statement of the reward offered for his apprehension, and a description of his person.

I turned cold and hot in a moment as I read that description of the missing forger. "Fair, handsome, blue-eyed, yellow hair, elegant appearance." Why, that was Julian Desoix. I glanced at the date of the paper. It was six weeks old, and Desoix had been at Rushbrook just that time.

A thrill of guilty joy ran through me. Julian Desoix could never marry Ann Leisle. I ought not to allow it, as an entirely disinterested person, if he was the wretch—the criminal I believed him to be.

But I must be sure. Accordingly I wrote to a detective of whom I knew, to come at once to Rushbrook, as there might be a chance of his earning the reward offered for the apprehension of

Stanley Combe, the forger. The man came by the first train.

He knew Stanley Combe by sight, and was very positive, from my description, that Julian Desoix and he were one.

“Now then,” said he, “the question is, where will I be most likely to find him—at his hotel?”

“I—I should think so,” I stammered, wishing the man would not be in such a hurry. “But you cannot be positive it is your man till you have seen him,” I added. “I think I had better go and try to get him to come here on some excuse.”

This the detective agreed to. As I set off on the errand I had myself proposed, I experienced a sensation of loathing and self-contempt, impossible to describe.

It was in vain I said to myself, that the man I proposed to betray was an infamous wretch, a wicked criminal who had crept into an honorable family under false pretenses, and deserved to be exposed for that family’s sake. I knew at the bottom of my heart, that however true all this might be, the fact that weighed most with me was that he had come between me and Amy Leisle.

I went to Desoix’s hotel, half *fearing* to find him there. But he was not in.

“Gone to Mrs. Leisle’s,” the grinning servant told me, and my heart turned hard and bitter again.

As I went up the avenue that led to Mrs. Leisle’s handsome mansion, I saw Amy and Julian Desoix sauntering along together in a distant walk.

I turned at once and went toward them, with my heart beating fast.

“I will ask him if he knows Stanley Combe,” I thought, “and if he shows guilt, I shall know I have got him, and then—”

I did not finish the sentence even to myself, as I stalked grimly on.

The pair I was following suddenly vanished.

As I stood looking about me in perplexity, I heard Amy’s sweet voice on the other side of a thick wall of rose bushes which separated this portion of the grounds from a large flower garden. They had turned about without seeing me, and come back as far as this.

“Is there nothing we can do, Stanley?” she was saying. “You must not be taken. It would kill me, I believe, to know you were in prison, and for such a cause.”

I stood like one petrified. So, she knew who he was and what he was all the time, and loved him

in spite of it!

In a moment my resolve was taken.

I went quickly to the head of the walk, and down the other side of the rose-bushes till I overtook them.

They stopped when they saw me, and the pain and distress on Amy's face, all for this man, was almost more than I could bear. But I only glanced at her once and addressed her companion:

"I have a confession to make," I said. "I know that you are Stanley Combe. I have loved Amy here all my life nearly, and I was jealous of you. I suspected there was something wrong about you from the first, and then, when I read a description of the forger, Stanley Combe, I almost knew you were he. I wrote to a detective, and told him my suspicions. He came down today, and is waiting at my rooms to arrest you."

The face of the man I had known as Julian Desoix grew ghastly.

I could feel, though I would not look that way, the lightning scorn in Amy's brown eyes, the agony and despair of the sweet face.

"God forgive you," Stanley Combe said, in a tremulous and excited voice.

"I don't think He will be any more likely to do it for *your* intercession," I retorted, bitterly. "Listen to me. I have changed my mind about having you arrested for your crime. Amy here loves you. For her sake I will help you to escape."

Both he and Amy attempted to speak but I would not permit it.

"There is no time to be lost," I said; "the man may get tired of waiting and follow me here at any moment. Amy, you will go, if you please, and order your mother's small, close carriage to be got ready at once. Give the order to a man you can trust, and tell him to take the carriage round to the western entrance to the grounds. It is more private than the other. Meanwhile I will write a note to the detective, telling him that I am obliged to remain and dine with Mr. Combe. But that he may expect us in about two hours. I think he will wait contentedly."

Amy was very pale. She tried to say something, but faltered over the words, and burst into tears.

Stanley Combe went and said something to her in a low tone, at which she seemed impatient.

Suddenly she threw up her head.

"You are an angel, Richard, anyway," she said, excitedly, and hurried away.

The programme I had marked out was followed. Stanley Combe and I were at the western entrance I had mentioned when the carriage drove around there. We entered and were driven to my Aunt Comberwell's—about an hour's ride into the country.

My Aunt Comberwell was a severe spinster whom the most suspicious person in the world would scarcely have dared suspect of harboring a *criminal man* in her domains, and she was devoted to me. I told her I wanted to leave the gentleman in her care for a few days, he not being well, and she consented at once.

I returned to town. I had not been gone more than two hours, and I found the detective asleep at my chambers.

He stared some when I told him our man had given me the slip after all, but I don't think he suspected me.

When he had really gone, I sent Amy word.

I had not been to the house once since the day I took Stanley Combe to my Aunt Comberwell's.

I was preparing to go away from Rushbrook. The place had grown hateful to me.

The day before that set for my journey, Amy sent for me.

I went, of course. I had not meant to go away without saying good-by.

Amy was alone in a little retired parlor and reading-room. Never had I seen her look so lovely.

She wore a white dress, with some late roses at her pretty throat, and another cluster of them in her hair.

She was very pale at first, but she blushed painfully when she saw me.

“She blushes for him,” I thought. “Perhaps she blushes at having me know that she loves that bad man.”

She stood hesitating, as I sat down without touching her hand. I could not. I was trembling like a leaf only at the sight of her.

Then she came and stood beside me, with her sweet eyes downcast, her face half turned away.

“Richard,” she said, after a moment, “I have something to tell you. Stanley Combe is not the wicked forger you think him.”

“I am glad to hear it,” I answered, coldly.

I did not believe it, but I thought if he had told her he was an innocent man, I would not seem to doubt it, for her sake.

Amy glance at me once, then she went on hurriedly:

“It was Stanley’s step-mother who forged the check, and then gave it to him to cash. Of course he had no suspicion that it was not all right, for she had put his father’s name upon it as well as that of the other gentleman, who was also related to her. But she was afraid of him, and did not dare to ask him for money when she found she was in debt and could not pay. When the forgery was found out, she confessed everything to Stanley, and threw herself on his mercy. Stanley assumed everything for her sake, and to spare his father, who, he thought, would suffer more in seeing his idolized wife disgraced than his son. But a few days ago, while Mrs. Combe was out driving, her horses got frightened and ran away with her. She was thrown out, and so badly injured that she died yesterday morning.

“Before she died she confessed everything to her husband, and now the matter is to be hushed up somehow, if possible. Stanley is to be publicly acquitted of all blame by the gentleman whose name was forged, and Mrs. Combe’s folly is to be concealed if that can be done. Are you not glad, Richard, to hear that poor Stanley is not so bad as you thought he was?”

“Yes,” I answered, “I am glad.”

Heaven knows I tried to speak cheerfully, but I am afraid it was a sad failure.

Amy turned suddenly toward me.

“Richard, how blind you are!”

“Am I?”

“Look at me.”

I obeyed, but glanced away instantly. The sweet face was too, *too* sweet now.

“*How* blind you are, Richard,” she said again, petulantly, but her voice trembled. “Stanley Combe is my cousin. Don’t you remember hearing about him years ago? He has been in school in Germany now a long time. That is why he has not been here before. I was always fond of Stanley as a brother. But—but you are mistaken if you fancy I—”

She stopped.

I glanced up quickly. She was crying.

“Oh, Amy,” I said, “you don’t love *me* after all?”

“Yes, I do; but it is very hard work to convince you of it.”

I had my darling in my arms the next moment, and that convinced me.

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