

Unmasked

by Miss E. J. Whitney

WHEN Ralph Fielding came to our little village, there was quite a commotion among the elder portion of the community, as well as among us girls.

“He was immensely rich,” the gossips said, “and belonged to a good family. The girl who won him would be a lucky creature, to say the least.”

And, certainly, we girls didn't need anyone to tell us he was a handsome young fellow, with the most charming ways in the world. He didn't pay anyone particular attention at first, but boated, rode and danced with us all. By-and-by he left all for Kate Earle, who was quite an heiress in her own right. Of course there were hard feelings and sharp speeches when this became known, and those who had been loudest in his praise, were the first to censure him.

Just at this time there were two more arrivals, Lucius Elsmere, the young minister, and Erle Faulkner, a lawyer, who came for his health.

Never before had the old church held so large and admiring an audience. Even the aisles were crowded, and numbers were forced to go away. The young minister was so eloquent, his graceful gestures so impassioned, and his voice so rich and clear, that he moved his audience at his will.

“Why are you not enraptured with our dear minister, as well as the rest of us?” inquired Mrs. Sterns, as we walked slowly home after one of Elsmere's splendid sermons.

“Because I detest a thief,” I replied.

Mrs. Sterns looked aghast.

“You are speaking of a minister of the gospel,” she said, severely.

“Ah, but there are wolves in sheep's clothing,” I returned, gravely. “And a man who steals his sermons from those who write and deliver them, is certainly a literary thief, and is therefore dishonorable.”

“I've heard the same sermon afore,” said old Mr. Lane, “but it came from Henry Ward Beecher's mouth.”

“It ith theer treathon for you to talk tho horridly about charming Mr. Elthmere, Emerelle Lanning,” lisped Cora Ware. “I think him just elegant! I was introduthed to him last week, and he has called three times, and I am going to the picnic with him. He thays I thould make a splendid wife for a minithter,” consciously simpering.

Mrs. Sterns looked nonplussed, and good Mrs. Everett said in a low tone:

“Mr. Elsmere’s sermons are not the products of his own brain.”

Just at this moment the subject of our conversation passed us, giving Mrs. Webster a hurried startled glance. A strangely evil look played over his features for a moment.

Mrs. Webster gazed after him with a puzzled expression on her placid face.

“There is something strangely familiar about him,” she said, slowly, “but I cannot place him in my mind. I shall think after a while, for I am confident I have seen him before.”

Even Ralph Fielding was forgotten, as the fair ones basked in the light of the fascinating clergyman’s smiles.

Someway, I did not join in the general admiration. His smile was cold and cruel, and his eyes had a sly stealthy look, and flashed ominously at times; besides, I had seen and heard several things that placed him in altogether a different light.

My sentiments, however, did not diminish his regard for me; on the contrary, they only seemed to increase it, and, to my chagrin and dismay, he followed me everywhere, forcing his disagreeable attentions upon me, until I was half wild. I tried keen sarcasm, and icy coldness, but it could not pierce his triple-plated armor of self-conceit.

Father and mother were bright and shining lights in the church, and it was the most natural thing in the world for the minister to make long and frequent calls at our house.

I shocked mother—the good soul!—more than once, and brought many a reproof upon my defenseless head, by my rudeness to our clerical visitor.

I was returning home just at dusk from a neighbor’s one night, when I saw Mr. Elsmere coming toward me. He was conversing earnestly with a dissipated-looking stranger, who was stopping at the hotel in the village. Not wishing to meet them, I slipped into the bushes, scarcely daring to breathe as they approached my hiding-place.

“Now, Bob,” the stranger was saying, as they passed so close to me I could have touched them, “if you play that game, you will fail.”

“*Fail!*” scornfully repeated Elsmere, “there is no such word in my vocabulary. The girl interests me, and I’d have succeeded before now, if it hadn’t been for that cursed lawyer. I know women pretty well, Jim, and the little beauty will come round after playing coy and shy.”

“Ha, ha,” laughed the other, “you’re a smart ’un, you be! But I’ve seen the girl, and if she hasn’t got bottled lightning in that body of hers, I’ll lose my guess; and I don’t believe even ‘Gentleman Bob’ can tame her.”

“I’ll do it or die,” sternly. “If I find her too refractory, I may need your help.”

And Elsmere's face took on an awful look as he lowered his voice—"in disposing of Faulkner."

"All right, old pal! I'm handy when the ready is plenty." And the two villains walked slowly away.

I came out of my hiding-place with a flushed face, and wrathfully muttered:

"Plot away, but you will find you wont succeed, my fine clergyman."

"Good evening, Miss Lanning," said a voice close to my side.

With a little cry I turned, and saw Erle Faulkner looking at me, with an amused smile on his handsome face.

"Were your thoughts so pleasant that you did not hear my approach, and not until I had spoken twice?" he asked, reproachfully.

I shook my head, with a slight smile, as I exclaimed:

"I am so glad to see you, Mr. Faulkner." And with heightened color, I repeated what I had heard.

Erle listened without any comments, but his eyes flashed dangerously, and his voice was stern, as he said:

"The stranger registered his name as Harvey Sangers, from Montreal, but it is an alias, probably. He has persisted in talking to me, in spite of my coolness, and following me about."

"They are terrible men, Mr. Faulkner," my voice trembling, "so do be very careful."

"For your sake? Would you care?" he whispered, passionately, his eyes on my flushed face.

I bowed, for I could not speak.

"Emerelle, Relle," called my little brother Willie.

"Coming, my boy," shouted Erle; and I could not but notice the joyous ring in his voice.

"Promise me, Emerelle," he said, softly, as he held my hand at parting, "that you will be very cautious, and not go anywhere alone. I shall keep watch over you, for such villains as Elsmere and Sangers use every method to carry out their schemes."

"I promise," I faltered.

"God keep my darling!" he said, under his breath, as his lips brushed my hair.

After this I tried to avoid the minister more than ever, and father took me to task for it, because, forsooth, "I was standing in my own light," he said.

"If you wish me to leave home," I said, quietly, as he finished, "I will go to Aunt Delmar's."

"I wish Mr. Elsmere to marry my daughter, not that she should leave her father's house," was the short reply.

Mother sighed, and her voice trembled slightly as she said:

"I can never give up my only daughter until a husband claims her."

"I guess you wont keep her long," spoke up precocious Willie, "'cause I know somebody that thinks a lot of her."

"You are talking about what you don't understand, my son," smiled mother.

"No, I aint, nuther. Just look at Relle's face, if you don't believe me," triumphantly.

"Emerelle," said father, gravely, as I was escaping from the room. "I am unwilling to have Mr. Faulkner continue his visits here, as Mr. Elsmere tells me that he bears a very bad character."

"How dare he?" I cried, passionately, and burst into tears.

"Don't cry, Rellie!" exclaimed Willie; then angrily added:

"I wish the old minister was in the Red Sea!"

"Willie, Willie," reproved mother, "you must not talk so. Mr. Elsmere is a very excellent young man."

"I don't care, I hate him," he muttered. "He isn't half so good as Mr. Faulkner is, 'cause I've heard him swear when nobody was looking; and Mr. Faulkner says it's awful wicked to swear."

"Willie, leave the room," said father, sternly.

"Let me beg of you to let him remain," said Mr. Elsmere's smooth voice.

"Don't want to stay if you are here," was the sulky reply, as he marched out of the room, and came up to my chamber, saying, energetically:

"How I hate our minister!"

"It is very wrong to hate anyone, my darling, although he is a very wicked man," I gently replied, as I smoothed his sunny hair.

“I can’t help it if ’tis wicked, Rellie; but I’ll try real hard not to anymore.”

“That is right, dear; for I can’t have my brave little brother be a cowardly man, and it is very cowardly, as well as wrong, to hate anyone.”

“That’s just what Mr. Faulkner said,” replied Willie.

That night I told mother what I had heard. She was terribly shocked.

“Your father must know that he is harboring a viper that will repay his kindness with disgrace and death,” she said, as she arose.

“No, no!” I cried; “not for the world would I have him know of it. You know he is very set, and might not believe it; or, if he was convinced, his changed demeanor would betray our secret at once. Besides, Erle—Mr. Faulkner,” confusedly, “warned me to tell no one, as he has sent to the city for a detective to meet him here tonight.”

“I pray he may not fail to come,” said mother, nervously, a little later. “Your father is suddenly called away to be gone several days. Mr. Elsmere brought the telegram, and is going to remain here during his absence.”

“Willie is gone to grandmother’s, and we two women are alone with that villain,” I gasped.

For a few moments we gazed into each other’s pale scared faces, then I shook off my fears, and felt able to cope with the villain who strove to entrap me.

“Is Elsmere here now?” I whispered.

“Yes, and a friend of his, Mr. Sangers. O, may Heaven help us!”

“Heaven helps those who help themselves,” I quoted, encouragingly. “All is lost if you give way like this, dear mother. I can slip out and go for help while you are at tea.”

“Tea was over long ago,” she moaned.

“While you entertain them in the parlor, I can slip out,” I said, cheerfully; “so go down, and appear as if nothing had happened.”

I waited until I heard the murmur of voices, then putting on my hat, I stole softly by the parlor door, and out into the garden shrubbery. Drawing a breath of relief, I started forward at a quick pace, when a hand grasped my arm, and Elsmere’s hated voice sounded in my ears.

“Whither so fast, pretty one?”

“I am going to Mrs. Bryant’s, on an errand for mother; so please release my arm, for I am in a hurry,” I answered, as calmly as I could, although my heart bounded with fear, for the fellow had been drinking, and I dared not exasperate him.

“Nay, nay, sweet one, be not so cruel as to drive me from your presence,” he went on, his bold eyes burning my face. “It’s not often I have such a glorious chance of seeing you alone.” And he pressed my hand to his lips, as he walked by my side.

Concealing my fear and disgust, I said, lightly:

“Nonsense, Mr. Elsmere. You are a sad flatterer, I fear.”

He eagerly protested that he had not said a tithe of the truth.

“Mother tells me you are going to favor us with a short visit, so I warn you to be chary of compliments, as you may wish you had never seen me,” I laughed, carelessly and coquettishly.

“Impossible, my beauty!” fervently, as he gave me a searching glance. “Your father has given me per—”

I interrupted his flow of eloquence with a shriek.

“What is it?” hastily.

“There, it’s gone now,” I breathed. “Do let us get out of this gloomy place, for it always makes me think of a prison.”

With a slight shudder, the impostor glanced nervously round, and quickened his pace.

Mrs. Bryant started up as I tapped at the door, exclaiming:

“Goodness, Emerelle, how you started me! Annie is over to her sister’s, and it is so warm I fell asleep. Come right in, Mr. Elsmere, and take a chair; father will be in in a few minutes. Your handsome face is always welcome, but I am uncommonly glad to see you tonight.

“Old Mr. Lane is worse; don’t think he will live through the night; and it’s enough to make your hair rise to hear him take on. He’s led a terrible life, they say; even called himself a minister, so as to deceive, and carry on worse than ever. And it’s no wonder he takes on awful—is it, Mr. Elsmere?”

“Not in the least, madam,” gravely, a deadly pallor overspreading his face.

“And, seeing he can’t die easy with such a load of guilt, and as he is calling all the time for somebody to help him, I says to myself, ‘who could help the poor soul equal to a minister of the gospel?’ and I should have sent my son after you, but he is away on a visit.”

My heart gave a great bound as I thought, "Perhaps he will go."

But no. He excused himself by saying he was quite ill, and dared not expose himself further, as he had no one to watch tenderly over him, and soothe and cheer him when disease laid her withering hand upon him, with an expressive glance in my direction.

"Why don't you get married?" she asked, sympathetically. "You need a wife, certainly, and you have lots of pretty girls to choose from, if you haven't already made your choice," inquiringly.

"Ah! but I have made my choice, and got the father's consent, too, Mrs. Bryant," triumphantly, as his glowing eyes took in my blushing angry face.

"Well, well, my dears," exclaimed the good woman, cordially, "you couldn't do better, and you'll be the handsomest couple I ever set my eyes on."

What could I do or say at this? Not one word, for *there was not a name mentioned, only implied.*

"Mrs. Bryant," I said, abruptly, "mother wanted to borrow a cup of yeast, as I neglected to make any today."

"Certainly, my dear, certainly," bustling away. "Why won't you stay this evening?" she asked, as she returned. "Annie may be back, as she went over to Sue's yesterday."

"Thank you," I replied, quickly, catching a ray of light. "Mr. Elsmere had better remain here, if he is unable to visit Mr. Lane; but I am obliged to decline your kind invitation, as mother would be anxious about me. I will write a line to Annie, which please give her as soon as she gets home."

Running up to my friend's chamber, I seized a pen and wrote:

"Dear Annie, if you love me, don't fail to put this note into Erle Faulkner's hands as soon as possible. Father was called away by a telegram; will be gone several days. *The minister and a friend will stay at father's while he is gone.* Mother and I are alone."

"There," excitedly, "that tells nothing, yet Erle will see our danger."

"I can't persuade him to stay," said Mrs. Bryant, in a disappointed tone, as I returned to the room. "Says he's promised your pa to see to you, and he's going to."

"I have been to see Annie too many times for me to want anyone to go home with me," I replied, smiling.

We had gone but a little ways before Elsmere began, angrily:

"How you did try to send me off to that dying wretch, but I'm too old a bird to be caught with chaff, or old women, either," laughing coarsely.

My cheeks flamed fiercely as I sprang forward.

“You needn’t try that game, my lady,” seizing my waist, “for I can see through your little tricks, and stop ’em, too, by Jove! Come, now, give me a kiss from those luscious red lips, my beauty!”

“Release me instantly!” I demanded, haughtily. “How dare you stop me in this manner?”

“Dare!” scornfully. “I fear neither God, man, nor the devil.”

“And *you* are a *clergyman*?” I asked, with biting scorn.

“No!” he cried, passionately; “no, I’m no canting hypocrite of a clergyman.”

“The past few weeks tell whether you are a hypocrite or not,” boldly.

“You shall pay for that, and all the rest of your cutting speeches, and your haughty ways, my proud beauty!” he raved. “You are mine, mine!”

“Never!” was my firm reply, “never. No power on earth shall make me yours.”

“Ha, ha!” he laughed, sneeringly; “think you I’ll wait for a priest to mumble a few words? Not I. You are mine, and I’ll make you beg for the caresses you scorn now; for no power in heaven or hell can take you from me.” And he clasped me passionately to his heart, covering my face with fiery kisses.

With a desperate effort I pushed the villain from me, and, striking my clenched hand into his face, I fled for home, uttering a cry for help.

With a volley of oaths, he rushed after me. I sprang forward like a deer, knowing more than life hung in the balance, but alas! just as I thought myself nearly safe, my foot caught in a treacherous vine, and I fell headlong. With a cry of despair, I struggled to my feet, to be caught in Elsmere’s arms.

“A fine race you have led me, but I have you safe!” he cried, with savage exultation. “Cry, writhe and struggle as you will, you are helpless as a babe; you cannot escape, for you are mine, mine forever.”

“Villain, take that!” thundered a voice; and the next moment I was snatched from Elsmere’s arms, and the baffled wretch fell to the ground.

With a low cry of joy, for the first time in my healthy life, I fainted in Erle Faulkner’s arms.

“Is he gone?” I gasped, as my senses returned.

“My darling, my darling, thank Heaven you are safe!” exclaimed Erle, fervently, as his kisses fell fast on my white face. “That detestable scoundrel cannot harm you while I am near.”

“I’m a desperate man, Faulkner,” hissed Elsmere, rising from the ground, “and I warn you to give me the girl, for have her I will, if I wade through rivers of blood to get her.”

“Away with you, miserable villain!” was the stern reply. “You will have to pass over my dead body to gain Miss Lanning.”

“So be it!” savagely; and the sharp report of a revolver smote on the air.

With a low cry I threw myself before my lover.

“Two can play at that game, my fine fellow!” exclaimed a deep-toned voice, and again sharp reports broke on the startled air.

With a hoarse cry of rage Elsmere turned upon the newcomer.

“Take that, and a million curses beside,” he suddenly cried, turning upon me.

There was a flash of light, a quick report, and a terrible pain shot through my arm, and with a moan I fell senseless. When I came to myself, mother was sobbing over me, and Annie Bryant stood by my side. With a shudder I closed my eyes, as I saw Elsmere prostrate on the ground, the lifeblood flowing from a wound in his chest.

“If you wish to say anything, Bob, you had best say it, as you are bleeding internally,” said the detective; for it was he who had come so opportunely to our aid.

“I’ve played for a high stake, and lost the game,” coolly replied the baffled villain. “I’m no canting minister. I’ve been in prison twice; killed the jailor, and got away the last time.

“I came here to hide, and pick up what I could find handy. Cross-eyed Jim came too. I fell in love with her,” pointing to me, “and I wouldn’t hear to Jim when he said trouble would come of it. I’ve robbed and murdered, but I only regret that I did not kill Emerelle Lanning.” The death-rattle sounded in his throat, and the miserable man fell back dead.

Here I lost consciousness again, and knew no more until the doctor set my arm. A long fit of illness followed that terrible night, and my arm was nearly well when I recovered.

“How did you find me that fearful night?” I asked Erle, long after.

“Annie Bryant reached home just as you had left. She was frightened as she read your note, and calling me, as I was passing, bade me read what you had written. I understood it at once, and finding out the path you had taken, sped on after you. And I was just in time,” tenderly.

“Thank God!” I murmured, reverently.

“I had met the detective at the station, and sent him after Elsmere. He heard he was at your father’s, and on going there, met Sangers, whom he arrested; and then, guided by your mother, hastened after you. We owe our lives to him, as I was not armed.”

Father came home crestfallen, indeed, as his telegram was a hoax to get him away from home. When he heard what had occurred during his absence, he vehemently ejaculated:

“The shameless villain! how dared he play such a desperate game? I am ashamed of myself for being so easily imposed upon.”

When Erle presented himself asking for his reward, father said frankly:

“I was deceived by an impostor, Mr. Faulkner, and judged you hardly, but I ask your pardon for my unjust suspicions. I have made inquiries concerning you, and finding them satisfactory, I cordially give you my little girl here, feeling that I have gained a son. And I humbly confess that I believe a true woman’s heart the best guide in love affairs.”

Ballou’s Monthly Magazine, September 1877