

THE RECTOR'S SECRET.

OR LOVE CONQUERS ALL.

A STUDY FROM LIFE.

BY J. R. ABARBANELL.

CHAPTER XV.—Continued.

"My dear Miss Barton," he began, in his earnestness dropping his slang of Wall street and the stable. "The single reference I shall make to the fact of your having rejected my suit is to assure you that in spite of that, your future welfare is dear, very dear, to my heart. To keep sorrow and grief from you is the purpose of my visit here this evening."

Blanche lowered her head on her breast. This exordium struck an icy chill to her heart.

"Your brother—"

"My brother," she repeated, without daring to look at him.

"Has always been," he continued, "a dear and valued friend of mine. To him I owe the happiness, poignant though it has now become, of your acquaintance. It is a matter of deep regret to me that he has abused my friendship."

Blanche's face became as white as snow. She essayed to speak, but no sound issued from between her blanched lips.

"He had access to my private office at any time he chose," continued Harvey. "And the other day, shortly after he had left me, I missed a blank check."

She clasped her hands nervously together and gave him a pleading glance, as if mutely appealing to him to spare her. Had he not been so much in love with her as to shrink back from no means of making her his wife, he would have perceived what a cowardly, miserable part Frank was making him play. As it was, ardent passion had completely warped his better nature, and extinguished whatever gleam of intelligence he possessed. He remorselessly continued in the lie he had been assigned to tell her:

"Of course, I never in the world suspected him of having taken it, or else I would not, even as a matter of precaution, have written to the bank to stop the check, in case it should be filled out and presented for payment. It was so filled out and presented, for ten thousand dollars, drawn to your brother's order. Here is the check as it has been returned to me."

He showed the check to her. She only saw the word forged stamped across it in red letters, like letters of blood. A crimson flood seemed to rise up before her eyes, and she seemed to be wading in a sea of gore. Faintness ensued, and insensibility then came to her relief.

When she uncovered her eyes she found herself lying stretched out on the sofa, while Harvey was kneeling beside her, bathing her forehead with some ice water, which was, luckily, in the room. It is to his credit to say that he was terribly frightened, and he would have taken back his words if he could only have done so. But it was now too late. There was nothing to do but to continue his rôle to the end.

"Do not be afraid," he said, "that I shall take any criminal proceedings in the matter. I would not be here this evening if I had so intended. I know what shame and disgrace such a step would inflict upon you as well as on him. I know how you love your brother. Alas, that such a love should not be mine. How your heart would be wrung were he to suffer the penalty of his act—to be convicted as a felon, to be sent to state prison—"

"Spare me," she piteously implored. "It is to spare you all that," he replied, rising to his feet, "that I thought it my duty to make this sad revelation to you. You are his sister; you have unbounded influence over him. You have not been able to properly exert your influence, because he has kept his frivolity, which has now led him into crime, a secret from you. Now, that you know all, you can give him a sisterly warning, and show him the error of his ways and bid him, for your sake, as well as his own, to turn over a new leaf. As for this check, he may call at my office to-morrow. I will burn it up in his presence. That will be an end to it, as far as all forgery is concerned. I do this for your sake, Miss Barton. I have no reward to ask of you. I can carry an unfulfilled wish with me to the grave. Good-night, Miss Barton, and—Heaven bless you."

His voice faltered and tears stood in his eyes as he extended his hand to her. Such a powerful effect has even the acting of a part when one is in earnest.

She caught his hand and raised it to her lips. That action expressed more than words. How well Frank knew his sister when he counseled Harvey to show himself in a generous light toward her.

She rose to her feet.

"Stay," she said, "I cannot permit you to depart thus without expressing my deep, my most fervent thanks for the generosity which has prompted your visit and your words."

Harvey blushed like a school boy. He felt how undeserved her thanks were; and, having said and done all that was as-

signed to him, he was anxious to make room for the appearance of the next actor in this drama in real life.

The other actor, Frank, was waiting outside. He could hear nothing, and he was apprehensive lest his puppet should bungle his part. The interview seemed to him a very long one; and, unmindful of his cue, he abruptly entered on the stage. That is, he opened the door at this juncture, and walked into the room.

He started back in well-feigned surprise, and assumed a guilty look as he ejaculated:

"Mr. Van Rensselaer here!"

"He is here," exclaimed Blanche, with unusual sternness in her voice, "because you have abused his confidence; and you can thank his generosity alone that you are not at present in a prison cell as an indicted forger."

"He knows—he has told you," stammered Frank, in apparent confusion.

"My dear Miss Barton," said Harvey, "please let me leave. This scene is very distressing to me. You will tell Frank that he has nothing to fear—"

"I will tell him," she interrupted, "that he need not show his face or speak to me until he has really reformed and proved it by his acts. As to your generosity, Mr. Van Rensselaer, you cannot outdo me in it. I have no heart, no love to offer you—that lies buried in a cruel disappointment; but if it will make you happy for me to be your wife, there is my hand. I am yours."

CHAPTER XVI.

AN EXCITING INTERVIEW.

Little did Walter Wainwright, roving Europe to ease the pain of his heart, imagine that Blanche, so soon after parting from him, would consent to become another's wife. He felt the hopelessness of his own aspirations; he feared the obstacle which had sundered their hearts would never be removed; he was willing to devote the rest of his days to the only object which was now of interest to him, namely, the search for his mother; yet he would have been greatly shocked to discover that she could so soon forget him.

Happily, he was ignorant of it. Since his departure from home he had kept up a desultory correspondence with his foster father, the good rector. From him he learned that Mabel, his sister by adoption, was well, though grieving for his absence, the reason for which she could not understand; but not a word about Blanche. Walter could not bring it upon himself to inquire after her, and the rector, through motives of delicacy, did not mention her in his letters.

Thus matters stood on the night of the reception at Lady Buford's. When Walter, alias Lord Dinwiddie, asked the momentous question why her ladyship hated Americans, the countess for an instant gazed furtively at the assemblage around her, and then whispered:

"I cannot answer you here and now. Still, you are entitled to an answer for the services you have done me. Call here to-morrow at noon, but call alone, and I will answer you."

"I will obey your ladyship," murmured Walter, with a low bow.

The exciting nature of the evening's incidents caused the assemblage to break up at an earlier hour than usual, and our two young friends returned to their lodgings in a state of high glee at what they had accomplished.

"I declare," exclaimed Harold, laughingly, "I was so taken up with Ethel that I forgot all about introducing her to you."

"And I was so anxious to discover the reason of Lady Buford's national antipathy to us, that I scarcely glanced at your innamorata. But you are already dropping the Miss in speaking of her. You seem to have come to a good understanding with her."

"Haven't I? I didn't slip off into the conservatory with her for nothing. It's all agreed between us. I'm to meet her at her house at noon to-morrow and we're to ask her ma's blessing on our union."

"At noon to-morrow! Why, I have an appointment with her ladyship at that hour."

"Indeed!"

"She promised to tell us her objections to Americans in general which, I suppose, includes us."

"Whatever her reasons are you must get me excepted. Ethel and I will wait in the park until you are through with your interview."

By this time the young men had reached the hotel at which they were temporarily staying, and they soon thereafter retired to their respective couches to dream: Harold, of innumerable love meetings with Ethel; Walter, of a host of Lady Buford's, all equally incensed against the Yankee nation.

They set out the next day to promptly keep their appointments. They walked

the distance to Buford House arm-in-arm, but it was thought best for each one to enter separately. Harold gave his name to the lackey at the door, and was at once admitted. Walter waited for about five minutes, and then in turn rang the bell.

He was a little embarrassed what name to give to the footman, as he now remembered that he had not mentioned his right name to Lady Buford.

He, however, handed his card to the footman, after adding a line to her ladyship; and the attendant soon returned and beckoned the young man to follow him.

Harold and Ethel were nowhere visible. They had retired into some nook of their own. Walter ascended the broad staircase after the footman, until they reached the second story; and then the latter opened a door and ushered our hero into Lady Buford's sitting-room.

The room was furnished with every appliance of wealth and good taste, and formed a fit setting for the jewel of a woman who, clad in a gorgeous morning robe, reclined in an easy chair.

She gave a slight start as Walter entered. He looked so different now, in his natural appearance, from what he did the evening before when disguised as a Welsh lord.

She remarked upon it as she arose, card in hand, to receive him.

"I really should not have recognized you, Mr. Wainwright," she said, "were it not from the fact that you keep your appointment so promptly. And I must add that the change is a decided improvement."

"You are complimentary, my lady," he replied, with a low bow.

"Pray be seated," she said, indicating a chair near her, while, with a graceful motion, she sank back into her elegant fauteuil. "By the way," she added, after he had seated himself, with a glance at the card, "your name is quite a celebrated one beyond the Atlantic. The Rev. Horace Wainwright's reputation has extended even to this country. I, especially, read the printed volumes of his sermons with avidity and much edification."

"He is honored and respected by those who know him," exclaimed Walter, "as he is admired by the world at large."

"You speak warmly, sir. Are you related to him, since you bear the same name?"

"He is my father, by adoption if not by nature. He has been all to me that a father could be, and I love him with a son's devotion."

"Which, no doubt, the good man fully deserves. How I should like to become personally acquainted with him."

"That wish may be easily gratified, my lady, by a trip across the Atlantic."

"I will never plant my foot on American soil," returned Lady Buford, with a visible shudder.

She lapsed into silence, and her face assumed a clouded moody expression. Walter felt that she was approaching the topic so dreaded by her. He wondered why it should cause her so much agitation. For a time she battled with her emotions. She finally conquered them, and glanced up at him with a countenance which had become deadly white during the struggle.

"Mr. Wainwright," she said, "you are an American and, in common with the rest of your countrymen in England, have no doubt heard of my aversion to everything connected with America. I am deemed eccentric in that respect. Rumor has gone so far as to adjudge me insane. I have longed for an opportunity to set these rumors at rest; yet I could not without disclosing a bitter secret, without unfolding some sad, sad leaves in the history of my past life. I next have thought of sharing my secret with some noble, generous American who would sacredly guard it, and, knowing my story, defend me against the attacks of his countrymen without revealing it. I despaired of finding such a man until last night. When you saved my daughter from the scheme of a dangerous adventurer, and demanded no other reward but to learn why I hated you, I said to myself: 'This is the man.'"

She paused to gather strength to begin the story, the sad nature of which she had indicated.

Walter was deeply moved by this mark of confidence which she placed, at the same time, in his discretion, generosity and bravery.

"You honor me highly, my lady," he exclaimed, "by choosing me to be your champion. American as I am by birth and education, though not reared amid traditions of chivalry and knighthood, I will, nevertheless, be your loyal knight. As the cavaliers of old defied the whole world in behalf of the lady who called upon their strong arm and trusty heart to defend her, so I will challenge him who dares impugn your ladyship's conduct. And that, too, unquestioningly, upon your mere request, without asking you for any confidences."

The countess arose from her seat; Walter followed her action.

"You are, indeed, a generous man," she said, with beaming eyes. "My heart told me truly when I fixed upon you as the man to whom to reveal my secret. You will swear to ever keep it a secret."

"I swear; and my oath of fealty is this."

He took her hand as he spoke, and, raising it to his lips, reverently kissed it. She let it linger for a moment in his clasp, and then, withdrawing it, paced up

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and down the room, as if considering how she should begin.

Walter watched her from where he stood and noted the fact that in her youth she must have greatly resembled her daughter, whose picture, in the artist's studio, had created such vivid imaginings in his mind. She resembled her daughter then, and that daughter so closely resembled him. His brain began to whirl with the wild, vague, fantastic thoughts which surged in upon it.

He began to actually grow dizzy, when the countess abruptly stopped before him and, in a tone half defiant, half remorseful, exclaimed:

"Mr. Wainwright, I, too, am an American!"

CHAPTER XVII.

WHY LADY BUFORD HATED AMERICANS.

"You are an American," exclaimed Walter, in the greatest surprise. "Then it is your own countrymen and women whom you hate."

"I do not hate them," she passionately exclaimed, "except one; and him I regard with a detestation which you will share with me when you learn its causes. In my inmost heart I cling to the land of my birth, as only those can cling to it who are for many, many years separated from their native land. In my inmost heart everything that effects America profoundly moves me; her pride and glory are mine. That is why I read Mr. Wainwright's sermons with such avidity. I respect and admire him because he is an embodiment of American piety and American intelligence. If then you ask me why, feeling this way, I have fairly secreted myself from my country people, it is not because I hate them, but because I fear them. I fear that among those who would join the train of flatterers and sycophants who bask in the sunshine of my smiles, there would be some who could point the finger of scorn at me, summon up the past, drag me from the watery grave in which they deemed me buried, and overwhelm me with the shame which another's infamy has cast over my maiden name."

She covered her face with her hands and hid the blushes which the memory of the past called to her cheeks.

"You were more sinned against than sinning," murmured Walter, in a low tone.

"You shall hear all," she said, uncovering her face; "you shall judge whether it is not so."

"If the recital will give you pain—"

"It will, but so does the weight of this secret carried in my bosom alone. In spite of what I have suffered, my heart has not broken. It will not break now."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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