

# THE RECTOR'S SECRET.

## OR LOVE CONQUERS ALL.

A STUDY FROM LIFE.

BY J. R. ABARBANELL.

### CHAPTER I. PROLOGUE.

"It will be salvation for him, rest for me."

How world weary sounded these words, coming from the lips of a young woman, who was sitting in an attic room of a third-class boarding house in Amity—now West Third Street—in the city of New York.

She was sitting there on a cold December night in the year 1850, eagerly perusing, in the daily paper in her hand, an account of the opening of the Foundling Asylum in Abingdon square, its adoption of the *crèche* or basket, before its doors, in which unhappy mothers might, at all hours of the day or night, deposit their innocent off-springs.

Strange that she should exhibit so vivid an interest in such a matter.

She was barely twenty years old, frail and thin in appearance, and with a face as white as the coverlet of the bed which stood against the wall. She was evidently but just recovering from an illness which had, temporarily at least, robbed her not only of her strength, but also of the dark fascinating beauty which must have been hers in health.

Her jet black hair hung in disordered confusion far down her back, her slight form trembled with nervous excitement, and her raven-hued eyes fairly glittered as she again and again read the description of the foundling asylum.

"It is what I want, it is what I have been looking for," she muttered to herself. Then she repeated: "It will be salvation for him, rest for me."

She was interrupted by a cry—the cry of an infant. She threw down the paper and hurried across the room to the bed.

There lay a male child scarcely two weeks old.

She sank on her knees beside the bed. The babe stilled its crying as soon as it saw its mother.

"Oh, my darling! my darling," she exclaimed. "Alas, what a heritage will I leave thee. I cannot live and endure the world's scorn and contumely, I dare not end thy sweet life with mine. Oh, the racking of brain and heart to know what to do! But now the sunshine has come; now I know thou wilt be provided for, while I will find that rest which is denied me here."

She rose to her feet and, for a moment, bent over her child, which had fallen asleep.

Then she seated herself at the table and turned up the light of the oil-lamp, which was burning low. From her bosom she took out a crumpled and tear-stained letter. She had read it a hundred times, and had shed bitter, bitter tears over it since it had been handed her by her landlady on the second day after the birth of her child. Again she read it:

MADAM:

My son has confessed his idiotic folly to me. I need only state that he heartily repents of his stupid escapade to assure you that he is cured of his boyish infatuation for you, and that a renewal of his former relations toward you is simply out of question. I have arranged for your present expenses and deposited a sum with your landlady sufficient to compensate you for whatever wounded affection you may be pleased to assume. Of one thing you may be certain, no son of mine will ever acknowledge an adventuress as his wife, no matter how desperate her scheme to obtain his hand and my fortune. I am happy to add that his eyes have been opened and that he is now of my way of thinking. He has very readily acquiesced in my desire to leave the country for the time being. As he had sufficient sense not to reveal his right name to you, I will follow his example and simply sign myself

HIS FATHER.

"What have I done to merit such a fate as this," she exclaimed, tearing the letter into fragments and stamping them under her foot.

She took up a sheet of paper and began to write, but at the first word she paused and threw down the pen with a gesture of infinite weariness.

"What is the use," she exclaimed. "why burden the world with the harrowing tale of my wrongs only to be laughed at? Rather let my child grow up in total ignorance of the present, let his future be unclouded by any knowledge which may cause him to blush for his mother. No, no, he shall never be identified."

She tore up the sheet of paper and rose from the table. She went to the windows and looked out into the dark street below.

A neighboring clock chimed forth the hour of ten, and the few passers-by hurried along huddled in their cloaks, to protect them from the bitter wind which was blowing. She gazed up at the sky where the black, murky clouds presaged a snow storm. Already the first flakes were falling one by one.

With a shudder, she drew away from the window and stood for a moment, irresolute, in the center of the room.

"Why should I hesitate," he then exclaimed, casting off the feeling of depression stealing over her, "beyond the clouds is sunshine, in the bosom of God there is rest even for me."

She put on her shawl and hat and, having robed the still sleeping infant in spotless white—carefully refraining from using any article which might hereafter be identified—she pressed her child to her breast under her shawl and issued out of the room.

A light was burning in the hall below, but there was no person there; the inmates of the house were in their rooms, or in the parlor whence proceeded the sound of a gay melody played on the piano. All the doors were closed to keep out the cold air.

The unhappy mother stole on tip-toe down the carpeted stairs and gained the front door unobserved, she noiselessly opened and closed it, and the next moment was out in the street.

The snow storm now set in in right earnest, and the fast and thickly falling flakes almost blinded her as they were driven against her face by the bitter blast.

She set her face resolutely against the wind and struggled along amid the snow and darkness in the direction of Abingdon square.

The distance was not very far, yet in her weak and enfeebled state she was completely exhausted when she reached the foundling asylum and sank in the snow on its stone steps.

She did not, however, dare to remain seated there long. She feared a policeman might pass by and arrest her; she was afraid lest some official of the asylum should come out and question her.

She hugged the infant again and again to her breast, and two big tears rolled down her face and dropped on its sleeping countenance. Then she placed the child in the *crèche* and, after ringing the bell immediately above it, ran and hid herself behind a tree which grew near the curbstone, a little way off.

From her place of concealment she could see the *crèche*, which was rendered distinct by the light of a hanging lantern burning above it. She saw the basket, worked by a mechanism from within, turn slowly, as on a pivot, and a few minutes later regain its former position—empty.

"Thank Heaven, my child is provided for," exclaimed the mother, sinking on her knees in the snow. "And Thou who hast said: 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay,' guard his innocent life, make him worthier than his father, happier than his mother. I Thy care I leave him and the vengeance of my wrongs."

She rose to her feet, and with a lightness of heart which accompanies a firm determination, hastened along the street which led to the river front.

Had a policeman, or any one else, encountered her she would, undoubtedly, have been stopped, for the presence of a woman in that locality at that hour of night is of itself a sufficiently suspicious circumstance to warrant a detention and investigation.

But the absence of the New York policeman from any particular place where his services might just then be required, is proverbial, and the disagreeableness of the night had driven even the tramps indoors.

She, therefore, gained the water's edge without having been observed or accosted by a single person, and walked along the slippery, snow-covered pier to where its farther end projected out into the deep-rolling waves of the North river.

She leaned against the bulkhead and gazed out over the fast hurrying water before her.

A heavy mist, occasioned by the snow-storm, rested on the surface of the river. Here and there a moving light penetrated the ever-thickening fog. She knew it was the light of some passing boat.

She could not see the passengers or crew; they could not distinguish her slight form, all clothed in black, leaning against the bulkhead and preparing to take the awful plunge into the Infinite.

Never were circumstances so favorable for a person bent on suicide to successfully execute his or her dread design.

One glance she cast to the sky above, one inward prayer for forgiveness, one last, lingering thought of her child, and then she plunged into the watery depths below.

Not a sound escaped her lips, the momentary splash was scarcely heard in the roar of the elements.

Once she rose to the surface, but did not make the slightest struggle to buffet the waves. Again she sank and the waters closed over her head.

Who was she?

What heritage had she left her son?

This story will tell.

CHAPTER II.

NAMELESS.

"I am not your father, Walter. You are, alas, not my son."

Rector Horace Wainwright's fine, noble face wore an expression of profound pity and his manly voice trembled with emotion as he uttered these words.

To mention the rector's name was to evoke the blessings of the poor he had helped, the ardent affection of his parishioners to whose spiritual wants he ministered, and the admiration of the stranger who occasionally listened to the stirring sermons delivered by him, from the pulpit of the Episcopal church, of which he was the pastor.

In the year 1875, twenty-five years after the happening of the incidents related in our prologue, Rector Wainwright was in the zenith of his fame, a fame acquired as much by goodness of heart as by brilliancy of intellect.

He was now in the forty-fifth year of his age, though his studious habits, his slightly care-worn face and the ever-increasing baldness of his head gave him an older and more venerable appearance. Clad in his suit of clerical black, tall and portly in build, with shoulders slightly stooping, clean-shaven, oval, finely chiselled countenance and broad, massive, intellectual forehead, he looked the distinguished prelate that he was.

As he uttered the words with which our chapter opens, he rose from the chair, in the library of the rectory on which he had been sitting, and slowly crossing the room held out his arms to the young man to whom they were addressed.

"Are you angry with me, Walter, for telling you this?" he asked, with infinite pathos in his voice.

"Angry with you," exclaimed the young man, rushing into his embrace, "how can I, how can any one be angry with you, my—Oh! would to Heaven, I could still say my father?"

"And why can you not?" returned the rector, fondly caressing the twenty-five year old young man, as if he were but a child. "Why can you not?" he repeated. "I am your father still, by adoption if not by nature. Our Heavenly Father, who sees into my heart, knows that I love you with a father's ardent devotion. To me you will be always my son."

"And Mabel my sweet sister?" asked Walter, with a slight touch of bitterness in his tone. "How the term lingers on my lips now that I can no longer apply it to her. My playfellow, the companion of my boyish joys and griefs, what will she say when she learns that her brother is not her brother, that a stranger has usurped a share of her father's heart, which ought to belong entirely to her. If she asks me who I am, what answer can I give her?"

"She will not ask the question, you need not answer it, replied the rector, gently disengaging himself from the young man's embrace, and standing at the center-table. "Mabel is very young, barely seventeen. Your adoption occurred before she was born. To her you may always be her brother, to the world at large, you may and will still be my son. Neither she, nor strangers, have a right to your confidence. There is only one other to whom it is your duty to reveal the truth."

"Blanche," murmured the young man, lowering his head, while his face became ashy pale.

"Yes, Blanche, Miss Barton, the girl you love, whom you wish to make your wife. Ah, Walter, I knew this interview would be inevitable. I foresaw the time would come when it would be necessary for me to reveal the truth, so long hidden from you. You will remember that I told you that if ever your heart was inspired with a sincere love for one of the opposite sex, to come to me first, before you declared your passion to the object of your affections."

"I have remembered it, father—I cannot address you by any other term."

"Nor you need not," rejoined the rector, with a genial smile.

"I came here this evening for that very purpose. I told you how ardently I love Blanche, what hopes I had that she would smile favorably on my suit, though I have as yet, not breathed a word to her. I dutifully laid my heart at your feet, and asked of you a father's permission to marry her. Your answer was that you are not my father."

"It is that answer which you are to take to her. Believe me, Walter, there can be no happiness in a marriage where even the slightest thing is concealed on either side. There must be no secrets taken to the marriage altar. It is a duty which you owe to your honor, as well as to her and her family, to tell her all. Besides it will be a test of her love. You are young yet, and I may say without flattery, handsome. You have been well educated, and your moral training has preserved you from the ordinary follies of youth. You are a lawyer in good practice, and if you have not a private fortune of your own or great expectations from me, who enjoys but a moderate income, you have energy enough and, thank heaven, a sound constitution to achieve a fortune of your own. A statesman's career is open to you as well as the legal profession, and you may gain fame and honor in your country's service as well as in the forum. With all these advantages you have a right to aspire to the heart and hand of any lady, no matter how proud her descent, how ample her fortune. If Miss Barton loves you truly and for your-

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self alone, she will not reject you because

The rector hesitated and the young man in a bitter tone, completed the sentence by adding:

"Because I am nameless."

The clergyman nodded his head and remained silent.

"But am I absolutely nameless?" cried Walter, impetuously. "Is there no clue to my parentage? Who is my father, who is my mother? Are they alive or dead? Have I been born in wedlock, or must I bow my head in shame before the gaze of the world? Woe, woe to my father if this is so, and he is still alive. Heaven grant that I may discover him to curse—"

The rector gently put his hand on the young man's mouth. "Judge not lest he be judged," he solemnly quoted. "The questions you have asked are hard if not impossible to answer, now after a lapse of twenty-five years. Still, if you wish to devote yourself to solving the mystery which surrounds your birth—it is a laudable, if somewhat quixotic, enterprise—I can throw but little light on the subject, and you shall hear all that I know."

He seated himself at the table and motioned the young man to take a seat near him.

"I was not reared for the clerical profession," he began, "the ambition of my youth was the same, as is yours, to become a great lawyer. Circumstances which I need not allude to here induced me to change my aspirations, and I became an Episcopalian clergyman. I soon discovered that it was required of me, almost as part of my religious duties, to choose a helpmate, and I married a pure and virtuous girl, a member of the congregation of the country church where I was then officiating. Though founded more on respect than on love, our short married life was a happy one, for I had made my wife the confidant of my inmost thoughts. One single, perhaps foolish care, haunted her, the fact that three years had elapsed since our marriage, and our union had not been blessed with any offspring. Somehow she had set it in her head that she would never have any children, and knowing her fancy on the subject, I thought it would please her if I should adopt a child and rear it as our own. A minister's convention sitting in this city gave me the desired opportunity."

The rector paused here in his narrative to touch a bell which was on the table.

A servant answered the summons. "Nancy," he said, addressing the maid, "you know the small satchel which stands under the bed in my room?"

"Yes, sir."

"You will please brush the dust off it and bring it to me."

The servant left the library to execute the order, and a few minutes later returned bearing the leather satchel, which was securely fastened by a small copper padlock.

She handed it to her master, who placed it on the table beside him and then dismissed her.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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