

THE RECTOR'S SECRET.

OR LOVE CONQUERS ALL.

A STUDY FROM LIFE.

BY J. R. ABARBANELL.

CHAPTER XX.—Continued.

"There now, you are excited," he gently said. "Not another word shall you hear from me. Mabel will bring you some tea and toast. The doctor told me to give it to you when you awaken. And then you will be pleased to go to sleep. Those are the orders."

The rector left the room for a moment, and then returned with Mabel, who bore the tea and toast on a tray. She placed the articles on the table, and then, shyly approaching Frank, stooped down and, before he could prevent it, kissed the plaster of paris mold on his wounded arm. It was a simple action, yet so expressive of her gratitude for him that once more Frank's eyes filled with tears.

"I don't deserve, I am unworthy, Miss Wainwright," he stammered in the depth of his self abasement. Then his voice became choked with emotion, and he could proceed no further.

"Come, come, Mabel," said the rector, gently. "Mr. Barton knows how grateful you are to him. You must not excite him with any words. A cup of tea from your hand will be all the reward he asks."

"It is too much," murmured Frank.

"I will never, never forget that I owe my life to him," said Mabel, earnestly.

With the rector's assistance, Frank managed to gain a sitting position. It cost him some twinges of pain, but he manfully concealed them. Mabel held the tray for him while he ate and drank, and his eyes expressed the feelings his lips did not dare to utter. When the repast was finished, Mabel smoothed the pillows for him and hovered over his couch like a good fairy. His glances followed her wherever she went.

Father and daughter shortly afterward bade the invalid good-night.

"I hope you will have a good night's sleep," said the good rector; "but should you have the slightest need of my presence during the night you will only have to pull the bell-rope on the wall at your bed, which connects with the bell in the next room, where I sleep."

"I hope I shall not be obliged to disturb your rest," said Frank, "for I suspect you have had little or no sleep for the last three days."

"Oh, well," off-handedly answered the clergyman, "do unto others as you would that they should do to you, you know."

With these words he left the room with Mabel. He left, but the words remained written in lines of fire in Frank's heart, seeming, to his excited, feverish imagination, like a flaming sword in an angel's hand, warning him off from a paradise which he had forever lost.

He slept very little that night. It is true he endured the physical pain of his fractured arm, but the keener pangs were mental ones. He would start from his dozing with the sublime words of the golden rule ever ringing in his ears. It required a terrible wrestling with the spirit to make him humbly resolve to obey the rule. It involved so much of humiliation, mortification, shame and disgrace in the eyes of all who knew him, in the eyes of Mabel, worst of all, that night was changing to day before he had firmly made up his mind to reveal all to his sister.

But darkness only was not passing from the face of the earth. Its committal spirits—selfishness, egotism, envy and covetousness—were taking their flight from his soul. The habitation which they had befouled with their presence was being cleansed and purified for the reception of the holy ministering angels which, henceforth, would make their abode there.

The morning sun was streaming through the window-panes into the room when Frank awoke for the day. For the first time, since he was a child at his mother's knees, words of prayer issued from his trembling lips.

It was more of an admonition than a supplication.

It was the golden rule: "Do unto others as you would that they should do to you."

CHAPTER XXI.

AN OPEN CONFESSION.

The next day being Saturday, Blanche had no school duties to divide her attention. She determined to devote the whole day at her brother's bedside.

Apart from the terror with which she had received the first tidings of the accident to Frank, was the emotion she experienced at the thought that he was being sheltered by the roof which had, up to within so recent a time, been the home of the lost, faithless, yet still loved one. When she entered the room where her brother was lying in the similitude of death, it required only a woman's glance to give her the assurance that it was Walter's room. Every article spoke eloquently of him; and when she discovered a bit

of blue ribbon which she had lost from her hair, being tenderly preserved between the leaves of his Bible, tears of anguish and regret rose to her eyes. She could have fairly screamed as she noticed his picture hanging on the wall. The eyes seemed to be looking down upon her as if in reproach for what she had done.

What had she done?

She had ruptured their relations, had refused the offer of his hand and heart, because he had confessed himself to her brother unworthy of her love. She had given her hand, though not her heart, to another, to save her brother from the consequence of a crime committed by him. She had wrenched her bleeding heart out of her breast in the hope that the knowledge that there could be no reconciliation would ease her pain. Yet the pain was there. The pain of wasted love and misplaced affection; and at no time was it sharper than when she had to subdue it in his room, in the presence of his father.

The rector received her courteously, yet a trifle coldly. He could not help suspecting that the reason she had alleged for refusing Walter's hand was merely the ostensible one; and that the real motive was to be looked for in the mercenary trait in her character which could induce her, within so short a time after Walter's rejection, to become the affianced wife of a man whose wealth was reckoned by millions.

The circumstances under which she paid the visit to the rectory forbade all allusion to the past; and Blanche did not dare to even inquire after Walter's health. The visit was altogether so painful a one to her that, the second time she came, she brought Harvey Van Rensselaer with her, so that his presence might act as a guard against any ebullition of her feelings.

On this Saturday morning, however, she came alone. The doctor had just left, after expressing his satisfaction at the progress his patient was making, and predicting that in a week he would be able to leave his couch, and in four weeks, perhaps, dispense even with a sling.

The rector and Mabel were in the sick-room, but after greeting Blanche they discreetly withdrew from the chamber, leaving brother and sister alone together.

Frank was sitting up in bed, and his face flushed violently as his sister bent over and kissed him. He muttered an inward prayer for moral and physical fortitude to go through the ordeal he had set for himself.

How he managed to begin, he himself could not afterward tell. There was little fear of interruption after he once made a start, for Blanche was riveted to her chair—bereft of the powers of speech and motion by the terrible tale he had to tell.

He concealed nothing, he smoothed over nothing, from Walter's first interview with him down to his confession of guilt of a crime which he had never committed. He revealed all to Blanche, who at the end could only exclaim:

"Oh, Frank, what have you done, what have you done!"

"Blanche, Blanche," cried the young man, with the hot tears streaming down his face, "I cannot hope that you will forgive me. I blighted your love and Walter's, because I did not know what love was. The passion I scorned took its own revenge on me. My severest punishment is that I love. As passionately as Walter adored you, I love his sister Mabel. My love will remain unrequited, untold. I have sundered your's and Walter's hearts. Mine is pierced by a barbed arrow which will rankle there forever."

"Oh, what shall I do, what shall I do!" exclaimed Blanche, springing from her chair and pacing up and down the room in the greatest agitation. "I am bound, bound to another, and I have cast off the man whom I love and will ever love. Oh, had he mentioned to me personally the fear which possessed him, and which induced him to entrust his secret to you, I would have laughed it to scorn, for what care I who his father or mother was. It is he I love. He was and is my hero, my idol. And now, now I am tied, promised to a fool—a golden calf!"

She was on the point of becoming hysterical when the door opened and the rector entered the room. He had come to interrupt the interview which he feared was being too prolonged. He started back at sight of Blanche's agitation, and more so when she fell on her knees before him and hysterically clung to him.

"Reverend father, holy sir," she gasped, "have mercy upon me. I have wronged Walter, so terribly wronged him. I did not know that I had done so. I have just learned it. Tell me how to undo my wrong—advise me. I look to you and your holy office for counsel and help. Do not turn from me, do not cast me off with scorn and contempt, or I shall go mad."

"My dear miss," exclaimed the clergy-

man, raising her from the floor, "what is the meaning of this extraordinary outburst? Nay, you must not kneel to me. I am but a humble servant of the Lord. There, there, compose yourself."

He led her gently to the sofa, onto which she sank, completely exhausted by the violence of her emotions.

"Speak, Frank," she stammered, "speak; tell him all. I cannot."

Once more the sad story of cruel deception and selfish intrigue was repeated. The rector preserved a very serious face throughout its recital, but toward the close his kindly countenance relaxed, and a faint smile hovered around the corner of his lips and beamed from his clear blue eyes.

"This is not the time to pass judgment upon you," he said to Frank. "That you have done wrong you yourself acknowledge. I believe that you are sincere in your repentance and in your desire, as far as possible, to right the wrong. Miss Blanche," he added, turning to her, "can you lay your hand on your heart and say that, if you were freed from your present engagement, you would make Walter happy with your love?"

"I can do so," mournfully replied Blanche; "but of what avail will it be? Mr. Van Rensselaer may not choose to release me; and if he does, Walter loves me no longer. When he knows all he will despise me."

"We will see about that," retorted the good rector, the smile in his eyes deepening to a merry twinkle. "Your brother's main object in life seems to have been to put your hearts asunder; mine, both as man and shepherd of the Lord, shall be to join them together again. Your brother, frivolous as he was, has committed no crime. Your engagement to Mr. Van Rensselaer, entered into under a misapprehension of the power he held over your brother, is null and void, as being made under duress. If he is a gentleman he will release you at once. Then a line from me will bring Walter home with the first steamer. I dare say all the water in the Atlantic Ocean cannot quench the ardor of his passion. The poor fellow is wailing himself to death in the capitals of Europe. A word of explanation after he arrives here, and, as the poet has it, 'two hearts will beat as one.'"

"Oh, sir, you will do this for me?"

"At once, Blanche. Walter's happiness is bound up in yours. It is for his sake, as well as for yours, that I act. If I thought you two wouldn't agitate each other anymore this morning, I'd take a run down to this Van Rensselaer's office myself, and open his eyes to a proper appreciation of the condition of affairs as it is."

His resolve was rendered unnecessary by the announcement of the servant that Mr. Van Rensselaer was below.

Blanche turned pale and slowly rose to her feet. Frank became uneasy; but the rector briskly said:

"Show him up immediately. His coming is very opportune."

The young scion of the old Knickerbockers, attired in all the glory of a gorgeous summer morning toilet, entered the room in a rather bad humor. He had called at Blanche's house to take her out driving, and was annoyed to find her out. He did not like this going to the parson's house, as he termed it, to fetch her.

The rector, in his eagerness, barely gave him time to bid good-morning, before he made a brief statement of what the reader already knows, concluding with a demand, on behalf of Blanche, for her release from her betrothal.

Harvey turned his fishy eyes on Frank.

"So you have been playing me for a fool, have you?" he hissed in a passion of rage. "I will show you I am not so much of a fool as I look. I hold the forged check in my possession. If Miss Barton desires to be released from her engagement to me, she has only to say so. But she does it at her brother's peril. I shall lodge my complaint against him, and have this house surrounded by detectives. As soon as he is able to leave he will be arrested. At the trial he will be given an opportunity to prove his innocence—if he can."

CHAPTER XXII.

HOMEWARD BOUND.

Harvey Van Rensselaer abruptly left the room, uttering the defiance which we have recorded in our last chapter.

This action, so unexpected from one whom they had believed to be a gentleman, filled Blanche with despair, and made even the rector look very grave. As for Frank, the cause of all this complication, he was willing to suffer any punishment, go to prison for life, if necessary, only he begged his sister not to become the wife of the man to whom she was betrothed.

"It is no question of your going to prison," said the clergyman. "If the facts are as you have stated, and Mr. Van Rensselaer has not denied it, you will be acquitted. Miss Barton, Blanche—you will permit me to call you Blanche—need not make herself miserable for life through any fear of harm coming to you. The main point is to avoid the publicity and the scandal which this young broker seems to be bent upon. For that purpose we need good legal advice, and I know of no attorney so competent for the occasion as a certain young lawyer at present in Paris."

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"You would recall Walt—Mr. Wainwright?" said Blanche.

"Of course. Who else?" asked the clergyman beaming at her through his gold-rimmed spectacles.

"Oh, the mortification of it," she cried, wringing her hands.

"Come, come, my dear Blanche; tell me honestly. Won't you be happy, in your inmost heart, to see him again?" She blushed and was silent.

Without going into further details, the cablegram, the contents of which the reader already knows, was sent to Paris, from which place it was forwarded to London.

The rector hardly exaggerated Blanche's condition of mind.

Rather than go to the altar with Harvey Van Rensselaer on the one hand, or endure the shame which the publication of her brother's trial for forgery would involve on the other, she would commit suicide.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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