

THE RECTOR'S SECRET.

LOVE CONQUERS ALL.

A STUDY FROM LIFE. BY J. R. ABARBANELL.
CHAPTER V.—Continued.

He approached her a few steps and made a gesture as if to pass his arm around her waist to support her, but she waved him away, and with a mute motion of her head bade him commence.

"I will repeat, Blanche, he began, "that he loves you truly, sincerely, with all his heart and soul. But such love, which is the fruition of manhood's aspiration, is entirely compatible with a youthful infatuation. In his college days, long before he ever saw you, he loved a village maid, was beloved by her."

A tremor shook Blanche from head to foot, but she bit her lips to prevent any ejaculation issuing from her mouth, and her brother proceeded, inventing his story as he went along.

"How beautiful she was, I need not describe to you in his terms, but she was uncouth in manners, rustic in speech, not the girl who could make him happy as his wife. As he realized this fact his infatuation left him, and it was completely banished from his heart from the first moment that he saw you. In one sense of the word you are his first love, for his youthful fancy was as fleeting and evanescent as the air. It was the very knowledge of the character of this love for you which has sealed his lips to a declaration of it until to-night."

Blanche allowed herself to breathe a little easier.

"We women too, have our girlish fancies, our school romances," she said, with a faint attempt at a smile. "I can forgive his secret, if it is nothing more than that. He need not at all have revealed it."

"Ah, if it were only that, he would not have spoken. If his honor had not been compromised, if he did not owe a husband's obligation to her who should have been his wife, a father's duty to his nameless child—"

He interrupted himself to catch his sister's form in his arms, as with a low moan she sank forward toward the floor. He carried her to the sofa, and would have summoned help, but she had recovered from her momentary swoon and stayed him by the hand.

"I will be brave, I will be firm," she kept repeating, with quivering lips, "but, oh, it is hard, so hard!"

Frank knelt beside her and held her hand in his.

"This was the secret which he bade me tell you," he continued. "You are to him so holy, so sublime above all other women, that he could not ask you to accompany him to the altar in ignorance of this, the only blot in his otherwise honorable life. All credit to him for acting so. This girl has no legal claims on him; his marriage to you would be perfectly legitimate. He would be to you the most faithful and devoted of husbands. How many other young men in similar positions would have simply kept silent, how many have actually done so? It is true," he rather shyly added, "there is sometime a scandal, an explosion in church. A bridegroom at the altar and a poor woman struggling up the aisle, calling on Heaven to witness that by the laws of God, if not of man, he is her husband. But from what I have understood from Walter, there need be no apprehension of this sort. The girl has forgiven if not forgotten him. It is simply a matter for you to decide. If your great love for him will enable you to overlook his fault, if like the majority of women, you will acquit him on legal, if not moral grounds, then you have only to write him a word to that effect, and he will be here to-morrow, the happiest of bridegrooms."

"And you," she faintly asked.

"Oh! I'm a man of the world, you know," he nonchalantly replied, rising to his feet. "I'll do like all the rest of society, extend my hand to him, and congratulate him on his success."

Blanche slowly rose to her feet. She was deadly white, but the lines of her mouth were firmly drawn and compressed. Her brown eyes glittered like two living coals of fire.

"Let him marry the girl who has a prior claim upon him," she slowly, but distinctly said. "Let him father her child. I reject him."

Then she was seized with a sudden revulsion of feeling, and sinking into her brother's arm, she, for the first time during the interview, burst into a flood of bitter tears.

"But oh! Frank, Frank," she sobbed "I love him so."

"Then lay you pride aside, and—"

"No, no," she interrupted, through her tears. "I can weep over my broken hopes, I can keep his image still implanted in my heart, but I can, also, be proud. He has inflicted a cruel, cruel blow on me. He ought never to have won my affections, he should not have allowed his own to become centered on me. Ah me! My refusal will pain him as much as it pains me to give it, but he must bear it like a

man. He must do what duty plainly prompts him. He must marry this girl, and—forget me, as I—I will try to forget him."

Another burst of tears interrupted her here.

"Bear with me to-night, brother," she stammered. "It is very hard to catch a glimpse of Paradise, and then to see the gates shut and close you out in the darkness of despair. But I will be firm and brave to-morrow. Oh, so brave!"

She was getting quite hysterical, and Frank led her from the parlor to her room in sorrow at the pain she was so evidently suffering, yet none the less determined to continue the miserable deception he had begun.

CHAPTER VI. SUNDERED HEARTS.

In the library of the rectory sat Walter Wainright, an utterly crushed man. The tears trickled from between the fingers of the hand which covered his face, his other hand tightly clenched the crumpled letter, which he had just received, and which was the cause of all his woes.

Thus he sat, with his elbow resting on the table, the very picture of despair.

It is a piteous spectacle to see a strong man weep; the heart must be wrung, indeed, to call forth tears from manly eyes.

He had read the letter ten times already, yet, like the wounded savage, who, with both his hands, presses in still deeper the dart which is rankling in his breast, he again turned to the missive, to inflict a new pang on his bleeding heart.

It was written by Blanche, her brother had dictated the words. Its contents were as follows:

Miss Barton presents her compliments to Mr. Wainright, and acknowledges the high sense of honor which induced him to make the revelation which he did to her brother, prior to asking her hand in marriage. Whatever feelings she may have had for him, based upon a friendly intercourse, which was not without its attractions for her, she is sorry, nevertheless, to be obliged to state that she cannot fly in the face of public opinion, and best moral sentiment, which she would have to do in becoming his wife. With her best wishes for his future welfare she begs leave to sign herself

His obedient servant,
BLANCHE BARTON.

There it was, cold and formal, and written in that most exasperating of forms, the third person singular.

Rejected! And why?

In obedience to a public opinion, which put without the pale of society the innocent victim of another's fault, in blind adherence to a moral sentiment, which visited the sins of the parents on their offsprings, even to the fourth generation.

And this opinion, this sentiment which robbed him of the girl he loved, who, in spite of her letter, he felt, he knew, loved him, he would meet them everywhere through life. They had blighted his heart, they would crush his ambition, they would make of his name a sneer and a by-word, they would resolve his future life into a long, hopeless battle against social prejudices, at the end of which defeated, hounded out existence, he would sink into an unknown, unnumbered grave.

No wonder the strong man wept, no wonder the iron of despair entered his soul! It was not simply the rejection of his suit, it was the stamping on his brow the brand of the Pariah, the outcast.

The door softly opened, so softly that the weeping man did not hear it turn on its hinges. A young girl, so light, so etherially fair, that she seemed more like an angel than a human being, appeared at the threshold. She saw the young man but his head was bowed in his hand, and he did not perceive her.

Evidently she had not expected to find him there, for she gave a slight start, and was about to retreat from the room, when she noticed the tears trickling from between his fingers.

Oh, what an expression of sympathy and love overswept her radiant face. For a moment she hesitated, then gliding softly over the velvet carpet, she approached him unawares, and, clasping her arms around his neck, tenderly, yet anxiously inquired:

"You are crying, Walter?"

He raised his head with a start and exclaimed:

"Mabel!"

Then letting it sink entirely on the table, he murmured in the bitterness of his heart:

"You, too, are lost to me."

"Lost to you," she repeated. "I do not understand. What moves you so? What has happened? Why do you weep? Won't you tell me, Walter? Won't you confide in your sister?"

He disengaged himself from her embrace and struggled to his feet.

"Sister!" he exclaimed, echoing her last words. "Oh, heaven, I have no sister now!"

He clasped her to his heart and she felt the hot tears drop on her face as he pressed his lips to hers.

"You will always remember that, Mabel," he continued with increasing agitation. "We are brother and sister, on earth as well as in heaven. You will always think of me as your brother when I am gone. You will pray for me; prayers from your pure lips, from your innocent heart, must always find favor at the throne of mercy. And, in your petitions, think of a sister angel as beautiful and as holy as you are, let her name, the name of Blanche, be joined with mine. Tell the rector my father—not to mourn for me. I—I—oh, Mabel, I am too unhappy to live."

He wanted to throw her off and rush from the room, but Mabel, now in the wildest state of alarm, clung to him with desperate energy.

"No, no!" she fairly shrieked, "you shall not go, you shall not leave me. Whatever your griefs are, you have no right to lay violent hands on yourself."

"Let me go, Mabel," he cried, struggling to get free.

"I won't, I won't," she desperately continued. "Think of me, think of father. You will break our hearts. Oh, won't you hear me! Help, help, father, help!"

The rector appeared at the threshold. He had been out and had at that moment returned.

Mabel let go her hold on Walter and ran toward her father.

"Close the door," she shrieked. "Keep him back, father! Walter—suicide!"

The excitement overcame her entirely. Before she could reach her father's side she fell prostrate in the center of the room in a dead swoon.

"My God, I have killed her," cried Walter, rushing forward and kneeling down beside her.

"She will recover," said the rector, in his gentle tones. "Her condition does not afflict me as much as yours. What were the words I heard as I entered?"

Walter made no reply, but silently handed him Blanche's letter. The rector adjusted his eye-glasses and carefully perused it.

There was a momentary twitching of the corners of his mouth, as if he were laboring under some inward emotion, but when he spoke his voice did not betray the agitation he felt.

"And because this girl prefers a purely conventional morality to a higher, diviner one," he said, with a touch of sternness in his tones, "you rashly wish to take the life God has given you."

"The world will judge as she judges, murmured Walter, bitterly.

"Vain youth," exclaimed the rector, "who is not satisfied with the approbation of his own conscience, his foster father's devotion, his sister's love, but must needs have a certificate of good standing from a callous selfish world, which does not care a particle about him or his troubles anyway. That you love Miss Barton, I grant, that her rejection of you pains you deeply, I admit, but is that sufficient reason for you to act the part of an ingrate toward us, of a coward toward yourself?"

"Is it cowardly," asked Walter, in a low voice, "to seek that rest in the grave which is denied one on earth?"

"Think, Walter," replied the clergyman, mournfully, while his lips trembled with a strange agitation. "Think of the many hearts that ache, think of the pang of unrequited love, of unremitted shame, of remorse for past deeds, ay, of secret guilt, which make life a torture and death seem a boon of bliss. Ah, yes, Walter, it is brave, very brave to live under such circumstances, and to live it down. I ask this bravery of you. I ask it for my sake, who loves you deeper, dearer than I could love any son of my own. I ask it for the sake of her who lies there, as one dead, before us. When she awakes and finds you are gone, what answer shall I, can I make? I ask in the name of her who has wounded you now. Were she here, she would plead with me. While there's hope, Walter, the dark clouds will roll away, the sunshine come again. Girls are sometimes fickle-minded; the next messenger may bring you a response to your suit. Live, Walter; live to clear up your mother's fair fame; live to, perhaps even become proud of the man to whom you owe your birth, and whom you you now hate and despise; live to make this proud girl humbly sue for the love which to-day she casts away."

"You have conquered, father," said Walter, extending his hand to him. "Oh, holy man, oh divine preacher, you have instilled in my heart a ray of hope, where

"No sister!" cried Mabel, bewilderedly, her gentle eyes filling with tears. "What then am I?"

He put the crumpled letter in his pocket, and held out his arms to her.

"Forgive me, darling," he exclaimed, kissing her flaxen ringlets as she nestled her head on his shoulders. "I did not know what I was saying. Yes, yes, you are my sister. I'm your brother, am I not? You know we were brought up together; we always loved each other. Say that I am your brother."

She raised her head and glanced at him with her blue eyes filled with wonder.

"Why should I say it?" she asked.

"I wish to hear the word from your sweet lips," he replied, with a pathos she could not understand.

"Brother!"

"Sister!"

all before was the darkness of despair. But before I rise, father, let me swear here, beside Mabel's outstretched form, to cast out of my heart all thought of love, all brooding over my disappointed hopes. One aspiration alone shall fill my soul, one duty be the guiding star of my future life—to find my mother, if she lives; to avenge her wrongs, if she be dead."

He kissed his sister's cold impassive lips, in token of his vows, and rose to his feet.

"Brave Walter," gratefully exclaimed the rector, as he cordially shook the young man by the hand, and furtively wiped away the tears which had risen in his eyes. "I have not the slightest objection to your noble quest. But you are not at present in the state of mind fit to pursue what may turn out to be a very harassing inquiry. You need a change of scenes and associations to quiet and compose you. I suppose," he added, with a smile, "that you are not overburdened with law business just at present."

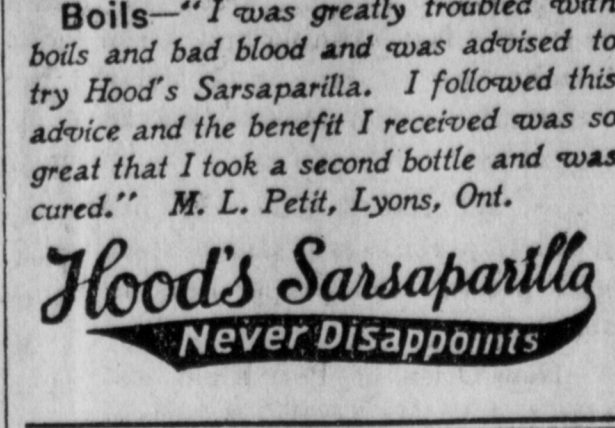
"The courts are about closing, not to re-open until October," replied Walter, "business need not detain me in town."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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EQUAL RIGHTS.

Discussing questions growing out of the war in South Africa, The Morning News, of Plymouth, Eng., says: "There is a Dutch Prime Minister at the Cape, and the Prime Minister of Canada is of French descent. With such examples before them, the Boers should never have had any doubt of the justice, freedom and equality which England extends to all who are under her flag. Canada judges the British cause from the standpoint of colonial ideas of liberty and equality, and it is because she thinks our cause just that the Dominion has sent her sons to help us. Sir Wilfrid Laurier expressed not only the sentiments of the colonists, but those of Great Britain, when he hoped that the war would end in a victory which will take away from the Dutch population none of the civil or political rights which they enjoy to-day, but which will compel them to give to others the same treatment they always insisted upon for themselves, a victory which will probably bring about a South African Confederation in which there will be justice and freedom for all, and absolute equality before the law. With these grand ideals, these aspirations, these principles, before them," said Sir Wilfrid Laurier, "the colonies of Great Britain stand behind her, not to give her assistance—she does not need that—but to affirm to the world that the unity of the British Empire is a real and living fact." These are words which come like music across the Atlantic to our ears. We need have no fear for the Empire when her sons can speak like that before the whole world"



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