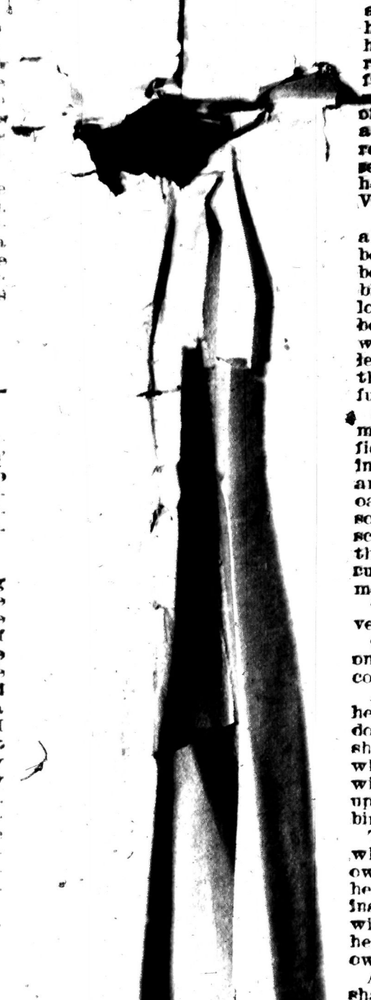
IN SPITE OF HIS BIRTH.



"But my life was ruined—my heart was broken, at least for the time; for"—and a sob burst from her quivering lips at this point—"I never looked upon the faces of my parents again. I—their idolized and only child—had to flee from the sight of every one whom I knew to hide my shame. And they both died of grief in less than three months. Then for long years I toiled for the support of myself and child. I would gladly have died, but I dared not take the life that was God-given, nor shirk the sad responsibility laid upon me, and doom my boy to orphanhood, and the cold charity of an indifferent world. How glad I have been since that I did not, in my despair, thus rashly sin past all forgiveness, for, at last, my reward came; and, through the kindness and conscientiousness of the Rev. Dr. Harris, of Chicago, I now hold the papers to prove that I was made a legal wife. Ah! you can never realize how I exulted over the fact—not because I was your wife—for I would have scorned to assert claim upon you; but because every shadow or dishonor was removed from me, and my dear boy. It made a new woman of me—it gave me life—renewed my youth—put strength, and hope and joy into my heart; and now the future looks very bright for us both."

But the man before her knew that no thought in connection with him served to brighten that future; he realized, but too plainly, that every spark of the affection which she might have once experienced for him, had burned to ashes in her heart.

This was very patent to him even before she drew her slight, graceful figure to its full height, and resumed:

"But for you, Richard Heatherton"—and, lifting one taper, rose-tipped finger, she pointed toward the door—"you can go from here as stealthily as you came in, for you have no part nor lot in my life, even though, in the sight of the law you may be my legal husband. I glory in the fact only because of my triumph over you and the wrong you would have done me, and because it gives an honorable name to my son; but you are no more to me than the stones of yonder pavement, which every day I tread beneath my feet."

"Miriam——"

"Never dare to address me like that," she burst forth, before he could utter another word, while a vivid scarlet flushed her face, "I am to you as a stranger—I will not recognize you as anything else; I will have nothing to do with you."

Richard Heatherton thought he had never seen her so beautiful as she was at that moment—not even in her youthful days, while as he gazed about the beautiful room, which everywhere showed traces of her care and taste, and realized the charm of her presence, a regret for what might have been, if he had done what was right and honorable, smote him painfully—a sense of remorse for the wrong he had done her, and the son of whom any father might feel proud, and, more than all else, for the irreparable injury which must in consequence fell upon the darling of his heart—his bright, beautiful, idolized Vera.

Ah! this was the keenest sting of all—that his sin against one who had been scarcely less beautiful, who had been equally pure and innocent, must blight, for all time, the life of his lovely child; for—the thought seared both heart and brain—if his marriage with Miriam Wallingford had been legal, the tie which had bound him to that other woman had not been lawful, and—Vera was illegitimate.

Surely, what his uncle had only that morning said to him was being verified in the most unexpected and crushing manner—he was indeed "reaping an abundant harvest" for the "wild oats" he had so boasted of having sown in his youth, and the relentless scythe had fallen where he had never thought it possible—it had ruthlessly cut down and laid low his dearest, his most cherished hopes.

These thoughts drove him to the verge of despair.

Oh! it did not seem possible that in one moment of time the world and life could be so bereft of light and hope.

Ah! could Miriam have suffered as he now suffered, when he smote her down with that one word to which she had referred a little while ago, when he had twitted her in his anger with the stigma which would rest upon her child when she should give it birth.

Those were "wild oats," indeed, which he must now gather into his own garner; the opprobrious epithets he had thrown at Miriam, years ago, instead of branding his intended victim with shame, had rebounded to dishonor her who was dearer to him than his own life.

A tempest of wrath, and grief, and shame, raged within him, as these thoughts surged through his brain.

But Vera should never know—no such grief must ever dim the light of her beautiful eyes, or mar the brightness of her happy face.

But it galled him terribly to think of Miriam Wallingford and her boy, here in Benjamin Lawson's home, triumphing over him, and perhaps wheedling the old man out of the fortune which he had so confidently expected would come into his possession, by inheritance, and thus descend eventually to Vera.

He resolved that they should never succeed, if such was their aim; he would overthrow them by some means; he would trample them in the dust before they should usurp his rights; he would gain his ends by strategy if he could—by violence, if he must.

"How came you here in Boston, and in Benjamin Lawson's household?" he demanded, when he could command himself sufficiently to speak, and ignoring Miriam's last bitter words.

"That is a question which does not concern you," she coldly replied.

"Perhaps it does concern me more than you realize," he returned, hotly. "I suppose you know who—what he is."

"Yes; I know that he is an honorable gentleman," Miriam responded, with significant emphasis.

Her companion winced visibly, and flushed.

"I mean what his relationship is to me," he said.

"His relationship to you!" repeated Miriam, with a scornful inflection, yet with a slight start of surprise; "I do not believe one drop of his blood flows in your veins."

Richard Heatherton looked astonished at this reply, for he could not doubt its sincerity.

"Is it possible that you do not know?" he exclaimed.

"Know what?" she inquired, breathlessly.

"That he is my uncle—my mother's only brother?—do you pretend you never suspected this, and have not wormed yourself into his confidence and good graces, in the hope of securing the fortune which should come to me, for your son?" her companion demanded, with a skeptical sneer upon his handsome but evil face.

CHAPTER XXXI.

Miriam Heatherton looked amazed at her companion's communication.

"Benjamin Lawson your uncle—your mother's brother?" she exclaimed, ignoring his contemptible insinuations regarding her motives, "No; I do not—I cannot believe it."

"It is the truth; my mother's name, before her marriage was Rachel Lawson," the man asserted, so positively that she could no longer doubt the truthfulness of his statement.

Then it dawned upon her why Mr. Lawson had always been so kind to her and Ned; why he had, from the very first of their acquaintance with him, shown so much tender interest in them.

He had doubtless suspected, at the outset, that they were the wife and child of his nephew, whom he believed to be dead, and this, of course, had been proved to him when she had confessed who she was, and related her history to him.

But she thought it very strange that he had never told her of the fact, and acknowledged the relationship.

Why had he concealed the truth from her all these years? Did he fear that she and Ned would take advantage of the fact to worm his fortune from him, as had just been suggested?

The rich color mounted to the sensitive woman's brow, at the bare thought of his suspecting her of anything so ignoble.

"Yes, it is a fact," Richard Heatherton continued, "and, in spite of your pretensions to the contrary, I believe you have known it all along, and have been playing your cards for his money."

"I have not," Miriam indignantly returned. "I never dreamed of such a thing; you are only judging me after your own ignoble standard."

"But I am his legal heir," the man went on—"his only heir, next to my mother, and, eventually I shall inherit all that he has. Now, Miriam," he continued, in a conciliatory tone, "be reasonable and sensible—don't set yourself up against me as a foe, and try to ruin my prospects with my uncle. Let by-gones be by-gones. I know that I used you meanly years ago; but if, as you say, that marriage was legal, why, we must try to come to some amicable terms, and I will agree to make a comfortable provision for you and—the boy, for the future; that is, if you will agree not to interfere with my expectations."

But Miriam had grown cold and haughty during his speech. Her lovely eyes, however, glowed like coals of fire; her lips curled with contempt for the wretched specimen of a man before her.

"'Be sensible!' she repeated. "I ought to have expected such an admonition from you, perhaps, since I so idiotically allowed myself, years ago, to be persuaded by you into a secret engagement and clandestine marriage. Oh! if young girls could only realize the doom that is sure to follow such a reckless act how much suffering and remorse they might be spared! But I came to myself—my eyes were opened by your heartlessness on that day when you revealed your baseness—your true character to me, and every atom of my love for you was burned out of my heart. 'Let bygones be bygones'? Yes, that is just what I wish to do—what I have done? All sentiment regarding you has been so thoroughly eradicated from my nature that you are to me as if you never had existed. I ignore, I repudiate you utterly; I would never have even acknowledged the legality of our marriage, much less attempted to prove it, but that my boy might be able to claim that he was of honorable birth."

It was not pleasant to her companion to be obliged to stand there and listen to such seathing words, and they cut him like a two-edged sword.

No man can patiently endure the disdain and repudiation of the woman over whom he has once held unbounded sway, and Richard Heatherton's arrogant nature was galled by the stinging words of his injured wife.

"No, Richard Heatherton, you are nothing to me," she resumed, after a moment; "you never can be anything to me. I have so risen above you and the wrongs you have done me, that I am not even moved to hate you, as some women would do. You can judge, perhaps, how utterly indifferent I am to you when I tell you that I am living happily in the present; I enjoy life—every day is full of sunshine and content in the performance of my duties and in looking forward to a promising future for my dear boy. Never come near me again, Richard Heatherton—never speak to me, never remind me of the past. If, as you say, you are Mr. Lawson's nephew, and you must come here to visit him, I suppose I shall be obliged to meet you as I would meet any other stranger who might be a relative of his. If you are his legal heir, and expect to inherit his fortune, that is nothing to me—I have never had a thought of receiving anything more from him than the amount which he pays me monthly, for caring for his home, and in return for which I try to make it as pleasant as possible for him. Your insinuation that I have been playing my cards for his fortune is too contemptible to be refuted. Now go; I never wish to see your face again."

"Then I understand that you have no desire to acknowledge the tie that exists between us," the disconcerted man remarked, while he wondered at, and was unaccountably irritated by her utter indifference toward him.

"Oh, yes," the fair woman calmly replied, "I acknowledge that I was made your legal wife some twenty years ago—that is a fact which I am very particular about having established; but, as for ever recognizing you as my husband—no; a thousand times no!"

"How about a divorce, then?" he ventured to suggest.

Miriam's crimson lips curled with irrepressible scorn.

"I could never be more completely divorced from you than I am at this moment," she icily returned.

The man flushed. She was very lovely, standing there, so cool and self-possessed; so satisfied with her present independent position; so supremely indifferent to his existence, and their relations in the past, and his old passion for her was suddenly renewed. But for Vera and his desire to shield her from the knowledge that he had had another wife living at the time of his marriage to her mother, he felt that he would leave no stone unturned to win back the sweet confidence and affection of this fair woman, whom he had so ruthlessly discarded, and whom any man might have been proud to acknowledge as his wife.

But, since there could be no hope of this, he resolved to manage some way to secure himself and prevent her from ever making him any trouble regarding her uncle's property, if the old man should happen to die without making a will.

"Then, perhaps, you will sign a paper releasing me from all future responsibility or obligation toward you," he said, though a sense of the shamelessness of such a request dyed his face crimson for the moment.

"All future responsibility or obligation!" Miriam repeated, with flashing eyes, "judging from the burden you have borne in the past, in those respects, such a document would, no doubt, be very valuable to you," she concluded, with seathing sarcasm.

The man had never been so conscious of his own meanness and littleness as at that moment, and he winced visibly under her satire.

"I suppose, however," she added, "I am to understand by that that you wish me to sign away my right of dower as a wife?"

"Yes," he answered, with averted face—he could not meet the fine scorn which he knew was gleaming in her blue orbs.

"I shall never do that, Richard Heatherton," she returned, with emphatic decision: "and even if I should that would not secure you against the claims of your son."

He knew it but too well, and it made him realize Vera's terrible situation with a feeling of despair such as he had not experienced.

This was followed by a blaze of anger and defiance, accompanied by a desire for revenge upon Miriam because of the victory she had achieved over him.

"You shall regret this!" he cried, vindictively.

"Regrets in connection with you have long since ceased," she composedly returned.

"Do not be too sure," he retorted; "there are more ways than one of wounding you and making you feel my power. Look out for yourself, Miriam Wallingford, and look out for the boy of whom you are so boastful."

With this vindictive warning the man turned abruptly and left the room and the house, while Miriam sank upon a chair with both hands pressed over her startled heart, a terrible fear suddenly depriving her of all strength.

Ah, yes, she thought, he might make her feel his cruel power through Ned! he could indeed crush her to the earth if he should dare to injure her boy in any way, and for a time she was distressed by a thousand fears.

Then she reasoned that she was in a city where crime and personal violence could not be committed with impunity.

Ned was a man now, too, and capable of looking out for himself personally; while, as far as principles were concerned, he was thoroughly good and pure, and she felt sure no one could have power to corrupt him.

It had been but an idle threat, uttered under the impulse of anger, she told herself, and she would not allow herself to be disturbed by it.

As she grew more composed, she realized how literally true her words to Richard Heatherton had been, how utterly indifferent she was to him—how completely he had lost all power to move her to either love or late.

Her love for him had indeed burned to ashes, and nothing could ever rekindle it.

As for the man himself, he went out of Benjamin Lawson's house wrought up to the highest pitch of excitement.

He had expected to browbeat the woman whom he had wronged into abject submission to his wishes, as he was wont to do years ago in his youth. But he had failed most miserably, and he had been made to realize instead, that he had been the destroyer of his own life and peace—that he had begun, in bitter earnest, to reap a harvest from the "wild oats" which he had sown twenty years ago.

He had more reason for fleeing from the country than was generally supposed when he had disappeared so suddenly after leaving college. Not only did he fear trouble from the proud young girl whom he had driven to desperation, but also from her furious father, who upon learning how his daughter had been wronged had sent him word that he "would shoot him like a dog if he should ever lay eyes upon him." Then his own father and uncle had received an inkling of the story, and, becoming enraged over it and the enormous debts he had contracted during his college days, hotly denounced him, refused to pay his bills and ordered him to go to work and take care of himself in the future.

With his cowardly heart full of fear and hatred, he had recklessly boarded the first steamer bound for Europe and put the ocean between himself and the consequence of his misdeeds.

But, even after reaching England he was haunted by a sense of insecurity, and so resolved to ship for Australia, where, he felt sure, no one connected with his former life would ever be able to find him.

While on his way to this country the man who shared his stateroom was taken suddenly ill and died, as he had related to his uncle, and, resolving to make assurance doubly sure, he determined to destroy his identity by personating the dead man, and allowing all on board to believe that it was Richard Heatherton, of New York, U. S. A., who had died when two days at sea.

This he could the more easily do, since both had been seasick from the hour of starting, and, having been confined to their stateroom, no one had had an opportunity to identify either. The man told him the first day out, that he had no friends—he had lost his family, and was trying to flee from his sorrow; therefore no inquiries would be made for him, and there was no fear that the deception would ever be discovered.

Having thus blotted himself out of existence, so to speak, he was prepared to begin a new life in the country whither he was going.

Being a good accountant, he readily found employment when he arrived in Sydney; and remained in the service of one firm for the next three or four years, and to whom he gave the name of Heath.

During this time he met Anita Castaldi, a beautiful Spanish girl, and the only child of a widow of great wealth.

The mother was an invalid, and Richard, who was not fond of toiling for his living, and who found it difficult to support his expensive tastes upon his modest salary, resolved that he would win the girl and the fortune, which in the course of a few months must be hers.

The beautiful Spanish maiden was as lovely in character as in person, and, believing her handsome lover to be all that he represented himself, she gave her heart unreservedly to the ardent suitor.

Anita's mother shared her daughter's belief in the moral worth of the young man, and willingly gave her consent to their union, feeling that she should thus have her darling happy in the care and protection of a noble and devoted husband.

Accordingly they were married by the woman's dying bed, and three weeks later she passed away, leaving her daughter sorrowing, but not inconsolable, over her loss, for, out of the fervor of her Spanish nature, she idolized her husband, and all other emotions were absorbed in this.

(To be Continued.)

He Was Convinced.

"Once, when I was publishing a paper in Seattle, I convinced a man in the most emphatic way that it paid to advertise," said an old journalist. "He was a fairly prosperous merchant, and I had tried for a long time to get him to insert an advertisement in my paper.

"'Oh, it's no use!' he would say. 'I never read the advertisements in a paper, and no one else does. I believe in advertising, but in a way that will force itself upon the public. Then it pays. But in a newspaper—pshaw! Everybody who reads a newspaper dodges the advertising pages as if they were poison.'

"'Well,' said I, 'if I can convince you that people do read the advertising pages of my paper, will you advertise?'

"'Of course I will. I advertise wherever I think it will do any good.'

"The next day I had the following line stuck in the most obscure corner of the paper, between a couple of patent-medicine advertisements:

"'What is Cohen going to do about it?'

"The next day so many people annoyed him by asking what that meant that he begged me to explain the matter in my next issue. I promised to do so if he would let me write the explanation, and stand by it. He agreed; and I wrote, 'He is going to advertise, of course.' And he did."—New York Herald.

A Blundering Genius.

Miss Cholmondeley's "Red Pottage" continues to be the novelistic sensation in England, while in America it is pressing the local favorites hard. 'Tis a strange mixture of genius and ignorance. Its plot is original. So, all too frequently, is its grammar. The very first line in the book includes an outrageous literary blunder. Here is it:

"'I can't get out,' said Swift's starling."

Now, a very ordinary acquaintance with English literature would have informed Miss Cholmondeley that Sterne, not Swift, originated the famous fable of the starling who couldn't get out. Perhaps the "Sentimental Journey" is not read much nowadays, but this little episode is contained in many and many a book of "Elegant Extracts" or "Prose Preserves."

Dom Pedro's Library Sold.

The library of Dom Pedro, of Brazil, was recently sold at auction in Vienna. There were 1,155 volumes and the highest price obtained was for a mineralogical year book extending from 1830 to 1892. Works of fiction were mostly uncut, whereas the scientific books had evidently been read carefully and some of them had marginal notes.