

Will The Bitterness of Their Sin Find Them Out Yet?

The Surprising Result of the Scandalous Runaway of the Rev. Jere Cooke and Little Floretta Whaley Which Has Turned Out So Differently from What Everybody Predicted--But Is the Usual Miserable End Still to Come?



Florence Schenck BEFORE Running Away with Alfred Vanderbilt's Horse Trainer, Wilson



NOT in rags, not broken in health, not with the hanging head of a girl eternally disgraced; but well dressed, the strong, healthy mother of two fine boys toddling at her skirts, clear-eyed hopeful—Floretta Whaley has returned to her home village on Long Island, from which she eloped five years ago with the Rev. Jere Cooke, then rector of St. George's Episcopal Church, Hempstead, L. I., of which August Belmont is senior warden.

This unusual situation—so seemingly subversive of the moral law which prescribes bitter compensation in such cases, and generally exacts it—is emphasized by the persistent devotion and the evident prosperity of Floretta Whaley's companion sinner. The former clergyman, pet of a fashionable congregation, has learned the trade of painter and decorator so well that he runs his own shop in San Francisco, and while back in the East with his companion and their children finds profitable work at his trade in New York City.

As though to further outrage and set at naught all precedents in such cases, Mrs. Cooke confesses to a change of heart. She now contemplates divorcing the former clergyman, so that he may make an honest woman of Floretta Whaley and give his little sons a name—in place of

the alias of "Balcom," which the little family now bears. In view of this apparent overturning of accepted social standards, doubtless the question will occur to many: Is it possible that a minister of the Gospel can set an example so pernicious and escape retribution? Because this pair of sinners suffered a few years of disgrace, fugitive existence and material hardships, are they now to be restored to prosperity, social recognition and a life of the same peace and contentment enjoyed by those who are sinless?

Or, are they yet to taste the full bitterness of their sin? If Floretta Whaley is to escape the prescribed consequences of her act, then why is poor Florence Schenck at the present moment drinking the dregs of her punishment, needy and reckless, cast off by family and friends, in an European capital? This daughter of a fine Southern family did not elope with a clergyman, only with Charles S. Wilson, the trainer of Alfred Gwynne Vanderbilt's racing horses.

Again, if Floretta Whaley is yet to "be happy ever after," how account for the terrible downfall of Mrs. "Jack" Wilmerding, great-granddaughter of Commodore Vanderbilt, belle of the New York "400," who sank to the point of a bigamous marriage with the valet of a millionaire, and now is, who knows where?

"The arm of retribution is long, and even now it may be stretching out to grip Floretta Whaley and her innocent little babies, whose father is Rev. Jere Cooke, the minister who betrayed his vows, his church and his wife to run away with the little Hempstead heiress."



Florence Schenck TO-DAY, Abandoned and Penniless in Paris, Paying the Penalty of Her Sin.



The Newest Picture of Floretta Whaley and Her Second Baby.

And, again, there was Mrs. Antonio Ruiz, wife of a member of the Cuban Legation at Washington, whom he divorced, and who killed herself in her London apartment after Alfred Gwynne Vanderbilt had ceased calling upon her. Was Floretta Whaley's act less culpable?

How about the innumerable instances in all parts of the world bearing out the Biblical warning: "Be sure thy sin shall find thee out!" Does not this mean that if Floretta Whaley and her ex-clergyman companion have thus far escaped definite and final disaster it is merely an instance of retribution deferred? That the future holds yet in store for them sorrows or misfortunes that will balance the scales in which their offense is weighed?

Social conventions are ruthless. In placing the blame and prescribing the punishment for this sort of sinners they do not discriminate between the two whose conduct was irregular and gave offense. They are equally guilty and are expected to share equally in consequences.

Yet, in the case of Floretta Whaley and the Rev. Jere Cooke, most of the individuals who compose society doubtless would be glad to see the girl spared further punishment. Her extreme youth and probable ignorance at the time of her downfall, and the position of extraordinary trust and moral authority and responsibility occupied by the man in the case, tend to make her appear rather in the light of an innocent victim than as an accomplice.

Who is there that does not remember, almost in detail, that hardly believable scandal of five years ago, that nauseous taint that entwined even the altar of a church?

Floretta Whaley, a mere child at that time, lived in Hempstead, L. I., with her grandmother, Mrs. Keziah Whaley. She was the favorite of two orphaned little girls, and was reputed to be the acknowledged heiress to the grandmother's comfortable fortune.

The Rev. Jere Knodde Cooke, a man of magnetic personality and a social favorite in that rich and fashionable Long Island colony, was further popular and influential as rector of St. George's Episcopal Church—the fashionable church of Hempstead, with August Belmont for its senior warden and a dozen other families of social importance and wealth for its chief supporters. The Rev. Cooke was married to an estimable woman of deep, religious convictions. The husband, of a more expansive nature, a more worldly outlook, than those of his wife, was, perhaps, the more popular of the two. It appeared afterward that they had not agreed with each other very well for some time past.

Now, the father of Floretta Whaley, in dying, had committed his two little girls to the care of the Rev. Cooke, pastor of his church—the man who, above all other men, he trusted. In his capacity of virtual guardian, as well as spiritual advisor, the Rev. Cooke had access at any and all times to the home of Floretta Whaley. It appears that he could not have improved this privilege much more thoroughly if he had been a member of the family.

The Rev. Cooke was so well liked and so respected in Hempstead that no unpleasant construction was placed on his growing companionship with pretty Floretta Whaley. The scandal burst with the force and unexpectedness of a secret infernal machine.

One day the Rev. Cooke was missing. On the previous day Floretta

Whaley, with \$50 in her purse, had been permitted to go to New York to "purchase a costume." Late that night her grandmother received her fearful letter explaining that she had eloped with the rector of St. George's.

In the efforts of the church authorities—quite fruitless—to trace the flight of their pastor, it was discovered that for some time past he had been preparing for that flight. He had drawn his savings from the local bank, and, in addition, had obtained in cash an advance of \$1,500 on his annual stipend.

As to Floretta Whaley, the grandmother now told how she had grown suspicious of the clergyman's constant visits, and once had forbidden him to come to her house. The broken-hearted grandmother also called recent unaccountable fits of tears and depression of spirits in Floretta. Her letter made all clear: "I know this is a dreadful thing to do, but I cannot help myself. I love you, I love Edna (her sister), I love auntie, but I love Mr. Cooke better than all."

A mysterious letter from the Rev. Cooke to August Belmont, the nature of which can be imagined, put a sudden stop to the strenuous efforts instituted to bring back the recalcitrant pastor and the girl he had betrayed. They were free to make their long flight to the Pacific coast unmolested, and there, while two children came to add to their burdens, to fight their uphill battle for a livelihood. Before any sort of security against starvation was gained they suffered more than two years of the bitterest privation. That they finally succeeded—as above referred to—stands to the credit of the recalcitrant pastor. He was willing and able to work with his hands.

Mrs. Cooke's attitude following her husband's elopement was characteristic, in keeping with her strong religious convictions. She authorized her attorney, Sidney S. Clarke, of Hartford, Conn.—her old home—to say for publication:

"Mrs. Cooke will never seek a divorce herself, nor will she consent to an action for divorce on his part. If he attempts to secure a divorce, he will instantly be arrested and brought back to New York for trial."

This was after the pair had been located in California, and after the birth of their first child. The broken, but still loving grandmother said:

"I have begged Mrs. Cooke to divorce her husband for Floretta's sake, but she has said to me: 'No. Let them live on in their shame.' Now that there is a child, it seems to me that this step is almost imperative. But I do not think even this will cause Mrs. Cooke to relent. I have little faith in the man

who wronged my child. I have kept her room and her money for her against the time when he will have discarded her and she has nowhere to turn."

Little Edna Whaley, though only fourteen years old, crystallized a whole homily in her passionate utterance:

"If Floretta returns with her baby I would not go back to school. I should feel so disgraced. I could not bear to face my schoolmates." And now Floretta Whaley is back in Hempstead with her two little boys—not in rags and despair, but prosperous and hopeful, welcome at the home of her grandmother, who a legacy of some few thousand dollars due to her. And—most unexpected of all in this reversal of the usual conditions in such cases—Mrs. Cooke, the abandoned wife, has experienced a change of heart in the girl's favor. Being interviewed at the home of her parents in Hartford, Conn., she said:

"When my husband first brought this disgrace upon us, I firmly resolved that he should never be free to marry that girl, so long as I lived. Since that time I have been daily counselling with God, and by Him I have been advised that my marriage to Cooke was merely a 'man-made' marriage, and not a 'God-made' marriage.

"Therefore, in the near future I will institute a divorce action in the courts here and release myself from that man and permit him and the girl to do whatever they please." Probably it was the receipt of a hint of this good news that encouraged Floretta and the father of her boys to return and face those whom they had so cruelly disgraced. The prospect of repining, so far as is possible, the humiliating errors of five years ago seems to have enabled Floretta Whaley to bear with equanimity the raised eyebrows and the sidelong glances of recognition which greeted her reappearance in the streets of Hempstead.

She knew that her grandmother's arms would be open to her. That was a pathetic scene, her arrival in her old home. Grandmother and grandchild threw themselves into each other's arms. Both wept, but neither spoke about the cause of Floretta's long absence.

Will Floretta and her companion remain in the East until he has secured his promised freedom to make her his wife? Will they have in the scene of their disgrace a wedding five years delayed? Will this ceremony reconcile Edna Whaley to the presence of Floretta and her babies, enable her to face again, unshamed, her old schoolmates?

Or, are Floretta Whaley and her companion still to taste the fullest bitterness of their sin, in accordance with the inscrutable destiny that seems to rule in most affairs of this kind?

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