

CHAPTER IV.

VIOLET'S STORY.

"And so, it being Christmas Eve," said Violet, "and just our own four selves here I will tell you a story."

It was after dinner. The dessert was on the table, wine flashing redly, a glow of rare exotics in a great silver basket, peaches blushing in dainty Sevres dishes. A saucy page in a same priceless ware, holding aloft a basket of grapes like amethysts and emeralds, and the firelight and lamplight flowing over all.

The Silvers had drawn from the table and were gathered round the fire, which burned royally as a Christmas fire should, and in its full glow sat Violet, at her father's foot, as Charlie had called her, a lovely idyll of the season. She was herself again, and the holly berries gleaming in the glossy coronal on her gold-on-head were not more vividly crimson than her cheeks and lips. Her eyes were starry, shining, dilated, wonderful in their rapid changes of expression as she looked from one to the other of the group. She looked at Aurelius Silver, as he sat on the opposite side of the hearth, his noble face and head thrown finely out by the ruby velvet back of the deep chair in which he sat, and she smiled, as she spoke. She held in her hand a fan of white feathers, the handle of rubies and dead gold, and when she drooped her head, its shade fell across her face.

"A time honored custom at Christmas-tide," said her father. Do you remember, Aurelius, how our poor father and mother used to tell us youngsters Christmas tales, in this very room?"

"I remember," said Aurelius Silver, quietly. "And more Margaret's tales of the Loup-Garou and Fen-follet, in the nursery?"

continued Arnold, "and now frightened I used to be. You never feared anything during the whole course of your existence I do believe, Aurelius." Aurelius Silver started very slightly, and looked at his brother, but in his usual composed tones he said:

"Let us hear Violet's story, by all means. It is not likely to be very fearful, is it, Pussie?"

"No," said Violet, eagerly, "it is watory just about people like ourselves. There could be nothing very fearful about us for instance, could there, uncle Aurelius?"

"No," said Aurelius, smiling strangely, as he looked into the fire. "We are anciently respectable, commonplace people. Far above cause for remorse. Infinitely beyond temptation."

"G-o-o, Violet," said Charlie, looking curiously at his father, the vibration of whose voice sounded unfamiliar. Indeed of late a certain strangeness had crept into the life of Aurelius Silver, noticeably during the few weeks ushering in the holy Christmas, and which had not escaped the keen young eyes of Violet and Charlie.

Arnold Silver had hitherto been alone in the almost princely generosity, which, at this season especially, had made the name of Silver a word honored and blest amongst the poor of the city, but this year Aurelius had borne his part generously, not appearing in the deeds of mercy himself, but deputing Violet in many cases, his brother in others, as the almoners of his bounty. If possible he was quieter, more reticent than ever, though at times a strange disturbance seemed to reign in his soul, and he would retire from the society of the family remaining secluded for many hours at a stretch in his library. Who shall say what phantom of remorse sat by his board, visible but to himself? Who shall tell the anguish of such a soul as his reflecting on the second of temptation which had been sufficient to hurl from its high place of arrogant security that cold and jealous integrity, that stern god honor which he had erected into a deity and bowed thy knees to idolatrously? Its crest had towered to the skies, its feet of clay were on the shifting sands. There he no such dauntless iconoclast for your idol of self-security, as temptation, a truth Aurelius Silver had waded through a sea of fire to learn and understand.

How often the hideous memory of that starlit and peaceful night, on which he had fled, as much morally a murderer as Cain, from the lake, returned upon his soul no one but himself could tell, for the secret was buried, and would for ever remain buried in his own breast. This up-as-tree memory had borne some good fruit. When he found Charlie firm as a rock in his determination to remain faithful to the memory of Daisy Leighton he had not urged him or threatened, or disowned him, as most assuredly he would have once done.

"Wait!" he had said quietly, "if you retain the same mind at Christmas, I will speak no more to you on the subject. But let the matter rest until then. You are very, very young, and youth is the changeable April time of a man's life. Wait."

And Charlie had waited, but as we have seen, changed not at all.

Through his soul there ever rang an appealing and plaintive voice, "Keep my memory green!" "Papa!" said Violet, putting her hand on her father's, and turning her wistful eyes to his, "in my story there is a girl, like me, and perhaps you will think her wicked and ungrateful to her father who was just like you, but you will hear all about her quite to the end before you say so. Won't you dear?"

"If she is like my little girl, she can't be very bad," said Arnold Silver, laughing broadly, and patting her pretty hand as it rested on his; "but go on, my dear, we are all anxiously."

Violet clasped her hands on her lap and fixed her eyes musingly on the seeping amethyst and molten gold of the flames licking the great sides

of the marble logs on the huge mantelpiece. "About fifteen years ago there were two brothers, partners in a good business. Just, papa, as you and uncle Aurelius are, and one of them had two sons and the other one only little child, a little girl, and the two mothers were dead. Now the elder brother, the father of the two boys, was a strange man, cold and haughty and like iron in everything he said and did, and when his wife died, he was very fond of her, uncle Aurelius, he grew colder and harder, until it seemed as though he had but two aims in life, to heap up wealth and to be known amongst men as of spotless integrity. He did not seem to care for his children, though of course that was impossible, because the elder, who was about fifteen, was like the dear mother who had died, and a generous high spirited lad, and I am quite sure all the time the father hardly seemed to know he had a son, he was proud and fond of this boy, only it was not his way to show his heart to the world. And the youngest, a little child of six, was it likely he did not love the little motherless thing dearly? Of course every one here knows how impossible that is," said Violet confidently, "don't, we papa?" "I suppose so, Pussie," said Arnold Silver very soberly, and looking straight at the fire. Aurelius was silent, his face a little in the shadow of the jutting marble pillar supporting the chimney-piece. His niece glanced at him and stole her hand into her father's. Her eyes were very bright, her sweet young voice steady and clear as silver as she went on,—

"How much that poor man was to be pitied! He was so absorbed in his own business that he had no time to see the evil which was gathering round his elder son, and had he seen it, I don't think he would have moved a finger to save him. Not that he meant to be cruel, you mustn't think that for a moment, but he said and thought that for a truly honorable and upright man there was no such thing as temptation. Those who fell, fell from inclination, and as they fell, so for him, should they lie. So it came about that one day, the proof was brought home to him that his son, the elder one, had forged his name for a trifling sum— Did you speak uncle?"

"No," said Aurelius Silver, but he had made a sudden movement which had attracted her attention.

"Well, the boy's father, quietly turned him adrift to her, as he said, 'with the dregs of the earth his crime had levelled him with.' I don't believe he seemed angry even, but none of us can fancy what he felt in his secret soul. He must have thought that perhaps if he had acted differently himself, watched and guarded the boy from corrupt influences, this would not have happened, and how! how dreadful that thought must have been. But the boy disappeared!"

"And your story ends," said Aurelius Silver, but not looking at her.

"No!" cried Violet, "it has a sequel, uncle Aurelius, let me go on!"

Aurelius Silver was silent and Arnold turned his cordial face towards him, with a mingled aspect of entreaty and command.

"Let her go on, Aurelius, the sequel is new to us both."

"He went," said Violet, rising and leaning towards her uncle, her voice broken, her cheeks paling and flaming, her eyes fixed on his, "he went to another country, and alone battled for fifteen long and lonely years with the world. He had a great heart, this boy, and it carried him on eagle wings, far above the associations such as they were, of his former life. He acquired wealth, and in the faint hope that his father had forgotten all but that he was his eldest son, he turned his steps homewards. He met his cousin, now a woman grown, how it does not matter, and oh! papa, she was very, very like me, but don't begin to hate her just yet, and be begged that she would try to soften his father towards him, and from one thing to another, the girl and he got to love each other better than all the world. They met very often in secret, though it was the wish of both families that she should marry her young cousin, now a man, and she promised, against her returned from California, where he had to go to look to his affairs, to beg his father to forgive him; but she was such a coward," cried Violet bursting into tears, "as well as such a wicked, deceitful thing to her own father who was the best and dearest in the whole wide world, that she put off speaking until Christmas Eve, and oh! uncle, you must finish the story," and Violet flashed into her father's arms, which folded tightly about her, and hid her face amid the ruffles decorating his expansive chest.

"Aurelius Silver," said Arnold, solemnly as Violet trembled in his arms, "I charge you to finish it as your heart and conscience urge you to do. Reflect where the chiefest fault lay."

A peculiar smile, gracious yet shadowed, crossed the lofty face of Aurelius Silver. He rose and came towards them.

"Daisy, my daughter!" he said, taking Violet into his arms, and kissing her pure, young brow, "the good Angel of this Christmas Eve. You shall finish your Christmas tale as you will."

"Papa dear," cried Violet, "tell me that you don't hate me dreadfully, but I couldn't help it, indeed I couldn't!"

"I'll get over it in time, Pussie," said Arnold with twinkling eyes. "I've known it all along. But come, let us see Aurelius' the younger."

"Did you know of this?" queried Aurelius Silver turning to Charlie as Violet fled, rosy as a wreath, with smiles and blushes into the hall.

"Yes," said Charlie, simply, "but it is only of late I knew that Violet's lover is my brother,"

She came back clinging to his arm, a man with dark, lustrous eyes and the kingly port of the Silvers, but with a face all his own and his dead mother's. She left him, however, and stood by her father, and Aurelius looking steadfastly at him, clasped his outstretched hand in his and held it in a firm grasp. "You are welcome!" he said, and still holding it turned to his brother.

"Arnold," he said, "where is your welcome?" "Here!" said Arnold Silver, taking Violet's rosy hand and placing it in his nephew's, "one more expressive than words. But no California, remember. I cannot part from her."

"A good gift!" said Aurelius Silver musingly. "Charlie, she might have been yours. Your brother is leaving us," he said turning to his elder son, "on account, as perhaps you are aware, of a certain sad event dating some four months back?"

"I have heard of it," said the young man in a tone of quiet, yet heartfelt sympathy, and Violet's pretty head drooped sadly. She had no spell to dissolve the trouble which was to darken the whole of that young life.

"Violet," said her uncle, after a moment's pause, "as Charlie's promised bride, I bought you a set of jewels, as the betrothed of my son Aurelius I should like to clasp them on you."

"Thank you, uncle," said Violet, as she left the room, she went up to Charlie, and looked at him with sad eyes.

"This Christmas has held nothing for you," she said, "it is very sad."

"Except a darling sister and brother," said Charlie, clasping her hands in his.

"And wife!" said the voice of Aurelius Silver behind them.

They turned their faces to him, in a silence born of awe. A pallid silence through which Violet's voice rang out in wild exultation.

"Daisy! Oh Charlie, this was the ghost I saw to-day!"

Aurelius Silver stood towering like some lofty column, crested with sparkling snow and by his side a dark and beautiful little creature, whose wide and speaking eyes were fixed on Charlie's face.

"Take her," said Aurelius Silver smiling, "she is yours. That night when she fell into the lake, it was my fortune to save her young life. I had her brought here in order to test the real strength of your affection for her, determined that she should be yours if I found you true to her memory on this day. Charlie!" he said abruptly with a sudden change of voice, "no more of this idea of leaving me. I am old and I wish my children about me. Will my Christmas gift bind you to your home?"

Charlie's answer need not be recorded, suffice it to say that in the happy silence which succeeded it, the silver clock on the chimney piece rang out twelve!

"See!" said Violet Silver, as the last stroke died away, "it is Christmas morning!"

And in the dawning of that glorious day we will leave them.

No one ever knew the fearful temptation, which for a second had mastered Aurelius Silver, and no one ever knew, except him, that Daisy had not fallen into the lake by mere accident, no, not even her husband.

No one knew how potent the bitter experience of that night had been in stirring the soul of Aurelius Silver to its depths, or how the latent fire of human sympathy and affection burned so late but so warmly in his soul.

THE MYSTERY OF VISCOUNT BOWLDOUT.

A WEST-END ROMANCE.

BY GEORGE AUGUSTUS SALA.

His lordship was furious, and all the attempts to pacify him were the dimest of failures. "Never," he said solemnly to her ladyship, "never," and as he spoke he added weight to his injunction by bringing down his finely-formed but somewhat gouty hand on a burl table covered with gimcracks from Dresden, and causing those tiny magnets to shiver in their porcelain shoes,— "never! let me hear the name of that abandoned, that hardened prodigal again! I absolutely forbid its being pronounced in this house. He is a disgrace to his family, to his order, and to the profession to which he belonged." And having deluged himself of this terrible denunciation, his lordship buttoned his coat across his noble breast, leant one hand on his hip, and extended the other in a monitory manner towards his lady, looking in an attitude remarkably like Scipio Africanus, or the late Lord Grey in the act of moving the second reading of the Reform Bill. I think, by the way, it was Lord John who moved it; but that matters little.

Her ladyship wept. How could she refrain from tears, seeing that the hardened prodigal whom she had just heard denounced, repudiated, and banished from the paternal roof— represented for the nonce by a back drawing-room in a private hotel in Jermyn-street— was her own son? Du resté, her ladyship was continually weeping. In her interesting youth her nursemaids were wont to address her reproachfully as "Cry-baby," and to speak of her contumeliously, when she was out of hearing, as that "whining little thing" in the Brigade of Guards (to which he belonged) they used to call her Lady Waterworks.