

THE STANDING ALISH OF H. STANLEIGH STORME

(By Wm. Hamilton Osborne.)

He listened for a moment. There was no sound from without. The door worked better. Noiselessly he drew back the bolts and unlocked the lock. He stepped out upon the balcony and looked down at the street. And then—he stood stockstill and held his breath. For he saw that which gave him a pause. "The devil!" he muttered under his breath. For there, below upon the pavement, motionless as marble, but silent and alert, stood two policemen looking at him as he stepped out into view. Each of them had a cocked revolver in his hand.

The Gouverneur was a fashionable bachelor apartment house at the end of town—is yet, for the moment, of that.

At half-past 3 that morning a young man, with a long black coat and an opera hat upon his head, stepped across its threshold and noiselessly ascended to his rooms, a single on the second floor.

His light was burning just as he had left it. Outside it was raining still. He was wet.

He removed his hat and hung it and his coat upon a chair to dry. He took off his dress coat. Then he lit a cigar and sat down on an easy chair—or rather threw himself upon it.

"Jove, but I'm tired!" he exclaimed wearily.

There was a slight noise, and he started and peered into another room. Somewhere in the dark a door opened, and a maid's voice spoke.

"It's you, is it?" said the voice. "Oh," replied the man in the easy chair, "I didn't know you would be here."

He sank back with an air of relief. "I thought it best," returned the voice, "at least to-night. It was so wet. You have been at the club?"

"At the club?" assented the man in the easy chair, "all night, and half the morning."

The man in the dark laughed in an odd sort of way.

"Good!" he responded. "Who was there?"

The man in the light half groaned. Half sighed, with weariness. He was tired.

"I'll tell you—tomorrow morning—all about it," he replied. "I'm too tired now."

He rose and turned the stem of the incandescent lamp. Then he, too, became a man in the dark.

And the voices were stilled. And the day began to break.

CHAPTER III.

Six Hours Before.

The bank was robbed at 2 a. m. Six hours before that, at a few minutes after 8 in the evening of the previous day, a tall young man in a long coat, and wearing an opera hat, strode through the rain and mist, and ran lightly up the steps of a gray stone dwelling in the West end of town.

He pressed the bottom and the door opened. He entered with the air of a man who was expected and who felt somewhat at home. He dropped a card in the salver. The maid ascended with it to the floor above.

On the floor above a girl sat reading—a girl who was good to look at; a tall slender girl, with square eyebrows and frank womanly eyes, with an abundance of brown hair arranged in just the most effective manner in the world.

The maid entered. The girl read on.

He smiled indulgently.

"I know," he returned, "but there is a reason in my suggestion. Does it signify, after all?"

She made a slight grimace. "No—Henry, it does not," she said with a laugh.

He bowed gravely.

"Thanks," he replied, "some time I will explain."

"Dear me," she exclaimed, "these robberies—they still go on. I read all this stuff through this morning. But isn't it awful? And they say that there is a lot that never got into the papers at all—the police are afraid of popular opinion and are trying to suppress the news."

The man looked at her. He seemed either deaf to her remarks or bored by them.

He had unconsciously returned to

the line of thought that she had interrupted. She glanced at his face and started.

"What—what's the matter?" she inquired, gently laying her hand upon his arm.

He started in his turn.

"Helen," he replied, looking her full in the face, "there—there is something that I've got to tell you. I—I must tell you."

She looked up into his eyes. What she read there to her was well worth reading.

"You—you love me!" she murmured, lowering her glance.

He stretched forth his arms and then withdrew them. "Yes," he replied in a tense, strained voice, "I love you. You knew it, then?"

She nodded, still with downcast eyes. "I have known it all along," she said, "and I—"

"Helen!" exclaimed the man, in a voice full of agonized entreaty, "wait until you have heard—the rest."

She glanced at him in a startled sort of way. "The—the rest?" she inquired. "Can there—can there be more to say?"

"Everything!" he responded, in a low voice.

She searched his face again.

"What else can signify?" she asked.

"Now that—"

Again he stretched forth his arms—and again withdrew them. "To me," he replied, "nothing, unless—it can to you."

She shook her head and laughed gaily.

"It cannot to me—of that I am sure."

She seated herself. He took a chair at her side.

"What is this—something that you have to tell me, then?" she asked.

"Is there—another girl? Somebody else, perhaps?"

Even as she said it she smiled again.

"No," returned he, nothing of the kind.

She picked up the paper, "You—you haven't been doing wrong, have you?" she asked again. Robbed jewelry stores or anything of that kind?"

She waved the sheet carelessly before him. He took it, rose to his feet and, without a word of explanation, dropped it gently in the fire.

It blazed up and made the room suddenly light. He watched the flame turn up and die away, and then he turned to her.

AN AMBIGUOUS EXPLANATION.

"Little girl," the caller resumed, and his face grew pale, "did you ever think—can you realize—just what it means to starve and freeze, to wander about the streets of a great city with no place to lay your head? To go without food for days, to shiver with the cold for weeks together? To seek for honest work day after day, without cleanliness and conscience, a tramp and a vagabond upon the face of the earth? Do you know what that means?"

She shook her head.

"Why do you ask?" she demanded.

"Because," he replied, with a ring of bitterness in his voice, "I know; I have realized it. I—I have been through it. It's a part, a gruesome part of my life's history."

She started up and looked at him in doubt.

"You!" she exclaimed. "You—H. Stanleigh Storme?"

He nodded.

"Yes—I," he replied, "of whom, when people see me on the street they say: 'There goes Storme—the man without a care, who only lives for life and pleasure. I have starved and frozen—well-nigh to death.'"

She gave a wild, inarticulate cry and hurried to his side. He noted her expression and was glad.

But he held out his hand.

"Not yet—not yet," he exclaimed. "I have but begun—wait until I finish."

"I know," he went on, "that all this does not signify. I know that if to-day, instead of living in luxury as I almost do, I were in rags, that it would not affect, by one jot or tittle, your feelings towards me, knowing me as you do."

She sank back into her chair with a sigh of relief. She knew now that she was understood.

He went on.

"What does the town know of H. Stanleigh Storme? It thinks it knows much—it knows practically nothing. Ask anybody."

"He will tell you that Storme is one of the best known men in the town—perhaps that he has been here for years. He forgets that the town never knew H. Stanleigh Storme three years ago. He forgets that the town does not know where H. Stanleigh

Storme came from—and that the town knows is but little. Not so much, perhaps, as that which you know."

"That is enough," returned the girl, confidently.

"Some day," he went on hurriedly, as though he dared not stop, "some day—but not now—I shall tell you of my birth and antecedents. They are both good."

"If it be any satisfaction to you to know it, I may tell you that I am your equal—or was in birth and position, and the other things that seem to count so much. But I am not the point. There are some things I can tell you about—some that I must not. I cannot tell you any."

"I have done a foolish thing—a dangerous thing—a most peculiar thing. Sometimes I have thought of it and stood aghast. Sometimes, especially at first, I laughed at it, and approved of it. At others I have denounced myself for it."

"What it is you may know some day. There is but one thing that reconciles me to the situation. And I not taken the step, I would never have met you. Had I never met you—still, that only complicates what was already too complicated."

"I'm afraid," said the girl, with a mischievous smile, "that I do not understand. Except," she added, gravely, "that to you it seems most serious."

"Helen," he exclaimed, "can you conceive that a man—a good man, if—if such a man were placed in a peculiar position where he was literally forced to do something utterly ridiculous and absurd, perhaps indiscreet, but not wrong or vicious—a thing that might some day make him the butt and jest of the people whom he knows, nay, that might condemn him even in their eyes when they found him out; can you conceive that such a man might, under the stress of circumstances, do all this and yet retain his character, his principle, his manliness? No matter whether you understand. Can you answer that?"

The girl thought for a moment.

"If he were not wrong or vicious," she replied, "yes, I can. Many men are laughed at for mistakes, for errors, for imprudence, who have done no wrong. If I only knew—"

He stopped her.

"Don't ask me that," he protested. "The details I cannot tell you."

He laughed in an annoyed, hampered sort of way.

"I am prevented from telling even you. It is a question in a very great degree of honor. I—I wish I could say just what I mean, but I must leave it as it is. Helen, listen closely to what I have to say. Before you knew me you had heard others speak of me. What did you hear?"

"Nothing," replied the girl, "except that Mr. Stanleigh H. Storme was a gentleman in every sense of the word."

She said it proudly and yet gently, too.

"And believe that still, I know. I think I may tell you that your belief is justified. I want to ask you something else."

"What would you do were I stripped of every worldly thing that I possess—if to-morrow I walked the streets a starved and humbled man,

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And as he read he smiled. "Those fellows seem to keep it up," he said to himself.

He took a step towards the paper and stretched forth his hand. And then he shook his head.

"I had better not, after all," he mused. "I shall stick to the enforced rule. And yet," he continued, "why not? Why not? That's the strangest part of all. Why not?"

He had touched the paper, but he withdrew it and turned his back to it.

(To be Continued.)