

The young man picked up his umbrella and turned toward the door. Paul could not suffer him to leave him like this, with no conception of the magnitude of the crime he had committed.

"Don't go yet," he said. "You don't seem to realize that this is a very serious matter. Do you know that this is nothing more nor less than a theft you have committed?"

"I do not regard it in that light at all," answered Charley, with his hand on the lock of the door, "and, since you entertain that opinion of me, the less we see of each other in the future the better. Good morning."

The door slammed with a vicious sound, and Paul was alone.

He was already equipped for the street, and he had had enough, more than enough, of his rooms for the present. He would go out. It was a cheerless morning, and still too early to go anywhere, he said to himself. To Paul *anywhere* generally meant to Mrs. Vaughn's house, and that was his meaning then. Still, he fancied he would feel better out of doors; he could take a cup of coffee at a restaurant and kill time somehow till he could imagine it late enough to call on Kitty. He felt an overmastering need of seeing her, and seeing her as soon as possible. With his old methodical instinct, he picked up the scattered leaves of his manuscript and arranged them in proper order. That consumed a little time. Then he glanced hopefully at the clock, but it was only a few minutes past nine. He was disappointed. He had hoped it was later. Still, the clock might be slow. Paul knew it wasn't, but he glanced at his watch. It had run down; he had not wound it the night before. He did so now, and set it by the clock; then he thrust the *Gotham Gazette* into his pocket. It might help him to pass the time. He threw open the window, took one more glance around the room, and went out.

The streets were muddy and disagreeable, and a fine, misty rain was falling. Stuyvesant took little heed of it, but walked across the square immersed in thought. He was trying to explain Charley's extraordinary attitude, but he could find absolutely no explanation. The boy had been bitterly indignant at the accusation, as indignant as he could have been if he were innocent, but of course his innocence was out of the question. Apart from all the rest of the evidence, apart from the tangible proof of the picture, Charley admitted the fact that he had bribed the concierge to allow him access to Mr. Sargent's apartments during that gentleman's absence. He had admitted it, too, without a tincture of hesitation or shame. To be sure, though, if he were incapable of remorse for the theft itself, he would be equally callous as to the steps which had led to the crime. He remembered that Charley the day before, when speaking of Mr. Sargent's purchase of the picture, had been very severe on a man who could find no better use for his money than to buy a valuable work of art and lock it up where no one could see it. But surely this idea could not have so wrought upon the young artist as to convince him that he was therefore justified in stealing the painting. Moral obliquity like this was not to be met with in men of Charley's class and education. Yet on no other hypothesis could Paul account for the indignation, the scorn, and at the same time the brazen assurance with which he had repelled the accusation of theft, while admitting that he had stolen the picture. This perplexing problem had been viewed in every possible light, many miry blocks had been traversed, a hasty cup of coffee had been swallowed,—and it was ten o'clock.

Stuyvesant stood on a street corner with his watch in his hand, wondering whether he could yet venture to call on Miss Vaughn.

CHAPTER XIV.

MR. PAUL STUYVESANT READS THE "GOTHAM GAZETTE."

It still lacked several minutes of half-past ten—more minutes than he cared to count—when Stuyvesant stood on the steps of Mrs. Vaughn's house and pulled the bell. He had never before called on Kitty at so early an hour, except by previous appointment when it had been arranged that he was to be her escort on some excursion demanding a start betimes. But this morning he felt an imperative need of seeing the girl he loved. He wanted the solace of her presence, the comfort of a few minutes conversation with her, after his long night of agony and his very peculiar interview with Charley at the end of it. He felt that he could not talk to her on the subject that was uppermost in his thoughts. He was determined to work out her brother's salvation alone, if that were possible, and till the last moment he would keep from the sister all knowledge of the terrible facts he had discovered. But he wanted to see Kitty for another reason. They had parted in coolness the night before, and this was in itself no slight addition to the burden he was called upon to bear. He could not believe that she was angry with him still; at any rate, a complete humiliation on his part, and unstinted apology, even without an explanation, would doubtless serve to smooth the matter over.

When the servant opened the door, he inquired for Miss Vaughn. Could he see her?

"Oh, yes, of course; she was up stairs now with Mr. Charles."

This was an unexpected embarrassment. Paul had no desire to meet Charley again, at least not just at present. He hesitated for a full minute, and a very little would have tempted him to run away. However, Stuyvesant's was not a shrinking nature, and he entered the house, and sent a message to Miss Vaughn. Would she see him alone for a few minutes?

He was shown into Kitty's special room, the same in which he had waited for her on the previous day,—the same in which he had waited for her more times than he could reckon, though every time had its own sweet memories. The apartment was full of remembrances of her; the evidences of the girl's dilettante art were scattered around in picturesque confusion.

(To be Continued.)

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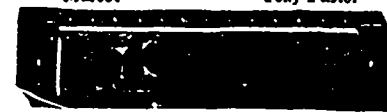
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