

A Bit of Blue Enamel

Or Traced By a Valentine

His crippled foot had been all a pretence—made with what motive she could not guess, but doubtless for the furtherance of some nefarious scheme.

He was walking very quickly, running almost, as though in desperate haste to reach the shelter of the house.

Marjorie left the window, and sank into the easy chair beside the bed.

A deathly faintness was stealing over her. She was ashy pale, and trembling from head to foot.

A new and more horrible suspicion had come into her mind, and she felt sick and dizzy beneath the overwhelming shock of it.

If these were indeed a gang of thieves, might it not be one of them who had murdered her father?

They were in possession of the lock-etc. What more likely than that Madeline's account of how she had obtained it was false, and that one of the men beneath that roof was guilty of her father's blood?

The question was—what? She asked it of herself with shuddering dread.

Surely—oh, merciful heaven! surely not Charles—not the man she had loved so dearly to whom her young heart had clung with such warm, trusting faith.

She remembered how vehemently Madeline had sought to prejudice her mind against him. Could it be that she had done it to keep her from falling in love with her father's murderer?

There was agony in the thought—black, bitter agony.

She buried her head among the bed-clothes and shook with grief and fear. Presently she roused herself to think and plan.

The clock struck one. She remembered then that it was St. Valentine's Day—the anniversary of her father's death.

How strange if on that very day she should be fated to discover his murderer.

Half mechanically she went to the chest of drawers, and, unlocking the various receptacles, looked for the bit of blue enamel.

It was gone! The ivory box was empty!

It could scarcely be said she was surprised at this. It only confirmed her terrible suspicions, and they needed little confirmation.

Of course, those desperate criminals would do away with the evidences of their guilt if they could.

She, a poor unsuspecting girl, had been easily duped by them.

But there was a sharp sting of agony in the thought that it was Charles who had asked her where she kept the bit of enamel.

She could not doubt that his was the hand which had stolen it.

As she sat at the edge of her bed in an agony of grief, her hands clasped, her pale lips moving in a convulsive appeal to heaven for strength, she heard sounds below—voices raised in fierce anger, and mingled with a woman's sobs.

Flinging a dark dressing-gown round her trembling form, she opened her chamber door very softly and listened. The voices came from the hall below.

She advanced a step or two, slowly, until she reached the top of the staircase, from where she could get a view of the whole group.

In the centre stood the elder Hyde. Marjorie now saw his face for the first time without the mask of good humor which had served so well to disguise his villainy.

It was almost demoniacal with rage, and he was storming and cursing in the most horrible fashion.

It was Charles, at whom his wrath seemed chiefly directed, and who stood stiffly with folded arms and down-bent head, without answering a word.

At the foot of the staircase stood Edgar, his face livid, his dark eyes flaming, and beside him, clad only in her night-dress, was Madeline, her long black hair streaming down to her waist, her whole frame trembling with convulsive sobs as she wound her arms round Edgar's neck, and seemed, by her gestures, to be imploring something which he roughly and sternly refused.

In a little group at the other end of the hall, where the servants, whose countenances showed plainly enough they were the accomplices of their pretended masters.

Marjorie was alone in that house with a gang of thieves as cunning and desperate as any in all England.

Suddenly Hyde said something in a tone of stern command, which caused a general movement to be made towards the stairs.

Marjorie, her heart beating as though it would leap out of her bosom with fright, stole back to her chamber, and closed and locked the door.



Scarce had she done this, however, before a frenzied shriek from Madeline made her venture forth again.

She heard strange voices—she heard one, loud, stern, authoritative voice exclaim—

"Consider yourselves under arrest, everyone of you. Attempt to move and I fire!"

A horrible fascination drew her to the top of the stairs again; and now she saw that a crowd of constables—ten or a dozen at least—thronged the hall.

A cry from Madeline made her look at Edgar Hyde.

He was in the act of flinging away a small phial, which he had just raised to his lips and drained to the dregs.

The next moment he sank, with a heavy thud, upon the tiled floor of the hall.

"Good God! he's poisoned himself!" exclaimed one of the policemen, while Madeline's shrieks rang all through the house.

Someone stooped over him and raised him, but the other policemen coolly secured their prisoners.

The handcuffs were put on Charles Hyde almost at once.

Marjorie saw this with a bursting heart, and then a merciful insensibility overwhelmed her—she fell fainting to the floor.

CHAPTER XI.

Madeline's Story.

When she recovered consciousness she was lying on her bed, and Madeline was bending over her with a face so white, so haggard, so drawn with misery, that, for a moment, Marjorie scarce recognized it.

"Madeline!" she murmured, faintly, reaching out her hand. "What is the matter? What has happened?"

And then a recollection of that fearful scene in the hall swept over her numbed brain.

She moaned, and buried her face in the bed clothes.

Madeline sat silent and rigid in the chair beside the bed.

She seemed to have no word to say—either of comfort or of explanation.

Presently Marjorie raised herself, and looked at her.

"Madeline, why don't you speak to me? I am miserable as well as you. Tell me—oh, tell me all the truth! Those people—are they all thieves?"

"Yes," the monosyllabic fell from Madeline's pale lips slowly, and as though it hurt her.

"And you—?" Marjorie began, then stopped suddenly, not knowing how to frame the question.

"What am I? you would say," exclaimed Madeline, passionately. "Oh, don't scruple to ask what questions you choose, Marjorie. I will answer them all now. I am the daughter of one thief and the wife of another. I am not a thief myself—I have not fallen quite so low as that. But I am one of the gang—I have known their guilty plans—I have been accessory to them all. The police have exempted me from arrest—simply because, as a wife, I was not bound to denounce my husband's crimes!"

"A wife!" exclaimed Marjorie, in amazement, as soon as Madeline paused for breath.

"Yes, I am Edgar's wife—or was. God help me! I am his widow now!"

"Then he is dead?" cried Marjorie, in horror.

"Yes, he is dead," said Madeline, resuming her story calmly. "He took poison before the police could touch him. He died, and I, who loved him so—oh, heaven! how I loved him!—I, even I, am thankful for it."

Her head sank upon her bosom, and a dry, tearless sob convulsed her frame.

Marjorie put forth her hand, and touched her gently.

"Poor Madeline!" she said. "I am so sorry for you."

At that kind word the unhappy creature fell into a storm of agony terrible to witness.

Her tears came in a flood, and her frame was racked with sobs.

Marjorie was frightened—never in her life had she witnessed such emotion as this.

But it did good.

It was more natural than that stony calm, and outraged nature was appeased by it.

Beneath Marjorie's sympathy and tenderness the wretched Madeline grew calm at last.

And then, in a broken voice, she began to try to tell her whole sad story.

"My father—and she shuddered as she spoke that word—has been a thief ever since I was a little child. But I have not lived with him all my life. My mother and he had quarrelled, and I lived with her until she died. Then

I was sixteen, and my father fetched me to live with him. He told me he wanted me in his business and, little by little, I began to see what that business was.

"He was no common thief, Marjorie. There was a diabolical cunning and cleverness in all he did. I had been well educated—indeed, he himself was—and he wanted me to help him to get the entire into the great houses he meant to rob. This I would never do, and he was fearfully angry with me, for he had a frightful temper when roused, for all his bland, pleasant looks. He said he wanted a woman in the business, and when I kept resisting he planned a cruel trick to bring me to his will."

"What was it?" questioned Marjorie.

"He threw me into the company of Edgar Monson—for Edgar's name was not Hyde. I must tell you; he was not my father's nephew, no relation at all, neither is Charles, Edgar's brother. They were both simply members of the gang."

Again she paused, then went on in a broken voice, and with many tears: "I know now that Edgar was deliberately set to employ every artifice to make me love him. He was represented in the best light to me. He won my sympathy, and, at last, my heart. How I loved him I could never tell you!"

"I think that never in this world has man been loved by woman as he was loved by me. Well, I married him—not quite a year ago. He swore he would break with the gang, reform, go abroad with me, and live an honest life. I believed him—and a week after the marriage he laughed and boasted of the ruse he had adopted to bind me to him! I remember his very words—they burnt themselves into my heart."

"No! No! my pretty one," he said. "It is you I am going to reform. I am going to so train you that you shall be the queen and head of the cleverest and richest gang of thieves in England."

"He did not do that, Marjorie. Try as he might, he could not bend me to his will. I hated and dreaded their vile pursuits too much for that. But I went on loving him—I couldn't help myself. I loved him even though I soon saw he had ceased to care for me. Oh, what I have suffered—oh, Marjorie! Marjorie!"

Again she was convulsed with sobs, and again Marjorie soothed her with all the tender sympathy a woman's heart can show a sister in distress.

After a few minutes had this passed, she resumed her narrative.

"We came here—to this house—about six weeks ago. Their object was to rob Sir Edward Mortimer. All the plate and jewels are kept on the premises there, and they expected a more than ordinarily rich booty."

"To achieve this, no expense was spared. This house was taken furnished; the servants were all members of the gang. We had been here only a short time, when he—my father—met with you. He had always said that a woman, young, and beautiful, and well-educated, would be invaluable to them; and it was his purpose to try to win you over. He showed you an advertisement which he pretended was his, and you believed him and came."

"Ah!" exclaimed Marjorie, in horror. "Who could have suspected that a man who looked and spoke as he did, could have been so vile!"

"His pleasant countenance has been his capital always," said Madeline, bitterly, "and he has traded on it to the uttermost. With a view to impressing you favorably, he has assumed the appearance of great wealth and power, and this would have continued till he felt you were in his power."

"You were so young, and so completely friendly that he made sure of winning you over in the end. You were to be tricked, as I was, through your affections. Charles had orders to do everything in his power to make you fall in love with him."

Again an involuntary exclamation burst from Marjorie's lips.

She saw the whole vile plot now from beginning to end, and then again turned pale.

"I did all I could, Marjorie, to save you from the snare," said Madeline, gazing on her very mournfully. "I dared not betray them. I dared not tell you the truth, but you remember how, whenever I could, I warned you against Charles. I hinted to you over and over again that he was unworthy of your love."

"Yes, I remember," acknowledged Marjorie; "and I thank you. It was not your fault that I wouldn't take your warning. Oh, Madeline, if I had! if I only had!"

And then, unable to bear her misery with calmness, she gave way utterly, and broke into tears.

"Dear Marjorie, don't grieve for him. He isn't worth one thought from your pure heart. Forgive me, darling, that I didn't tell you all the truth in time."

"I have only myself to blame," sobbed Marjorie. "You warned me, enough, I ought to have believed you."

After a time she calmed herself, and turned to Madeline with gentle resolution.

"Go on, Madeline, tell me all."

"There is not much more to tell—not much that you can't guess at, or that you don't already know. Last week they made an attempt on Mortimer's House. It failed, and they resolved to try again, so bold and desperate they were. They made the effort again; they thought they had got clear away, and were followed here. In my heart I had felt sure that would be the end of it. Something within me seemed to prophesy it would come to this."

"Madeline, you were imploring something from—from Edgar in the drawing-room before you came to bed. I heard you by accident. What was it you were asking him, dear?"

how anxious we are to be of service, if you will allow us."

He paused, then added: "I think you perhaps may know who I am; my name is Mortimer."

"Sir Edward Mortimer—yes, I know. Indeed, I can't find words to thank you. You are only too kind. I wish I could make you understand how much I feel your kindness shown at such a time."

(To be Continued.)

"To give up the plan, not to go out to-night. I told him how full my heart was of the belief that it would end in something terrible. I intreated him, if not for myself, yet for the sake of his unborn child."

"His child!" exclaimed Marjorie, with a sudden burst of tender pity. "Oh, Madeline!"

"Yes, Marjorie. I have that to look forward to. You may judge whether I look forward to it with joy. I hope my baby will die. Why should it live, poor innocent? A murderer's child!"

"Madeline!" said Marjorie, in a low, awe-struck whisper. "Was it he—your husband—who killed my father?"

Madeline answered with a deep, heart-breaking sigh.

She could not speak.

Then that was what you meant when you said you might, some day, ask me to give you a life for a life," cried Marjorie. "You were thinking of him—of what might happen if I discovered his crime."

"Yes, that was what I meant. Oh, Marjorie, what I have suffered! Ever since you recognized that locket, my life has been an agony. I had never dreamed he had murdered on his soul; desperate though I knew him to be, I had never suspected that. You, per-

haps, remember that, the very next day, I was taken ill—so ill that I couldn't get up. It was the anguish of my mind that drove me into a fever. I have been in misery ever since—in hourly misery and dread."

"And you are sure he was guilty?"

"He confessed it before he died," wailed Madeline. "Oh, Marjorie, how can you be so tender to me, his wretched widow? Your kindness kills me—it breaks my heart!"

For Marjorie had got her arms round her now, and was pillowing her head upon her own aching breast.

"Surely," she said, with herself, with a cruel pang, "we are sisters in misery, we two. She told me it would be better for me to die than to give my love to one who was unworthy. I did not heed her then; but, oh, I feel it now!"

A loud she said, very softly and sweetly: "Did you not risk your life for mine? And are we not sisters in suffering? Oh, Madeline!"

And then those two unhappy creatures clasped each other more closely still, and mingled their tears together.

CHAPTER XII.

St. Valentine's Day.

Terribly dawned that St. Valentine's Day for Marjorie.

When the sun rose she was standing beside her bedroom window, looking mournfully across the frozen lake, and feeling half tempted to wish she had found her death there.

Life was so full of misery. There was nothing to hope for.

Her heart was aching with a dull, dreary pain, as she thought of the frank, smiling face she had loved so well; and, apart from that source of misery, what was to become of her? Where was she to go?

She could not even be sure that she might not yet be arrested as an accomplice of the thieves.

She had been more than a fortnight in their house, and who was there to prove her innocence?

Filled with such thoughts as these, she turned away from the window with a heavy sigh; and, having completed her toilette, went slowly downstairs, scarce knowing which room to enter, or what to do.

Madeline, worn out with grief, had fallen asleep an hour ago, and there was no one else in the house save a couple of police officers, who had been left in charge.

One of these was in the hall. He spoke very civilly to the pale, trembling girl, and told her there was a fire in the dining-room, where she might be quite alone if she wished.

She thanked him gratefully, but had been seated at the fire scarcely five minutes before he tapped at the door, and announced:

"A gentleman to see you, miss."

Marjorie rose with a start, to find herself face to face with the handsome, grey-eyed man she had seen in the wood when she was walking with Charles—Sir Edward Mortimer.

He came forward with an air of great respect, and yet with the most evident and earnest sympathy as well. "If I am intruding, please pardon me," he said, in a clear, cultured voice. "But your position here is so very trying that I felt bound to come and tell you how deeply we sympathize with you—my sisters and I, I mean—and

how anxious we are to be of service, if you will allow us."

He paused, then added: "I think you perhaps may know who I am; my name is Mortimer."

"Sir Edward Mortimer—yes, I know. Indeed, I can't find words to thank you. You are only too kind. I wish I could make you understand how much I feel your kindness shown at such a time."

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