

SELECT STORY.

IN THE TOILS, OR THE THWARTED SCHEME.

The sun had just disappeared beneath the Western horizon, and the shades of evening were fast closing in upon the peaceful Garden City, Chicago, some six months subsequent to the time that the great conflagration had raged with demoniac fury through it.

Near the southern borders of that portion now known as the 'Burnt District, stood a stately, marble-front mansion, surrounded by a garden covered with the greenest of grass, and beds of gay-colored flowers, that filled the air with their sweet perfume.

Seated near an open window, in one of the front rooms of this dwelling, was a young girl. Apparently not more than nineteen years of age, she was as beautiful a creature as it is seldom the good fortune of one to meet. Her figure was well rounded and exquisitely outlined. Face oval; skin soft and white; eyes of the deepest sky-blue, large, and lustrous in their light; hair dark-brown, long, and hanging over her shoulders in a floppy cloud.

She was not the only occupant of the room, for a young man, dressed in the height of fashion, and rather handsome both in feature and form, kept her company. She did not seem to care much for his presence, however, but sat gazing out of the window, with as calm and indifferent air as though he were miles away. The man, on his part, was watching her keenly; a dark frown on his face, an evil glitter in his eyes.

At length he spoke.

Laura!

The girl turned.

Miss Prescott, if you please, she said. The man bit his lip in anger.

Do you not include me in your circle of friends? he asked.

No, sir.

Sharp and decisive was the girl's answer.

And why?

Do you really wish to know?

Yes.

Well, then, you shall. It is because you are a gambler and a villain.

Clarence Marston bounded to his feet. His face was purple with rage.

By Heavens, girl! he hissed, were you a man and used those words to me, your life would not be worth a sixpence.

I presume not, was the girl's scornful rejoinder; men of your class scarcely hesitate to commit murder.

Marston glared savagely at the bold, out-spoken maiden for a moment; then, with a laugh, slid down into his chair.

Poh! he exclaimed, impatiently. I was a fool to get angry at your words; you evidently do not know what you are talking about.

Ay, but I do, returned Laura, firmly, and, what's more, know that I speak the truth.

Marston laughed.

Some person has been whispering slanders into your ears about me, he said.

No; some person has not. I know you of old, Clarence Marston—know you to be just what I said you were; and let me add that, at least, you have proved yourself no gentleman this day.

You come to me and offer me your love, when you are aware that I am betrothed to another.

I swear that—

Do not add a falsehood to your contemptible act, interrupted the girl; and she continued: Then, to move my heart, you said that father approves of your suit.

He does.

Then it is because he does not know you as I do, which he soon shall. But enough of this. I have endured your presence longer than I should. My actions, some time since, bade you go, but as you did not heed them, I will now say, in plain words—leave this house immediately.

Imperious the look, imperious the command of the beautiful girl, as she drew herself up to her full height, and pointed to the open door.

Marston rose to his feet, and walked across the room to the door; then, turning, he said, in a sneering tone,—

I obey your order, pretty one; but before I take my departure, allow me to inform you that I take it for granted that your lover, Howard Rolston, is the man who insinuated that I am a gambler, blackleg and villain; and let him beware! I will be revenged upon him, if it costs me my life. Still further, let

me add that, before this month is out, my wife you will be, or never leave the altar as another man's. Good-day, haughty one.

Clarence turned to leave, but a heavy hand clutched him by the shoulder just then, and stayed him, while a deep voice said,—

Don't be in a hurry, Marston, your presence will be needed here a few moments yet.

Chapter II.

The hand that stayed the departure of Clarence Marston belonged to a man of some five-and-twenty years of age. He was superbly handsome, with regular, clearly-defined features, bronzed somewhat from frequent exposure to the sun's rays; steel-blue eyes; jet-black hair and mustache; a high, intellectual forehead, and a compact, well-knit figure.

Marston turned angrily to him.

Take your hand off my shoulder instantly! he said, sharply.

Not just yet, returned the other, coolly.

Howard! exclaimed Laura Prescott, recognizing the intruder.

Yes, Laura, 'tis I, said the young man, casting a loving look at the girl.

Loose your hold of me, Rolston, I say, repeated Marston, raising his arm and making a pass at the one who held him.

But Howard easily warded off the blow; then, with a jerk, he brought Clarence into the room, closed and locked the door.

What do you want with me? demanded Marston, savagely.

You'll learn in a moment, was the cool reply; and Rolston began dragging the reluctant young man to the window, where Laura Prescott was sitting.

The girl looked on these proceedings in surprise, but said nothing.

There, said Howard, as he halted and pushed the discomfited Marston forward to the side of Laura. Now, then, Mr. Clarence Marston, who takes the liberty, when a lady is alone, to enter her room and grossly insult her, get down on your knees and beg her pardon.

The other uttered a frightful oath, and started back.

Tush! remonstrated Rolston, giving him a gentle shake; do not use such language in the presence of a lady, but do as I tell you.

I'll die first! said the captive, determinedly.

No you won't; you'll do as I bid you, returned Rolston, his fingers beginning to painfully compress the young man's throat.

You'll repent this outrage, foamed Marston, struggling to escape from the vice-like grip that held him.

Outrage! Why, you cowardly villain, if you had some men to deal with, you would hardly leave this room alive. But, once for all, continued Rolston, sternly, will you beg this lady's pardon for the threats you offered her a few minutes since, or will we adjourn to the barn, and—well, you know what will happen there. So, now, down on your knees and comply with my request.

Clarence demurred, but a few reminders from the thumb of his captor induced him to obey the command, which he did in low, sullen tones.

There that is all I want with you—you can go now, said Howard, loosening his hold of the prisoner.

The young man slowly rose to his feet, his face convulsed with rage. He walked silently to the door, then, turning, he addressed Rolston in a low tone of fierce meaning.

By that one act you have made me your enemy for life. I'll have revenge for it—a deep and bitter revenge!

He shook his clenched hand at the two lovers, and then withdrew.

Rolston turned to Laura Prescott.

My love, my angel! he said, clasping her in his arms, and showering a dozen passionate kisses on her red lips. I arrived just in time to hear the last of that villain's threats to you, said the young man, as he sat down on the sofa.

He is indeed a villain, and, though I hardly approve of your compelling him to beg my pardon, I think his punishment was just.

And Laura smiled. She was proud of her bold, fearless, yet noble-hearted lover. But then, as the threats of Clarence Marston occurred to her, she turned pale. She knew the man's nature; knew his to be a wild, uncontrollable temper, while he was as unrelenting and merciless as a savage.

O Howard! she cried, impulsively. I wish you had let Marston depart in peace.

Why? inquired the young man, in surprise.

You know he threatened us?

Yes.

Well, he may attempt to carry out these threats.

Yes he may, returned Rolston, thoughtfully; but have no fear, Laura; if he tries to injure you in any way whatever, I will call him to a strict account for it.

But you—he will do something terrible to you, I am afraid.

I will keep a sharp lookout for myself, so have no fear on that score, darling.

Although Rolston spoke confidently, yet a strange presentiment of coming evil was tugging at his heart-strings—a presentiment that, the rest of that evening, and for many days afterward, depressed him heavily.

Chapter III.

The night of the fifth day following the incidents narrated in our preceding chapter, was a dark and gloomy one. The thick, heavy clouds hung low, threatening every moment to burst forth in a torrent of rain, and the lightning shot forth vivid streaks of light in the distant horizon.

In the west entrance of the Washington Street tunnel crouched the dark figure of a man. He was evidently lying in wait for some person, for, at different intervals, he would peer cautiously out of the mouth of the tunnel, and mutter.

'Tis midnight, and he is not in sight yet. Perdition! How much longer must I wait?

Then to the ears of the watcher came the faint tread of approaching footsteps. Peering out of his covert, he saw the dim outline of a man coming down the street toward his retreat.

That must be him, he muttered; and now then for my plan of action. As he descends the steps, I will spring upon him, gag him, and then drive him to the bank of the river, where we will have a private duel.

The footsteps of the approaching man sounded louder and more distinct. He was near at hand. The watcher braced himself for the coming struggle, and, crouching down lower to the ground, clutched in one hand a long, murderous-looking knife, and in the other, a handkerchief.

The dark form of the man appeared at the mouth of the tunnel, then began slowly to descend the stone steps leading into the underground passage. He had put his foot on the last step, when a hand suddenly grasped him by the throat; another thrust a handkerchief into his mouth, and a deep voice hissed in his ear,—

I hold a knife at your breast, Clarence Marston, and the least attempt to escape, on your part, will cause me to plunge it to the hilt into your black heart!

The threats had the desired effect. The prisoner at once ceased the struggles he had begun, and became as quiet and submissive as a lamb.

Now, then, start straight for the river, commanded the captor. Move, he continued, as the other hesitated, or I'll drive this steel into you.

Thus compelled, the captive walked up the steps, and moved in the direction of the river, the other following close to his heels.

Arrived at the river-bank, both men paused. The captor tore the gag from the mouth of the prisoner, and said to him,—

Clarence Marston, look into my face and see if you recognize me.

The other bent forward and closely scrutinized the features of the man before him, then started back as if shot exclaiming,—

My God! 't Mark Winters!

Yes, was the stern reply, Mark Winters, the man whose wife you so cruelly wronged four years ago.

'Tis false! I never wronged your wife.

You did! retorted the other fiercely. You did, and you know it. You did more, too; you caused her death, for, poor thing, she is dead now. Murderer, either your race or mine is run. One of us dies to-night.

What do you mean? asked Marston, his face blanching.

I mean that you and I will fight a duel. I have two weapons for that purpose—they are bowie-knives. Here they are. Choose one.

Mechanically Marston took the offered weapon, and then both men prepared for battle. The conflict was long and terrible. At its close, only one man left the river's bank. The other was dead.

Chapter IV.

Here police! This outcry came from a tall, well-dressed gentleman, with great bushy side-whiskers and heavy mustache who was standing on the bank of the Chicago River, beside the dead body of a man lying in a little pool of blood.

It was the morning following the duel between Mark Winters and Clarence Marston, and the gentleman, sauntering along the river-bank, had just stumbled upon the corpse. Almost at the same moment in which he had made the discovery, two policemen were crossing Canal Street near the tunnel, and he had called to them.

The officers at once came hurrying up.

What's the matter? Robbery? both asked, in a breath.

Don't you see, replied the stranger, pointing to the body at his feet. This man has been murdered.

By Jove! that's so! ejaculated one of the officers, as he knelt beside the corpse, and placed his hand on his breast. And he's hardly cold yet. He must have been killed between eleven and twelve o'clock last night.

Good Heavens! exclaimed the stranger, suddenly, bending down and closely scrutinizing the features of the dead man.

What's wrong? asked one of the policemen.

I know this man; it is Clarence Marston.

Was he a friend of yours?

No; but I knew him slightly. Poor fellow! he's gone at last.

Well, we've got to get him up to the station, said one of the officers. You stay here Tom, while I go in search of an expressman, adding this to his brother policeman.

The officer started off. Scarcely was he out of sight, when another ejaculation from the stranger drew the attention of the "blue coat" who had remained near him. He saw him stoop and pick something up from the ground, behind the body of the dead man.

Hallo! he said. What have you found?

A knife—the one that killed Marston, was the reply; and—ah! there is a name on the back of the blade. It is Howard Rolston! Heavens! can he be the murderer?

He may be. But you act as though you knew him.

I do.

Well, I always thought him good enough; but he has a hot, uncontrollable temper.

Was he acquainted with this Clarence Marston?

He was.

Were they friends?

No; enemies, I believe.

Ah!

The policeman was thoughtful.

The finding of this knife, with Rolston's name on it, makes it appear as though he killed Clarence Marston, or had a hand in it, for there may be more than one man who helped to commit this crime, said the stranger. Don't you think a warrant should be issued for his arrest?

Yes, returned the officer, promptly. Do you know the number of this Rolston's residence?

I do; it is—State Street.

The return of the other officer at this moment, with an expressman and wagon, put an end to the conversation. The murdered man was placed in the wagon; the two policemen and the stranger, who, now on being asked his name, gave it as Cyril Chapman, jumped in, and the driver started for the station. Arrived, the corpse was conveyed into a room, and a messenger dispatched for the coroner.

While he was gone, Cyril Chapman drew the captain of the police aside, and talked earnestly with him a few moments. The result of this conversation was the issuing of a warrant for the arrest of Howard Rolston, and a sergeant, a policeman, and Chapman, started for Rolston's residence to make the arrest.

Chapter V.

The sun was shining through the windows of Howard Rolston's room when he awoke on this particular morning. He yawned heavily, turned over, and glanced at the clock on the mantel-piece.

Seven o'clock! he muttered, as he sprang up and began dressing. I must hurry, or I will be late to work. We poor must toil for our bread while the rich live in luxury and ease. Well, I'm content, and would not exchange places with many of these wealthy people, who, I'll wager, are not as happy as I, with the love of my own darling La—Good Heavens!

This abrupt exclamation was called forth by the discovery of several large stains of blood on the bosom and sleeves of his shirt. While he was conjecturing as to how they had come there, a loud knock on the door drew his attention hither. Hastily finishing his toilet, he opened it, and saw, to his astonishment, the two police officers and Cyril Chapman, who had come to make his arrest.

The sergeant immediately stepped forward, and, laying his hand on Rolston's shoulder said, in a firm tone,—

Howard Rolston, you are my prisoner. Your prisoner? ejaculated the young man, in surprise. What do you mean?

I mean that I arrest you for the murder of Clarence Marston.

Heavens! is Marston murdered? asked Rolston, starting back, shocked at the news.

Exactly; and you are his murderer, there is reason to believe.

That's absurd, said the young man, impatiently; a charge with no foundation.

I think there is a foundation to this charge, said Cyril Chapman, since a knife with your name engraved upon it, and covered with blood, was found by the side of the murdered man.

A knife with my name on it! ejaculated Rolston. You must be mistaken, for I never owned such a thing.

We are at liberty to believe that or not, said Chapman, dryly. However, he added, be so kind as to explain how these blood stains happen to be on your shirt.

That I cannot do, said Howard. I am as much surprised to see them as you are.

The officers and Chapman exchanged glances. It was evident that they did not believe the young man.

Come, sir, said the sergeant, at length, stepping forward. We've spent much more time talking with you now than we should. You must go with us. Maybe you're innocent of Marston's murder, but, if you are, you'll have to prove it in a court of justice.

He took from his pocket a pair of handcuffs, as he finished speaking, and slipped them over the young man's wrists. Then the whole party left the house, and started for the police station, where, upon arriving, Rolston was lock-up in a cell.

His feelings were of the bitterest kind, knowing, as he did, that he was innocent of the crime of which he was accused, yet doubting whether he could prove his innocence. Alas, poor fellow! he was in the toils of some person who was seeking his life, and who had chosen this way to take it. That person was doubtless the real murderer.

Chapter VI.

Laura Prescott was sitting in her room, by the window, idly drumming on the piano, and thinking of her lover, Howard Rolston, when her father entered in great excitement.

Laura, he said, dropping into a chair, and wiping the perspiration from his brow. I have bad news for you.

Bad news! exclaimed the girl, in astonishment.

Clarence Marston was murdered last night.

Murdered, father?

Yes, poor fellow! he has gone to his last account.

And who is the murderer?

Well, that is hardly known for certainty; but the person arrested for the crime is—

Prescott hesitated about speaking the name, for fear it might come too suddenly on his daughter.

Is whom? asked Laura, as a wild suspicion shot through her brain.

Can you bear to hear?

Yes, yes—better than this suspense. Well, then, it is Howard Rolston.

The girl uttered a piercing scream; clasped her hands to her brow; tottered to her feet; reeled, and fell forward into her father's arms, a dead weight.

The old man bore her carefully to the sofa, and laid her thereon; then seizing a goblet of water, he began bathing her temples.

[CONCLUDED IN OUR NEXT.]

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