

At least it was evident that he had not told her a new story.

"Was my father the cashier of the —th National Bank?" he asked, trying to speak very calmly.

"Yes, Stuart."

The bands of ice closed in around his heart. They were so palpable and tangible that he could almost touch them.

"Did he take forty thousand dollars?"

His breath came short and fast. He had risen and stood in front of her, looking directly at her.

She threw up her arms a little, and her hands seemed to flutter feebly toward him.

"Oh, Stuart," she cried, "I will not have you doubt him; he was the truest, noblest man in the world!"

"Mother," he said sternly, "you'd better tell me the truth now."

She looked at him a second, and for the first time in all his life she felt his nature antagonistic.

"Tell me!" he repeated, "did he take forty thousand dollars?"

"He did not take it, Stuart," she said eagerly, "he never touched a penny. It was —"

"Who," he asked quietly.

"Oh, I do not know," she cried in a sort of dumb despair, "I never understood. It was—all too horrible."

"Why was it not investigated?"

"It was—that is, they were just beginning, and then, oh Stuart—he died!"

"Did—answer me mother, did he kill himself?"

"No!" she almost shrieked. "No Stuart, no! He died in his own bed. I was with him. It was apoplexy. They brought him home, and I was there. He did not know me, but I never left him. Oh, Stuart, you are cruel, cruel, to say such things!"

She broke down completely, and began to sob. She rocked to and fro, making a little moaning sound.

He looked at her sadly, but he did not offer to comfort her.

"So the investigation stopped with his life?" he asked.

"Yes," she said between her sobs, "I gave them all that I could, and they didn't do anything more."

"You gave them," he repeated after her, in amazement, "you gave them money! To hush the matter up? Is that what you mean? Did you buy them off?"

She took her handkerchief from her eyes, which seemed to dry suddenly, as if the indignation which had arisen within her stopped her tears.

"Stuart," she said harshly, "you are his son, but not even you shall talk like that. I gave them money,—all that I could spare,—because I would not see his dear name dragged through the mud and mire. I *knew* he was innocent; why should I want it proved? I was alone, and I could not have borne the agony of having him,—his life, his deeds, his very thoughts, perhaps, picked to pieces and coldly criticised by men who believed that he might be guilty. No, I saved his name from that, at least."

He looked at her coldly.

"A strange way to save it," he exclaimed. "If my father was innocent, all the investigations in the world would not have hurt him. If he was guilty, it would have been time enough then, to buy off his accusers, as you seem to have done. How much did you give them?"

"Thirty thousand dollars."

"Why didn't you make up the whole amount?" he asked bitterly.

"Because I could not. I had to save a little for you. You were his child. I had to educate you and take care of you, as he would have done."

They looked at each other silently. It was the most miserable moment in Stuart Dawson's life. Not only was he full of

shame for his father, whom he had so revered and honored, but he felt that he had been tricked, deceived and played upon by the person whom he had most loved and trusted in the world.

He looked at her, with her sweet gentle face, and thought how she had made his life one long lie.

"My God!" he gasped, "if there is a God! is there nothing true in the world?"

He was staggered and dazed by the blow, and by the revelation of what seemed to him his mother's deceit. But you cannot detach love, all in a moment, from the object around which it has grown for years. You must unclasp the tendrils one by one. Should the object fall, love falls too, clinging as it falls.

He loved his mother still; it was the habit of his life. He longed to fling himself before her and bury his face in her lap, and be comforted. Then, with a great wave of bitterness, the thought came over him, that never again could she comfort him. He could not trust her any more. He might love her in a sad, blighted sort of way, and be tender of her, for the old love's sake, but the sweet companionship that had been the biggest part of his life, was over forever.

Then it occurred to him suddenly that she might have deceived herself. Perhaps she did not know what she was doing. If he could make her see the hideousness of her long deceit, she would recoil from it as he had done. She would be filled with remorse. She would beg him to forgive her; and though life would never be quite the same to them, they might go on, at least together, and not divided from each other, as they were now.

"Do you see, mother," he said gently, "what you have done? You have brought me up to believe in things that were never true. All my life has been founded on what was false. I have lost my father over again, or rather—I never had a father. I have lost my faith in you. I am ashamed among men, my father's name—"

"Stuart!" she interrupted, "I will not listen to you! You are my boy, my own, my one baby, but do you think I can let even you raise your voice against him? I have never deceived you, never! Every word that I have told you about your father was true. There was nothing in his life to be ashamed of, or in mine either; until to-day when his son, his only son, doubts him, insults his memory and tramples on his name!"

She stopped; she was trembling all over.

He looked at her hopelessly. Would they never come any nearer together than this? Then a great feeling of pity for her came over him; pity for her anguish and for her wasted love and loyalty.

He put his hand on her shoulder.

"Poor little mother," he said, "we will never speak of it again. Promise me never to mention my father's name again, and we will let it all pass."

But she did not yield to his touch. She was rigid and impassive.

"Not mention his name!" she cried; "Why should I promise you such a thing as that? It is as though I acknowledged that there was something shameful about it. I will not promise!"

He took his hand from her shoulder and looked at her. Then, after quite a long time, in which neither of them spoke, he left the room.

He stopped irresolutely at the door, and said, "Good-night," without turning.

"Good-night," she answered quietly, but her heart beat fast. He had never left her like this before.

She heard the hall door slam.

(To be continued next month).