

Story of a Wicked Girl

"But afterward, when I knew what had been done at the Tower with that dagger Mr. Miles used as a paper-knife, I took care to be the first to tell her, and I said: 'He just sat at usual, Miss Ella, so it must have been some one he never suspected.'"

"Yes," she said, quietly. "I know. Some one came between us. No one can come between us now. Don't speak of it any more, Sarah."

"I found in her pocket, crushed up, a half-written letter from Mr. Miles to some lady. I burned it, and from that day I tried not to leave her. When you came, I was terribly afraid at first that you had a suspicion. I found you hadn't, and after that I was afraid you would find out. Lately, Miss Derry, I've known what you suffered, I knew why you rescued her from that marriage, but then I feared still more, because you had come between her and Mr. Oliver. I knew your only motive, and, Miss Derry, I just want to tell you there was one reason I could make, and I have made it. Long ago I wrote all this down. I was afraid death might prevent me. I wrote it all and have sent it to Mr. Oliver and I have told him why you had accepted him, for I don't know, I guessed, that for this she would have made you, for I saw by your face you were miserably as he might have seen. It was hard justice to do that, and—there's no need to keep my secret now. She's at rest. She's—who knows, Miss Derry? I have heard her pray. Oh! I have heard her pray often and often, though never praise. I used to think it odd, but perhaps it wasn't. Perhaps it was that one awful emptiness in the brain that she would not help. We don't understand, do we? She looks at rest. When I look at her now I cannot believe it, all, but then often and often I could not before. I only came to tell you this, Miss Derry. No, don't try to speak to me, especially if you feel kind. I can't bear a kind word tonight. I'll see you again. No, please, Miss Derry. Oh, I'm all right, I shall stay with Mrs. Martin."

"The light of the shaded lamp in the old library at the Tower fell on the girl's bent head as she sat writing. His sister, sitting opposite, had just dropped into her lap a sheet of paper closely covered, and was looking across—at her brother, with a real pride as well as tenderness in her eyes.

"You have read it, Primrose?" he asked, glancing up as if he had become conscious of her gaze. "It is a pitiful narrative, is it not?"

"Oliver"—his sister had come up to him, and fallen to her knees, looking up with swimming eyes—"Oliver, I must tell you. I shall hate myself till I am dead. I have had—sometimes—such a terrible, terrible fear, intangible when I tried to dissect it, yet there, making me most miserable. Dear, do you remember that night? Do you remember that I saw you—out in the park, just after his death? Do you remember—and missing his hand, and laying it against her lips and cheek—"that you and Miles had quarreled, and yet that you told me to forget it from that night? And that he must take his turn to suffer? Oliver, to tell you this is a bitter punishment for the wrong I did you—"

"My dear," said Oliver, bending to kiss her, "tell me no more. It is not constant, for it was most strange that I should have been there just then. I had been with Steve. Let us forget it all, for afterward—when I know what had been done and yet all such a fearful pain, how you had said—What on earth was I going to tell you?"

"The young man cried, his eyes flashing suddenly, for the words coming from his lips were strong, strong as if he uttered them to her, and suspicion could not take form in her gentle presence.

"Was it," she asked anxiously, "anything I could have told you about poor Steve? Oh! if he had been only not died! But his name will be cleared, won't it, Oliver? That paper will go to some in authority, won't it? Oh, poor Derry!"

"Primrose, go back, dear, now. I'm writing to her. I must tell her that I know her motive for that change which always puzzled me. For her acceptance of my hand after her rejection of it, I must release her now."

"You will tell her you will wait?" whispered Primrose, as proud of him as she was distressed for him.

"Yes, I will give her her own time. It will not trouble her—yet. Now you had better do something," he added, looking for it would not do to sound the depths of his own disappointment and yet, and in his sister's watchful presence. "Should you like us to go abroad together? Long ago you used to say one of your dreams was to travel with me."

"Oh, what happiness!" she sighed. "And that night, for the first time since that January evening when she was murdered, she took her place at the table. Not that she played the piano, but she held it in her loving hands, and once again touched it, as if she were living lips."

CHAPTER II.

In the special corner of the long room, where Mr. Hope was playing "her" game, the October sun shone brightly upon her, while her father's, if you please. Yes, I remember."

He had gone back to his work cheerfully, while she idled near him; so she waited, softly discussing it, or watching in a sympathetic silence the skillful hands which never blundered like the tender hand; not returning to her own tasks until one of her father's patrons entered, and the two were engrossed with their conversation. Then she slipped back to her corner, and tried to make up for lost time, until a letter was brought her. Seeing it was from Harrack's Beacon she opened it with trembling haste. Steve Basset lived, and that she longed for news of him. Unlike her father, Mrs. Frayd's letters were limited, and the sheet Derry opened was not half covered. Yet how much it seemed to contain:

"Dear Miss,—a cousin of my dear departed frayd's (the mistress of Harrack's had become Mrs. Pickett now, but Derry never thought of her but as Mrs. Frayd) 'is home from America and was here this morning one day in New York her mistress took her to carry some soup and things to a sick dressmaker at the top of a tall house and left her outside on the landing and as the next door was open she looked in and saw my photograph upon the chimney and I know it is Mr. Basset's I had only that one frame done so handsome as she saw it of course dear miss it might have been left there or he might have given it away or it might be he is there the worse is my late dear husband's cousin don't know the size a bit but you might get to know her mistress is Mrs. O'nears living in Cork house 9 avon' amos' de'sire duty penkus is kept in every day your respectful amelia picket late frayd."

Derry looked down the studio with darkened shining eyes. Her father was alone now, making a feint of not having observed that she was engrossed by a letter.

"Dad"—she was at his side before she had allowed herself time to shape any thought distinctly—"will you take me to America?"

"My dear!"

The sentence was rather short to need to be broken by a gasp.

"There is somebody—I think there's somebody there."

"I have no doubt of it. Several people," with a spurious jocularity. "A friend to whom I owe a great, great debt, father."

Only in moments of supreme earnestness did Derry ever say father, and Patrick Hope's whole bearing changed at the word.

"I can not pay it unless I go. I cannot find this friend, except by going myself. No one else—scarcely—knows he is alive."

"He?"

The sculptor pushed up his preservers, and stared at his daughter's lovely face, but she was too deep in her one hope to notice this pathetic peep of alarm.

"He did so much for me. And, father, in a whisper, 'so much for me.' I never, never can forget."

"For Ella? For my little Ella?"

"Ah! for her sake you will take me?"

"No," he answered, sturdily, "for yours, my darling. Yet if I were not so busy—"

"Oh, I'll work so hard afterward, dad, I'll make it up. And you will more than make it up yourself directly, for you will be like a giant refreshed, and will do such wonders. You know they say that an enforced idleness would do you good, and prevent your imagining, dear, that your eyes are anything more than tired?"

"Well," Mr. Hope mused, "I should like to see Joseph, and America; but he won't pay, you know, unless you promise to drop what he calls your unsuitable work. But—with one of his rare caresses—"I will think it over, my dear."

"Don't you think, dad," in coaxing tones, "it would do to think it over after you have promised?"

"What, decide in a moment? Why, there are hundreds of things. For instance—searching about for them—you would want piles of new clothes."

"Not a single one. I could be ready in half an hour."

"I see that I must go away, if I'm to think it over to any purpose. You had better think it over, too, my dear, before I come back, for I don't believe you have done so yet."

Smiling, he went away, leaving his own letters unnoticed, and bent only on escaping what he hated to resist—his daughter's pleading. At least at first bent only on that.

It was quite two hours before he returned, and then there was such delighted mystery in his face that Derry came up to him breathlessly from the work in which she had so conscientiously engrossed herself during his absence.

"You've thought it over, Pat, I see."

"No, my dear, I have not. I have been too big a fool." (He had been going to enjoy lengthening her uncertainty, but the question in her eyes was too much for him.) "I have done worse—I have taken passages for both of us in the Cunarder sailing tomorrow. Oh, what a fool your poor dear father is!"

"Oh, dad!" She had been a little girl the last time he had seen her cry like this; and he—well, he supposed being an older man now, he could not stand it so well.

"Why, Pat!" she exclaimed, frightened when she saw the slow tears gathering in his falling eyes. "Why, Pat," and then she laughed suddenly,

as if it had been laughing she intended all along; and then she kissed each him, wet eye, and the gray hairs and laughed again, and then caught herself up just in the act of going to cry.

And so it was by very slow degrees they both grew quiet, and clung together in the fading light, thinking with actual joy of starting together on the morrow, and not even recollecting that any preparations would be necessary. But when the lamp was brought in, it seemed to remind Derry, and she went away to see about her father's packing first, singing softly in her new-born gladness.

"She had not got very far in her task when her father called her, and she ran back to the studio. He sat close to the shaded lamp, reading his letters, and she thought she had been his mistress; but when she came to him he rose and threw the letters behind her to put both hands on his daughter's shoulders.

"Derry, my dear, poor Mrs. Martin has died—suddenly. She was standing before her glass, Sarah tells me, the evening before last, just going to—never mind what—and she turned sharply round, and said, 'Sarah, how awfully ill I look, and—fell dead.'"

"How terrible!"

"And, Derry, I have heard from her lawyer, too. She has made no will since Ella's death—you know she had left all to Ella—so that you are her heir."

"It is impossible! Oh, dad, impossible! For you know she—disturbed me so."

"Yes, and loved Ella; but if she has really left no later will, you are her nearest relative."

"Stop, dad, please. It—bewilders me."

"No wonder, my dear. To think of your being rich! Well, we can lend Rogers that other £50 now, and"—with a sigh that was meant for a smile—"we can afford to go to America, eh?"

"If it is true," said Derry, gravely, "we will make Sarah independent. She shall have everything she wants."

"Yes; she deserves a house of her own for her devotion to my little girl."

"She shall be rich," declared Derry fervently, "if she will give me that favor."

Then very slowly and thoughtfully she went again to her packing, singing no more for all the fortune that had come to her.

CHAPTER III.

In a room in New York, so high that it was on a level with many of the city chimneys, Steve Basset sat with a pen in his hand, and a half-filled page before him, as he had sat for hours. There was a pained bewilderment on his worn face, for he had had a long, hard chase after thoughts—which had not come at his command. This painful experience was growing sadly familiar to him now, and utter hopelessness was following in its train. Yet, from the first, he had said he would not fail if

any possible effort, any trying ever so wearily, would prevent it. But the effort had grown to be a very distressing one. It had been growing ever more so, since it had first brought home to him that his old power had left him.

He supposed he had power, once, as editors in the old country had told him so, and that had gone first. Then went all his old ease and audacity, and that he often thought had served him best of all. Some critics had been used to speak of the charm his unflinching geniality always gave to his light and cynical vein, but sorrow had changed all that. Everything he did now he—perhaps best of all judges—knew to be heavy and forced.

"I myself," he said, in sadly honest self-contempt, "would never care to read, much less to write, the gray stuff which is all I can buy now."

Then he leaned back, and his quill still between them, held the thin, nervous fingers before his eyes.

"It is no use. Yet what man can bear to do nothing? To seek help from Oliver—even if he knew I was alive to need it—is impossible, for I'm a Basset still, though I shall never own to it. Not that I have need to be proud of that name, though. In its best days it never had any value in my eyes, and now that I have forfeited my identity would I, after making myself conspicuous once again to life to be the cynosure—but something must be done. I could get manual labor, perhaps, and willingly would; but there's not strength enough left in me now. I don't know why, for I'm not ill, only growing bony, and—odd in the head sometimes. Sleepy. The consequence" (with a little cynical smile) "of being delivered over to luxurious idleness."

Steve was lying back in his chair, and the room was very silent, so he wondered the heavy lids fell over his eyes, and the lined face (which held its look of power through all its physical weakness) fell upon his clasped hands. Beyond a doubt he was falling asleep, at this hour, when most busy men turn out to lunch. He was indeed so far on his way to sleep that he was only half aware of a knock on his door, and that after a pause it was opened noiselessly. Presently his eyes unrolled, and he saw some one, dressed in black, standing before the mantel-piece, and gazing at the photograph of Mrs. Frayd in its ornate frame. How could he know that this was Derry's excuse for not at first looking in his direction? How could he know it was not a dream? As he looked, she turned and quietly came toward him, uttering his name almost in a whisper.

"Stand!" as it seemed, he rose to his feet, then had to lean for actual support against his chair, while his hollow eyes devoured the tender face before him.

"Steve?"

Once again Derry pronounced his name, not in a whisper this time but with a thrill of joy, and she took up his thin, unsteady hand and held it between her own, stroking it and laying it at last against her cheek.

"Steve, I have come." Then she stood trembling in alarm, for she had never before in all her life heard a man sob.

Holding his hand still in both of hers, she waited silently, with smiling lips but most pathetic eyes, until the strong, resistless sobbing ceased.

"Yes, Steve," then she said, and almost cheerfully. "I have come—I mean we, Pat and me. Pat is my father. Perhaps you do not know. We have come for you—I mean, really, in his silence of great repression, 'we' came to do 'his' eyes good because he had tried them too much, and a holiday was recommended. And Uncle Joseph lives here, and he wanted to see us, and—still not the interruption which she longed for, no help in telling, only this strong self-control—and we wanted to see Uncle Joseph awfully. So we thought of a trip in a Cunarder—to find you, Steve."

The truth had burst through all her touching childish disguise, even without his encouragement. "Oh, Steve, we want to—only" (with a gulp), "we want to tell you what we owe you, dad and I, and Uncle Joseph"—who had never heard Steve's name!

"Still that touching silence of restraint, still her hungry eyes devouring her. 'What do we owe you, Steve?' This"—with a sudden change of tone—"is like your room at Harrack's; I mean not at all like our parlors there, is it? There are no admirals drying in a crowd on deck, in shirt-frills starched, are there? And no brown pipes under it under them. Oh, how that pipe cornering me with confusion that first morning! I remember so well. I shall never forget it. Shall you? Of course you will. It was nothing to remember, only you sneaked away—is that a right word—so very demonstratively, Steve. It was written so plainly across the back of your head that you had seen it all, and wanted to set away before I caught sight of you, and that you were very sorry for my inability, and pledged yourself not to tell. Oh, it was all so plain as print! Steve, I am rich now—I have everything now—but you, I mean we have everything, for we have you. Steve, don't tremble so. Oh, how longingly I have waited for you!"

"No! no!"

He spoke at last, hoarsely in his intense agitation, but his longing eyes still told her what no words could tell.

"I have waited for you," she gently persisted. "I shall go on waiting."

"No, my—it would be a sin in me." "I shall wait," she said, in quiet earnestness, "if it is forever. Steve, you once said—at least I thought you meant it, if you did not—that, though I had many faults—so true that is—in your soul I bided. Was not it that? Unless you have put me out of your soul I shall wait for you forever. Oh, Steve," she cried, with actual pain, for the unspeakable gladness that her words had brought into his lined face was at that moment

more than she could bear. That words of hers should change him so, told all that he would not—for her sake—consent.

"Oh, Steve," she cried, in actual pain, and then could say no more, until a new thought and a new courage came. To all seeming she spoke quite easily, looking across the room, away from him. "I declare, Steve, I have not yet properly renewed my admiring friendship with that dear, ingenious grin of Mrs. Frayd's. Do you recollect how you despised me for not appreciating the orange-tinted gold of the frame? You did 'I don't forget that' as it was that picture which guided me to you, Steve, and as—without it—I might have been for years, or all my life, and not found you, I must—kiss it!"

Her lips had been always beautiful to him, but he thought only now of the warm, brave, tender heart that stirred them.

"Yes," he said, still holding fast his self-control in all his overmastering love and gratitude, "yes—afterward."

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