

procure his signature to a paper. This paper, drawn up in legal form, had been preserved, for Mr. Belcher was a methodical, business man; and when he had finished reading Yates's letter, and had exhausted his expletives after his usual manner, he opened a drawer, and, extracting a paper, read it through. It was more than six years old, and bore its date, and the marks of its age. All it needed was the proper signatures.

He knew that he could trust Yates no longer. He knew, too, that he could not forward his own ends by appearing to be displeased. The reply which Yates received was one that astonished him by its mildness, its expression of satisfaction with his faithful labor, and its record of good wishes. Now that he was upon the spot, Mr. Yates could still serve him, both in a friendly and in a professional way. The first service he could render him was to forward to him autograph letters from the hands of two men deceased. He wished to verify the signatures of these men, he said, but as they were both dead, he, of course, could not apply to them.

Yates did not doubt that there was mischief in this request. He guessed what it was, and he kept the letter; but after a few days he secured the desired autographs, and forwarded them to Mr. Belcher, who filed them away with the document above referred to. After that, the great proprietor, as a relief from the severe pursuits of his life, amused himself by experiments with inks and pens and pencils, and with writing in a hand not his own, the names of "Nicholas Johnson" and "James Ramsey."

CHAPTER XVIII.

IN WHICH MRS. DILLINGHAM MAKES SOME IMPORTANT DISCOVERIES, BUT FAILS TO REVEAL THEM TO THE READER.

MRS. DILLINGHAM was walking back and forth alone through her long drawing-room. She was revolving in her mind a compliment, breathed into her ear by her friend Mrs. Talbot that day. Mrs. Talbot had heard from the mouth of one of Mrs. Dillingham's admirers the statement, confirmed with a hearty, good-natured oath, that he considered the fascinating widow "the best groomed woman in New York."

The compliment conveyed a certain intimation which was not pleasant for her to entertain. She was indebted to her skill in self-"grooming" for the preservation of her youthful appearance. She had been conscious of this, but it was not pleasant to have the fact detected by her friends. Neither was it pleasant to have it bruited in society, and reported to her by one who rejoiced in the delicacy of the arrow which, feathered by friendship, she had been able to plant in the widow's breast.

She walked to her mirror and looked at herself. There were the fine, familiar outlines of face and figure; there were the same splendid eyes; but a certain charm beyond the power of "grooming" to restore was gone. An incipient, almost invisible, brood of wrinkles was gathering about her eyes; there was a loss of freshness of complexion, and an expression of weariness and age, which, in the repose of reflection and inquisition, almost startled her.

Her youth was gone, and, with it, the most potent charms of her person. She was hated and suspected by her own sex, and sought by men for no reason honora-

ble either to her or to them. She saw that it was all, at no distant day, to have an end, and that when the end should come, her life would practically be closed. When the means by which she had held so many men in her power were exhausted, her power would cease. Into the blackness of that coming night she could not bear to look. It was full of hate, and disappointment, and despair. She knew that there was a taint upon her—the taint that comes to every woman, as certainly as death, who patently and purposely addresses, through her person, the sensuous element in men. It was not enough for her to remember that she despised the passion she excited, and contemned the men whom she fascinated. She knew it was better to lead even a swine by a golden chain than by the ears.

She reviewed her relations to Mr. Belcher. That strong, harsh, brutal man, lost alike to conscience and honor, was in her hands. What should she do with him? He was becoming troublesome. He was not so easily managed as the most of her victims. She knew that, in his heart, he was carrying the hope that some time in the future, in some way, she would become his; that she had but to lift her finger to make the Palgrave mansion so horrible a hell that the wife and mother would fly from it in indignant despair. She had no intention of doing this. She wished for no more intimate relation with her victim than she had already established.

There was one thing in which Mr. Belcher had offended and humiliated her. He had treated her as if he had fascinated her. In his stupid vanity, he had fancied that his own personal attractions had won her heart and her allegiance, and that she, and not himself, was the victim. He had tried to use her in the accomplishment of outside purposes; to make a tool of her in carrying forward his mercenary or knavish ends. Other men had striven to hide their unlovely affairs from her,

but the new lover had exposed his, and claimed her assistance in carrying them forward. This was a degradation that she could not submit to. It did not flatter her, or minister to her self-respect.

Again and again had Mr. Belcher urged her to get the little Sevenoaks pauper into her confidence, and to ascertain whether his father were still living. She did not doubt that his fear of a man so poor and powerless as the child's father must be, was based in conscious knavery; and to be put to the use of deceiving a lad whose smile of affectionate admiration was one of the sweetest visions of her daily life, disgusted and angered her. The thought, in any man's mind, that she could be so base, in consideration of a guilty affection for him, as to betray the confidence of an innocent child on his behalf, disgraced and degraded her.

And still she walked back and forth in her drawing-room. Her thoughts were uneasy and unhappy; there was no love in her life. That life was leading to no satisfactory consummation. How could it be changed? What could she do?

She raised her eyes, looked across the street, and there saw, loitering along and casting furtive glances at her window, the very lad of whom she had been thinking. He had sought and waited for her recognition, and instead of receiving it in the usual way, saw a beckoning finger. He waited a moment, to be sure that he had not misunderstood the sign, and then, when it was repeated, crossed over, and stood at the door. Mrs. Dillingham admitted the boy, then called the servant, and told him that, while the lad remained, she would not be at home to any one. As soon as the pair were in the drawing-room she stooped and kissed the lad, warming his heart with a smile so sweet, and a manner so cordial and gracious, that he could not have told whether his soul was his own or hers.

She led him to her seat, giving him none, but sitting with her arm around him, as he stood at her side.

"You are my little lover, aren't you?" she said, with an embrace.

"Not so very little!" responded Harry, with a flush.

"Well, you love me, don't you?"

"Perhaps I do," replied he, looking smilingly into her eyes.

"You are a rogue, sir."

"I'm not a bad rogue."

"Kiss me."

Harry put his arms around Mrs. Dillingham's neck and kissed her, and received a long, passionate embrace in return, in which her starved heart expressed the best of its powerful nature.

Nor clouds nor low-born vapors drop the dew. It only gathers under a pure heaven and the tender eyes of stars. Mrs. Dillingham had always held a heart that could respond to the touch of a child. It was dark, its ways were crooked, it was not a happy heart, but for the moment her whole nature was flooded with a tender passion. A flash of lightning from heaven makes the darkest night its own, and gilds with glory the uncouth shapes that grope and crawl beneath its cover.

"And your name is Harry?" she said.

"Yes."

"Do you mind telling me about yourself?"

Harry hesitated. He knew that he ought not to do it. He had received imperative commands not to tell anybody about himself; but his temptation to yield to the beautiful lady's wishes was great, for he was heart-starved like herself. Mrs. Balfour was kind, even affectionate, but he felt that he had never filled the place in her heart of the boy she had lost. She did not take him into her embrace, and lavish caresses upon him. He had hungered for just this, and the impulse to show

the whole of his heart and life to Mrs. Dillingham was irresistible.

"If you'll never tell."

"I will never tell, Harry."

"Never, never tell?"

"Never."

"You are Mr. Belcher's friend, aren't you?"

"I know Mr. Belcher."

"If Mr. Belcher should tell you that he would kill you if you didn't tell, what would you do?"

"I should call the police," responded Mrs. Dillingham, with a smile.

Then Harry, in a simple, graphic way, told her all about the hard, wretched life in Sevenoaks, the death of his mother, the insanity of his father, the life in the poor-house, the escape, the recovery of his father's health, his present home, and the occasion of his own removal to New York. The narrative was so wonderful, so full of pathos, so tragic, so out of all proportion in its revelation of wretchedness to the little life at her side, that the lady was dumb. Unconsciously to herself—almost unconsciously to the boy—her arms closed around him, and she lifted him into her lap. There, with his head against her breast, he concluded his story; and there were tears upon his hair, rained from the eyes that bent above him. They sat for a long minute in silence. Then the lady, to keep herself from bursting into hysterical tears, kissed Harry again and again, exclaiming:

"My poor, dear boy! My dear, dear child! And Mr. Belcher could have helped it all! Curse him!"

The lad jumped from her arms as if he had received the thrust of a dagger, and looked at her with great, startled, wondering eyes. She recognized in an instant the awful indiscretion into which she had been betrayed by her fierce and sudden anger, and threw herself upon her knees before the boy, exclaiming:

"Harry, you must forgive me. I was beside myself with anger. I did not know what I was saying. Indeed, I did not. Come to my lap again, and kiss me, or I shall be wretched."

Harry still maintained his attitude and his silence. A furious word from an angel would not have surprised or pained him more than this expression of her anger, that had flashed upon him like a fire from hell.

Still the lady knelt, and pleaded for his forgiveness.

"No one loves me, Harry. If you leave me, and do not forgive me, I shall wish I were dead. You cannot be so cruel."

"I didn't know that ladies ever said such words," said Harry.

"Ladies who have little boys to love them never do," responded Mrs. Dillingham.

"If I love you, shall you ever speak so again?" inquired Harry.

"Never, with you and God to help me," she responded.

She rose to her feet, led the boy to her chair, and once more held him in her embrace.

"You can do me a great deal of good, Harry—a great deal more good than you know, or can understand. Men and women make me worse. There is nobody who can protect me like a child that trusts me. You can trust me."

Then they sat a long time in a silence broken only by Harry's sobs, for the excitement and the reaction had shaken his nerves as if he had suffered a terrible fright.

"You have never told me your whole name, Harry," she said tenderly, with the design of leading him away from the subject of his grief.

"Harry Benedict."

He felt the thrill that ran through her frame, as if it had been a shock of electricity. The arms that held him

trembled, and half relaxed their hold upon him. Her heart struggled, intermitted its beat, then throbbed against his reclining head as if it were a hammer. He raised himself, and looked up at her face. It was pale and ghastly; and her eyes were dimly looking far off, as if unconscious of anything near.

"Are you ill?"

There was no answer.

"Are you ill?" with a voice of alarm.

The blood mounted to her face again.

"It was a bad turn," she said. "Don't mind it. I'm better now."

"Isn't it better for me to sit in a chair?" he inquired, trying to rise.

She tightened her grasp upon him.

"No, no. I am better with you here. I wish you were never to leave me."

Again they sat a long time in silence. Then she said:

"Harry, can you write?"

"Yes."

"Well, there is a pencil on the table, and paper. Go and write your father's name. Then come and give me a kiss, and then go home. I shall see you again, perhaps to-night. I suppose I ought to apologize to Mrs. Balfour for keeping you so long."

Harry did her bidding. She did not look at him, but turned her eyes to the window. There she saw Mr. Belcher, who had just been sent away from the door. He bowed, and she returned the bow, but the smile she summoned to her face by force of habit, failed quickly, for her heart had learned to despise him.

Harry wrote the name, left it upon the table, and then came to get his kiss. The caress was calmer and tenderer than any she had given him. His instinct detected the change; and, when he bade her a good-night, it seemed as if she had grown motherly—as if a new life

had been developed in her that subordinated the old—as if, in her life, the sun had set, and the moon had risen.

She had no doubt that as Harry left the door Mr. Belcher would see him, and seek admission at once on his hateful business, for, strong as his passion was for Mrs. Dillingham, he never forgot his knavish affairs, in which he sought to use her as a tool. So when she summoned the servant to let Harry out, she told him that if Mr. Belcher should call, he was to be informed that she was too ill to see him.

Mr. Belcher did call within three minutes after the door closed on the lad. He had a triumphant smile on his face, as if he did not doubt that Mrs. Dillingham had been engaged in forwarding his own dirty work. His face blackened as he received her message, and he went wondering home, with ill-natured curses on his lips that will not bear repeating.

Mrs. Dillingham closed the doors of her drawing-room, took the paper on which Harry had written, and resumed her seat. For the hour that lay between her and her dinner, she held the paper in her cold, wet hand. She knew the name she should find there, and she determined that before her eye should verify the prophecy of her heart, she would achieve perfect self-control.

Excited by the interview with the lad, and the presence of its waiting *dénouement*, her mind went back into his and his father's history. Mr. Belcher could have alleviated that history; nay, prevented it altogether. What had been her own responsibility in the case? She could not have foreseen all the horrors of that history; but she, too, could have prevented it. The consciousness of this filled her with self-condemnation; yet she could not acknowledge herself to be on a level with Mr. Belcher. She was ready and anxious to

right all the wrongs she had inflicted; he was bent on increasing and confirming them. She cursed him in her heart for his injustice and cruelty, and almost cursed herself.

But she dwelt most upon the future which the discoveries of the hour had rendered possible to herself. She had found a way out of her hateful life. She had found a lad who admired, loved, and trusted her, upon whom she could lavish her hungry affections—one, indeed, upon whom she had a right to lavish them. The life which she had led from girlhood was like one of those deep cañons in the far West, down which her beautiful boat had been gliding between impassable walls that gave her only here and there glimpses of the heaven above. The uncertain stream had its fascinations. There were beautiful shallows over which she had glided smoothly and safely, rocks and rapids over which she had shot swiftly amid attractive dangers, crooked courses that led she did not know whither, landing-places where she could enjoy an hour of the kindly sun. But all the time she knew she was descending. The song of the waterfalls was a farewell song to scenes that could never be witnessed again. Far away perhaps, perhaps near, waited the waters of the gulf that would drink the sparkling stream into its sullen depths, and steep it in its own bitterness. It was beautiful all the way, but it was going down, down, down. It was seeking the level of its death; and the little boat that rode so buoyantly over the crests which betrayed the hidden rocks, would be but a chip among the waves of the broad, wild sea that waited at the end.

Out of the fascinating roar that filled her ears; out of the sparkling rapids and sheeny reaches, and misty cataracts that enchanted her eyes; and out of the relentless drift toward the bottomless sea, she could be lifted. The sun shone overhead. There were rocks to climb

where her hands would bleed ; there were weary heights to scale ; but she knew that on the top there were green pastures and broad skies, and the music of birds—places where she could rest, and from which she could slowly find her way back, in loving companionship, to the mountains of purity from which she had come.

She revolved the possibilities of the future ; and, provided the little paper in her hand should verify her expectations, she resolved to realize them. During the long hour in which she sat thinking, she discounted the emotion which the little paper in her hand held for her, so that, when she unfolded it and read it, she only kissed it, and placed it in her bosom.

After dinner, she ordered her carriage. Then, thinking that it might be recognized by Mr. Belcher, she changed her order, and sent to a public stable for one that was not identified with herself ; and then, so disguising her person that in the evening she would not be known, she ordered the driver to take her to Mr. Balfour's.

Mrs. Dillingham had met Mr. Balfour many times, but she had never, though on speaking terms with her, cultivated Mrs. Balfour's acquaintance, and that lady did not fail to show the surprise she felt when her visitor was announced.

"I have made the acquaintance of your little ward," said Mrs. Dillingham, "and we have become good friends. I enticed him into my house to-day, and as I kept him a long time, I thought I would come over and apologize for his absence."

"I did not know that he had been with you," said Mrs. Balfour, coolly.

"He could do no less than come to me when I asked him to do so," said Mrs. Dillingham ; "and I was entirely to blame for his remaining with me so long. You ladies who have children cannot know how sweet their society sometimes is to those who have none."

Mrs. Balfour was surprised. She saw in her visitor's eyes the evidence of recent tears, and their was a moisture in them then, and a subdued and tender tone to her voice which did not harmonize at all with her conception of Mrs. Dillingham's nature and character. Was she trying her arts upon her ? She knew of her intimacy with Mr. Belcher, and naturally connected the visit with that unscrupulous person's schemes.

Mrs. Balfour was soon relieved by the entrance of her husband, who greeted Mrs. Dillingham in the old, stereotyped, gallant way in which gentlemen were accustomed to address her. How did she manage to keep herself so young ? Would she be kind enough to give Mrs. Balfour the name of her hair-dresser ? What waters had she bathed in, what airs had she breathed, that youth should clothe her in such immortal fashion ?

Quite to his surprise, Mrs. Dillingham had nothing to say to this badinage. She seemed either not to hear it at all, or to hear it with impatience. She talked in a listless way, and appeared to be thinking of anything but what was said.

At last, she asked Mr. Balfour if she could have the liberty to obtrude a matter of business upon him. She did not like to interfere with his home enjoyments, but he would oblige her much by giving her half an hour of private conversation. Mr. Balfour looked at his wife, received a significant glance, and invited the lady into his library.

It was a long interview. Nine o'clock, ten o'clock, eleven o'clock sounded, and then Mrs. Balfour went upstairs. It was nearly midnight when Mrs. Dillingham emerged from the door. She handed a bank-note to the impatient coachman, and ordered him to drive her home. As she passed Mr. Belcher's corner of the street, she saw Phipps helping his master to mount the steps. He had had an evening of carousal among some of his new ac-

acquaintances. "Brute!" she said to herself, and withdrew her head from the window.

Admitted at her door, she went to her room in her unusual wrappings, threw herself upon her knees, and buried her face in her bed. She did not pray; she hardly lifted her thoughts. She was excessively weary. Why she knelt she did not know; but on her knees she thought over the occurrences of the evening. Her hungry soul was full—full of hopes, plans, purposes. She had found something to love.

What is that angel's name who, shut away from ten thousand selfish, sinful lives, stands always ready, when the bearers of those lives are tired of them, and are longing for something better, to open the door into a new realm? What patience and persistence are his! Always waiting, always prepared, cherishing no resentments, willing to lead, anxious to welcome, who is he, and whence came he? If Mrs. Dillingham did not pray, she had a vision of this heavenly visitant, and kissed the hem of his garments.

She rose and walked to her dressing-table. There she found a note in Mrs. Belcher's handwriting, inviting her to a drive in the Park with her and Mr. Belcher on the following afternoon. Whether the invitation was self-moved, or the result of a suggestion from Mr. Belcher, she did not know. In truth, she did not care. She had wronged Mrs. Belcher in many ways, and she would go.

Why was it that when the new and magnificent carriage rolled up to her door the next afternoon, with its wonderful horses and showy equipage, and appointments calculated to attract attention, her heart was smitten with disgust? She was to be stared at; and, during all the drive, she was to sit face to face with a man who believed that he had fascinated her, and who was trying to use her for all the base purposes in which it was possible for her to serve his will. What could she do with him?

How, in the new relations of her life to him, should she carry herself?

The drive was a quiet one. Mr. Belcher sat and feasted his greedy, exultant eyes on the woman before him, and marvelled at the adroitness with which, to use his own coarse phrase, she "pulled the wool" over the eyes of his wife. In what a lovely way did she hide her passion for him! How sweetly did she draw out the sympathy of the deceived woman at her side! Ah! he could trust her! Her changed, amiable, almost pathetic demeanor was attributed by him to the effect of his power upon her, and her own subtle ingenuity in shielding from the eyes of Mrs. Belcher a love that she deemed hopeless. In his own mind it was not hopeless. In his own determination, it should not be!

As for Mrs. Belcher, she had never so much enjoyed Mrs. Dillingham's society before. She blamed herself for not having understood her better; and when she parted with her for the day, she expressed in hearty terms her wish that she might see more of her in the future.

Mrs. Dillingham, on the return, was dropped at her own door first. Mr. Belcher alighted, and led her up the steps. Then, in a quiet voice, he said:

"Did you find out anything of the boy?"

"Yes, some things, but none that it would be of advantage to you to know."

"Well, stick to him, now that you have got hold of him."

"I intend to."

"Good for you!"

"I imagine that he has been pretty well drilled," said Mrs. Dillingham, "and told just what he may and must not say to any one."

"You can work it out of him. I'll risk you."

Mrs. Dillingham could hardly restrain her impatience, but said quietly:

"I fancy I have discovered all the secrets I shall ever discover in him. I like the boy, and shall cultivate his acquaintance; but, really, it will not pay you to rely upon me for anything. He is under Mr. Balfour's directions, and very loyal."

Mr. Belcher remembered his own interview with the lad, and recognized the truth of the statement. Then he bade her good-by, rejoined his wife, and rode home.

CHAPTER XIX.

IN WHICH MR. BELCHER BECOMES PRESIDENT OF THE CROOKED VALLEY RAILROAD, WITH LARGE "TERMINAL FACILITIES," AND MAKES AN ADVENTURE INTO A LONG-MEDITATED CRIME.

MR. BELCHER had never made money so rapidly as during the summer following his removal to New York. The tides of wealth rolled in faster than he could compute them. Twenty regiments in the field had been armed with the Belcher rifle, and the reports of its execution and its popularity among officers and men, gave promise of future golden harvests to the proprietor. Ten thousand of them had been ordered by the Prussian Government. His agents in France, Russia, Austria, and Italy, all reported encouragingly concerning their attempts to introduce the new arm into the military service of those countries. The civil war had advanced the price of, and the demand for, the products of his mills at Sevenoaks. The people of that village had never before received so good wages, or been so fully employed. It seemed as if there were work for every man, woman, and child, who had hands willing to work. Mr. Belcher bought stocks upon a rising market

and unloaded again and again, sweeping into his capacious coffers his crops of profits. Bonds that early in the war could be bought for a song, rose steadily up to par. Stocks that had been kicked about the market for years, took on value from day to day, and asserted themselves as fair investments. From these, again and again, he harvested the percentage of advance, until his greed was gorged.

That he enjoyed his winnings, is true; but the great trouble with him was that, beyond a certain point, he could show nothing for them. He lived in a palace, surrounded by every appointment of luxury that his wealth could buy. His stables held the choicest horse-flesh that could be picked out of the whole country, from Maine to Kentucky. His diamond shirt-studs were worth thousands. His clothes were of the most expensive fabrics, made at the top of the style. His wife and children had money lavished upon them without stint. In the direction of show, he could do no more. It was his glory to drive in the Park alone, with his servants in livery and his four horses, fancying that he was the observed of all observers, and the envied of all men.

Having money still to spend, it must find a market in other directions. He gave lavish entertainments at his club, at which wine flowed like water, and at which young and idle men were gathered in and debauched, night after night. He was surrounded by a group of flatterers who laughed at his jokes, repeated them to the public, humored his caprices, and lived upon his hospitalities. The plain "Colonel Belcher" of his first few months in New York, grew into "the General," so that Wall Street knew him, at last, by that title, without the speaking of his name. All made way for "the General" whenever he appeared. "The General" was "bulling" this stock, and "bearing" that. All this was honey to his palate, and he was enabled to forge.