

UNDER A CLOUD.

A THRILLING TALE OF HUMAN LIFE.

CHAPTER I.

IN BENCHERS' INN.

"My darling! Mine at last!"
Ting-tang; ting-tang; ting-tang.

Malcolm Stratton, F. Z. S., naturalist, a handsome, dark-complexioned man of eight-and-twenty, started and flushed like a girl as he hurriedly thrust the photograph he had been apostrophizing into the breast pocket, and ran to the deep, dingy window of his chambers to look at the clock over the old hall of Benchers' Inn, E. C. It was an unnecessary piece of business, for there was a black marble clock on the old carved oak chimney-piece resting among Grinling Gibbons' wooden flowers and pippin, and he had been dragging his watch from his pocket every ten minutes since he rose at seven, taken his bath, and dressed; but he had forgotten the hour the next minute, and gone on making his preparations, haunted by the great dread lest he should be too late.

"Quarter to ten yet," he muttered. "How slowly the time goes!" As he spoke he sniffed slightly and smiled, for a peculiar aromatic incense-like odor had crept into the room through the chinks in a door.

He stepped back to where a new looking portmanteau lay upon the Turkey carpet, and stood contemplating it for a few moments.

"Now, have I forgotten anything?"

This question was followed by a slow look round the quaint, handsomely furnished old oak-paneled room, one of several suites let out to bachelors who could pay well, and who affected the grim old inn with its plane trees, basin of water, and refreshing quiet, just out of the roar of the busy city street. And as Malcolm Stratton looked round his eyes rested on his cases of valuable books and busts of famous naturalists, and a couple of family portraits, both of which seemed to smile at him pleasantly; and then on and over natural history specimens, curious stuffed birds, a cabinet of osteological preparations, and over and around the heavy looking carvings and mouldings about the four doorways, and continued from the fireplace up to the low ceiling. But, look where he would, he could see nothing but a beautiful face with large, pensive eyes, gazing with loving trust in his as he had seen them only a few hours before when he had said "good-night."

"Bah! I shall never be ready," he cried, with an impatient laugh, and crossing to one of the doorways—all exactly alike—he disappeared for a moment or two, to return from his bedroom with a black bag, which he hastily strapped, set down, paused to think for a moment, and then taking out his keys opened the table drawer, took out a check book, and sat down to write.

"May as well have enough," he said merrily. "I've waited long enough for this trip, and a man doesn't get married every day. One—fifty. Signature. Bah! Don't cross it, stupid!"

He tore out the check, threw back the book, and locked the drawer, before going to a door on the right-hand side of the fireplace, bending forward and listening.

"Wonder he has not been in," he muttered. "Now let's see. Anything else? How absurd! Haven't finished my coffee."

He took the cup from the table, drained it, and, after another look round, turned to the left side of the fireplace, where he opened a door corresponding to the one at which he had listened, went in, and returned directly with an ice ax and an alpenstock.

"May as well take them," he said. "Myra can use you."

He gave the alpenstock a rub with the table napkin before placing it and his old mountaineering companion against the bag. Then, bending down, he was busily strapping the portmanteau and forcing the tongue of the last buckle into its proper hole when there was a knock at the door behind him, and he started to his feet.

"Come in!"

The answer was a second knock, and with an impatient ejaculation the occupant of the chamber threw open the fourth door.

"I forgot the bolt was fastened, Mrs. Brade," he said, as he drew back to admit a plump looking, neatly dressed woman in cap and apron, one corner of which she took up to begin rolling between her fingers as she stood smiling at the edge of the carpet.

"Yes, sir," she said, "if I make so bold, and I don't wonder at it. Oh, my dear—I mean Mr. Stratton, sir—how handsome you do look this morning!"

"Why, you silly old woman?" he cried, half laughing, half annoyed.

"Oh, no, excuse me, sir, not a bit. Handsome is as handsome does, they say, and you is and does too, sir, and happiness and joy go with you, sir, and your dear, sweet lady too, sir."

"I beg your pardon, sir, I'm sure, and of course it's natural at such a time. I came because you sent word by the waiter that I was to—"

"Of course, yes: about ten. I'm so busy, I forgot," cried Stratton hastily. "Look here, Mrs. Brade, I want you to go over to the bank; it will be open by the time you get across. Cash this check for me; bring all notes—tens and fives."

"A hundred and fifty pounds, sir?"

"Yes; take a hand bag with you. Don't get robbed."

"Oh, no, sir. I know too much of the ways of London town."

"That's right. Excuse my being hurried with you."

"Of course, sir; I know well what your feelings must be. (Sniff, sniff.) Why, you can smell Mr. Brettison's smoking his uddle-dubble with that strange tobacco right in here."

As the woman spoke she went straight across to the door on the left of the fireplace.

"Here! where are you going?" cried Stratton.

"Back directly, sir," came in smothered tones, accompanied by the pulling of a bath chain, the gurgling of water, and the sound of shutting down a heavy lid.

"Lor, how strong Mr. Brettison do smell, sir. It's my memory's got that bad, sir," said the woman, reappearing and care fully shutting the door, "that I'm obliged to do things when I see them want doing, else I forgets. It was only yesterday that Mr. Brettison—"

"Mrs. Brade, the check, please."

"Of course, sir," said the woman hastily just as there was a little rat-tat at the brass knocker of the outer door, which she opened.

"Here is Mr. Brettison, sir," and she drew back to admit a spare looking, gray man, dressed in dark tweed, who removed his soft felt hat and threw it, with a botanist's vasculum and a heavy oaken stick, upon an easy-chair, as he watched the departure of the porter's wife before turning quickly and, with tears in his eyes, grasping Stratton's hands and shaking them warmly.

"My dear boy," he said, in a voice full of emotion, "God bless you! Happiness to you! God bless you both!"

"My dear old friend!" cried Stratton. "Thank you; for Myra, too. But come, you've repented. You will join the wedding party after all?"

"I? Oh, no, no, my boy. I'm no wedding guest. Why, Malcolm, I should be a regular ancient mariner without the glittering eye."

"I am sorry. I should have liked you to be present," said Stratton warmly.

"I know it, my boy, I know it; but no; don't press me. I couldn't bear it. I was young, if not as handsome as you. But, there was a pause—"she died," he added in a whisper. "I could not bear to come."

"Mr. Brettison!"

"There," cried the visitor with forced gaiety, "just what I said. No, my dear Malcolm. No, no, my boy. I'm better away."

Stratton was silent, and his neighbor went on hastily:

"I heard you packing and knocking about, but I wouldn't disturb you, my dear boy. I'm off, too: a week's collecting in the New Forest. Write to me very soon, and my dear love to your sweet wife—an angel, Malcolm—a blessing to you, my boy. Tell her to let you gather a few of the mountain flowers to send me. Ask her to pick a few herself and I'll kiss them as coming from her."

"I'll tell her, sir."

"That's right; and, Malcolm, my boy, I'm quite alone in the world, where I should not have been now if you had not broken in my door and came and nursed me back to life, dying as I was from that deadly fever."

"My dear Mr. Brettison, if you ever mention that trifle of neighborly service again we are no longer friends," cried Stratton.

"Trifle of neighborly service!" said the old man, laying his hands affectionately upon the other's shoulders. "You risked your life, boy, to save that of one who would fain have died. But Heaven knows best, Malcolm, and I've been a happier man since, for it has seemed to me as if I had a son. Now, one word more and I am going. I've a train to catch. Tell your dear young wife that Edward Brettison has watched your career—that the man who was poor and struggled so hard to place himself in a position to win her will never be poor again; for I have made you my heir, Malcolm, and God bless you, my boy. Good-by; write soon."

"Mr. Brettison!" cried Stratton, in amazement.

"Hush!"

The door opened, and Mrs. Brade reappeared with a black reticule in one hand and a ruddy telegram envelope in the other.

"I see, wanted already," said the old man, hastily catching up hat, stick, and collecting box, and hurrying out without another word.

"Telegram, sir; and there's the change, sir."

"Eh! The notes? Thank you, Mrs. Brade," said Stratton hurriedly, and taking the packet he laid them on the table and placed a bronze letter weight to keep them down. "That will do, thank you, Mrs. Brade. Tell your husband to fetch my luggage, and meet me at Charing Cross. He'll take a cab, of course."

said a heavily built man with a florid face, grayish hair, and closely cut foreign looking hair.

"My name, sir, but I am particularly engaged this morning. If you have business with me you must write."

This at the doorway, with Mrs. Brade standing a little back on the stone landing.

"No time for writing," said the stranger sternly. "Business too important. Needn't wait, Mrs. what's-her-name," he continued, turning upon the woman so sharply that she began to hurry down the stairs.

"I don't care how important your mission is, sir," cried Stratton; "I cannot give you an interview this morning. If you have anything to say you must write. My business—"

"I know," said the man coolly: "going to be married."

Stratton took a step back, and his visitor one forward into the room, turned, closed the outer door, and before Stratton could recover from his surprise, the inner door, and pointed to a chair.

"Sit down," said the man, and he took another chair and sat back in it.

"Well of all the audacious—!" began Stratton, with a half laugh; but he was interrupted.

"Don't waste words, sir; no time. The lady will be waiting."

As he spoke Stratton saw the man's eyes rest for a moment on the banknotes beneath the letter weight, and an undefined sensation of uneasiness attacked him. He mastered it in an instant, ignoring the last remark.

"Now, sir; you say you have business with me. Let me hear it, since I must—at once."

"Ah, that's businesslike. We shall be able to deal."

"Say what you have to say."

"When you sit down."

Stratton let himself fall back into a chair.

"Now then. Quick!"

"You propose being married this morning."

"I do," said Stratton, with a sort of dread lest even then there should be some obstacle in the way.

"Well, then, you can't; that's all."

"What!" cried Stratton fiercely. "Who says so?"

"I do. But keep cool, young man. This is business."

"Yes; I'll be cool," said Stratton, mastering himself again, and adopting his visitor's cynical manner. "So let me ask you, sir, who you may be, and what is your object in coming?"

The man did not answer for a moment, but let his eyes rest again upon the notes.

"I say, who are you, sir?"

"I? Oh, nobody of any importance," said the man, with an insolent laugh.

Stratton sprang up, and the visitor thrust his hand behind him.

"No nonsense, Mr. Malcolm. I tell you this is business. Without my consent you cannot marry Myra Barron, formerly Myra Jerrold, this morning."

"I say, who are you, sir?" cried Stratton furiously.

"James Barron, my dear sir—the lady's husband."

"Good God!"

CHAPTER II.

TWO SHOTS FROM A REVOLVER

Malcolm Stratton started back with his eyes wild and his face ghastly, just as there was the faint sound of steps on the stone stairs, and directly after someone gave a long continued double knock on the outer door.

"Company, eh?" said the man rising. "Get rid of him. I've a lot to say. I'll go in here."

He went straight to the doorway on the right of the fireplace.

"No, no," cried Stratton harshly; "that is a false door."

"False door?" said the man; "is this?"

He laid his hand upon the other on the left of the fireplace, and opened it.

"All right. Bath room. I'll go in here."

As the man shut himself in Stratton reeled as if he would have fallen, but a second rat-tat upon the little brass knocker brought him to himself, and, after a glance at the closet door, he opened that of the entry, and then the outer door, to admit a good looking, fair-haired young fellow of about five-and-twenty, most scrupulously dressed, a creamy rose in his buttonhole, and a look of vexation in his merry face as he stood looking at his white kid gloves.

"I say, old chap," he cried, "I shall kill your housekeeper. She must have black-leaded that knocker. Morning. How are you. Pretty well ready?"

"Ready?" said Stratton hurriedly. "No, not yet. I'm sure I—"

"Why, hullo, old chap; what's the matter?"

"Matter? Nothing, nothing."

"Well, you look precious seedy. White about the gills. Why, hang it, Malcolm, don't take it like that. Fancy you being nervous. What about? Packed up, I see?"

"Yes—yes."

"Wish it was my turn," continued the newcomer. "Might as well have been two couples: Mr. and Mrs. Malcolm Stratton; Mr. and Mrs. Percy Guest. Why, I say, old chap, you are ill."

"No, no," cried Stratton hurriedly; and a sudden thought struck him.

Catching up the telegram from the table, he handed it to his friend.

"Hullo! Nothing serious? Poof! What a molehill mountain. You shouldn't let a thing like this agitate your noble nerves. Bless the dear little woman. I'll run on to Common Garden, Central Avenue, as we say in some suckles, bully the beggar for not sending it, start him, and be back for you in a jiffy."

By the time Stratton had grown firmer, and, pointing to the door, he cried:

"Look here, sir: I'll have no more of this. You are an impostor. I don't know where you obtained your information, but if you have come to levy blackmail on the strength of such a mad tale, you have failed; so go."

"To my wife?"

"To the police-station if you dare to threaten me. Look here: James Barron, otherwise James Dale, died two years ago."

"Then he has come to life again, that's all," said the man coolly. "Now, look here, you; I've not come to quarrel. I call on you, and of course it must be just dampening at such a time, but you see, I had no option. It wasn't likely that—be cool, will you? Let that poker rest!"

He spoke savorily, and took a revolver from a hip pocket.

"I say it wasn't likely that you would be threaten to see me, and I'm not surprised at your crying impostor, because, as I well enough know, the papers said I was dead, and for the past two years my beautiful little wife has worn her widow's weeds."

Stratton made a gesture to start forward, but the man sat back in his chair and raised the pistol.

"I'm a very good shot," he said coolly. "Be quiet and listen. I'm an impostor, am I? I was not married to Myra Jerrold, I suppose, directly after the old man had taken her for a continental tour with pretty, merry little Edie Perrin. Bless her—sweet little girl! I'd rather have had her if she had possessed Myra's money. It's all right, my dear sir. I can give you chapter and verse, and commas and full stops, too, if you want satisfying. But you do not; you know it's all true. Why don't I put in my claims? Well, there is that little unpleasantness with the police, and that is why," he continued as he toyed with the revolver. "I object to your calling them in to interfere. No, Mr. Malcolm Stratton, I shall not let you call them in for more reason than one. Ah! you begin to believe me. Let me see now, can I give you a little corroborative evidence? You don't want it, but I will. Did the admiral ever tell you what an excellent player I was at piquet?"

Stratton started.

"Yes, I see he did. And how I used to sing 'La ci darem' with Myra, and played the accompaniment myself? Yes, he told you that, too. My dear sir, I have a hundred little facts of this kind to tell you, including my race after Myra's horse when it took fright and she was thrown. By the way, has the tiny little red scar faded from her white temple yet?"

Stratton's face was ghastly now.

"I see I need say no more, sir. You are convinced Myra is my wife. There has been no divorce, you see, so you are at my mercy."

"But she is not at yours," cried Stratton fiercely. "You go back to your cell, sir, and she will never be polluted by the touch of such a scoundrel again."

"Polluted? Strong language, young man and you are losing your temper. Once more, be cool. You see I have this, and I am not a man to be trifled with. I do not intend to go back to my cell: I had enough of that yonder, but mean to take my ease, for the future. These chambers are secluded; a noise here is not likely to be heard, and I should proceed to extremities if you forced me."

"You dare to threaten me?"

"Yes, I dare to threaten you, my dear sir. But keep cool, I tell you. I didn't come here to quarrel, but to do a little business. Did you expect me? I see you have the money ready."

He pointed to the notes—notes to defray a blissful honeymoon trip—and Stratton had hard work to suppress a groan.

"There, I'm very sorry for you, my dear sir," continued the scoundrel, "and I want to be friendly, both to you and poor little Myra—good little soul! She thought me dead; you thought me dead; and I dare say you love each other like pigeons. Next thing, I admire her, but she never cared a sou for me. Well, suppose I say that I'll be dead to oblige you both. What do you say to that?"

Malcolm was silent.

"I never wanted the poor little lass, Frankly, I wanted her money, and the admiral's too—hang the old rascal, he won about fifty pounds of me. But to continue. Now, Mr. Malcolm Stratton, time is flying, and the lady will soon be at the church, where you must be first. I tell you that I will consent to keep under the tombstone where the law and society have placed me, for a handsome consideration. What do you propose?"

"To hand you over to the police," said Stratton firmly, but with despair in his tone.

"No, you do not. You propose to give me the money on the table there, to sign an agreement to pay me three hundred a year as long as I keep dead, and then to go and wed your pretty widow, and be off to the continent or elsewhere."

Bigamy—blackmailed by a scoundrel who would make his life a hell—through constant threats to claim his wife—a score of such thoughts flashed through Stratton's brain as he stood there before the cool, calculating villain watching him so keenly. Money was no object to him. Mr. Brettison would let him have any amount, but it was madness to think of such a course. There was only one other—to free the innocent, pure woman he idolized from the persecution of such a wretch, and the law would enable him to do that.

Malcolm Stratton's mind was made up, and he stood there gazing full in his visitor's eyes.

"Well," said the man coolly, "time is on the wing, as I said before. How much is there under that letter weight?"

"One hundred and fifty pounds," said Stratton quietly.

"Write me a check for three hundred and fifty pounds then, and the bargain is closed."

"Not for a penny," said Stratton quietly.

"You will. The lady is waiting."

"So are the police."

"What!" cried the man, rising slowly and with a menacing look in his countenance. "No fooling, sir. You see this, and you know I shall not be trifled with. Once more let me remind you that a noise here would hardly be heard outside. But you are not serious. The prize for you is too great. Police? How could you marry the lady then? Do you think my proud, prudish little Myra would take you, knowing me to be alive? Stop, will you?" he cried with a savage growl like that of a wild beast, "or, by all that's holy—Here, what are you going to do, fool?"

"Summon the police," Stratton, who was half way to the door, as the man sprang at him with activity of a panther.

For the next minute there was a desperate struggle, as the men wrestled here and there, both moved by one object—the possession of the deadly weapon.

Then one arm was freed, there was the sharp report of a pistol, and a puff of ill smelling smoke partially hid the struggling pair.

Another shot with the smoke more dense. A heavy fall.

Then silence—deathlike and strange.

Outside, on the staircase a floor higher a door was opened; there were steps on the stone landing, and a voice shouted down the well:

"Anything the matter?"

After a moment another voice was heard:

"Nonsense—nothing. Someone banged his oak."

There was the sound of people going back into the room above, and in the silence which followed, broken only by the faintly heard strain of some street music at a distance, the door below, on the first floor landing, was opened a little way, the fingers of a hand appearing round the edge, and a portion of a man's head came slowly out, as if its owner was listening.

The door was closed once more as softly as it was opened, and the sun, which had been hidden all the morning by leaden clouds, sent a bright sheaf of golden rays through the dust-encrusted staircase window, straight on to the drab-painted outer door, with the occupant's name thereon in black letters.

MR. MALCOLM STRATTON.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

FALL FUN.

"Cholly is very unfortunate in the impression he makes," said one girl. "Yes," replied another. "His clothes are so loud and his remarks are so soft!"

This is the blissful autumn time,
So prized by bard and lover,
When one wakes up at 3 a.m.,
And bellows for more cover.

Jack—"That girl next door sings like a lark—or should I say a nightingale." Tom—"Both. A lark, you know, sings by day and a nightingale by night."

"What have you got in folding beds?" asked the customer addressing the furniture salesman. "Got one of our clerks in one and they are just trying to get him out."

"Men," said Sharpe, "may be divided into two classes—knaves and fools." "That's a pretty bright remark," said Uncle Silas; "any man who takes you for a fool is mistaken."

Miss Prude—"Miss Smith is very charming but she seems to have no special hold upon the men's affections." Miss Pimm—"No, it seems to be a 'catch-can' affair."

She (to one who has been making love in the most approved fashion)—"But, really, Harry, are you serious?" He—"Serious? You don't suppose I'm doing this thing for the fun of it, do you?"

I taught her how to fence with foils,
To box with gloves—and now,
Since we are married, I don't dare
To raise the smallest row.

"Why do you call old man Jobson a pirate?" "He kicked me off the place the other night." "That doesn't make a pirate of him." "Doesn't, eh? Well, what is a pirate but a freebooter, then?"

Fond Parent—"Goodness, how you look, child. You are soaked." Frankie—"Please, pa, I fell into the canal." "What with your new trousers on?" "I didn't have time, pa, to take them off."

"Allow me, mademoiselle, to present this to you?" "No, no, I do not wish to accept a present." "It is a volume of my poems."

"Ah, that is different. I could not have permitted you to give me anything of value."

Mr. Higgins—"What do you think of the latest medical dictum that kissing is unhealthy?" Mr. Hunker—"It is quite true. Mr. Munn happened to catch me kissing his daughter, and I was laid up a whole week."

Teacher—"What is your name?" Little Boy (from England)—"Enry Hadams." Little Girl (from New York)—"He, he, he! Hear him misplace his h's!" Teacher—"And what is your name?" Little Girl—"Idar Warnah."

"Papa," said Jack, as he gazed at his ten cents—one week's allowance—"do you know what I would do if I was an awful rich king?" "No, Jack. What?" "I'd increase my allowance to a quarter a week."

Fond Mother—"Yes, sir; I have a little fellow who is only ten, and yet he writes beautiful poetry." Old Editor—"Well, there's some hope for them when you catch 'em young, you can whip it out of 'em easier then."

"Things is gettin' mighty mixed, Mandy," said Farmer Cornstossel; "mighty mixed." "What's the matter?" "The politicians air all tryin' to tell the farmers about farmin' an' the farmers air tryin' to tell the politicians about politics."

"I'm going to have that stock investigated," said the investor. "There's been a good deal of funny business in that corporation." "True," said Barlow; "and I'd advise you to employ a diver to do your investigating, there's so much water in it."

Keeper—"I thowt you was workin' up at Morley's farm, Giles?" Giles—"Well, so I wer; but two weeks ago I owd cow died and we 'ad to eatin'; and next week I pig died and we 'ad to eat 'im, an' this mornin' I master's mother-in-law died, so I thowt I'd leave."

A Mean Trick.

Clara—"Why in the world did you engage yourself to that Mr. Hardhead?" Dora—"He took me at such a disadvantage that I had to."

"Nonsense."

"Oh, but you don't know. He proposed to me in an ice-cream saloon, and I knew perfectly well that if I didn't accept him he wouldn't ask me to have another plate."

Who seeks and will not take when once 'tis offered, shall never find it more.—Shakespeare.