

The Mystery of The Violin

"Yes! Who is it? Let us hear his name!"

"A—gentleman, sir," hesitated the servant, his fascinated glance upon that still, tragic woman's figure framed in the balcony window. "In the hall—a Mr. Geoffrey Arnold. He asks you to see him this once—for five minutes in a lifetime, he says. He will never trouble you again. It's life or death to him, I was to say."

"Very clever; a dramatic touch! Just request the gentleman to step from my premises, say that Mr. Bede Grafton declines to see his niece shackled for life to a fortune-hunter, musical genius or not, and then—"

"No! Uncle, you could not—no! You dare not send those words to him—no!"

"Stand back, Annabel. We'll discuss that afterwards."

Old Bede Grafton waved his arm; the wild sob was lost, the imploring white face shrank back; the servant disappeared. In that pause, till the dull bang of a door below sounded, it seemed that the beat of a woman's heart could be heard in the silence. Then, one hand groping out as if in a mist, she was moving towards the door.

"One moment!" A trifle unsteady, still grim, the retired ironmaster's voice came from the arm-chair in the shadow. Something in it riveted her attention, even at such a moment.

"Now! I promised that poor father of yours I would stand square between you and the mistake so many women make. Is this the result of all my efforts to that end? No, stand still; all the sobs in the world cannot alter the fact that this man is an adventurer, whose dramatic ways and violin-playing have worked upon you successfully. Here is your golden chance to pause and realize. You cannot—or you will not? You intend to become this man's plaything for life?"

"His wife! I must; I have promised," the steady, far-away whisper floated across. "I trust him; no woman could give a greater reason. One day—one day he will prove to you that he was worthy all the love and comfort I can give him now!"

"Very good; that should end it." He rose stiffly. "Well, I need not say a word as to what I meant to do for you—that's past. I will write you a cheque for a hundred, and you can go and marry him when and how you choose."

He had sunk back into his arm-chair, eyes closed and lips set. A pause, and then two soft, trembling arms came round his neck from behind and held him still, with a whisper that he was never to forget.

"Good-night, dear uncle—and good-bye. No, I cannot take the cheque; Geoffrey and I do not ask it—trust that we shall never have to. You need not fear so for your Annabel. It may be a struggle for years yet, but is not that the time when he needs most a wife's help and comfort? And may you live—yes, may you live to share our happiness, and to know that it is you, not Annabel, who has made the mistake!"

She kissed his forehead, smoothed back the thin, grey hair, and seemed to wait. Some flint-like lump was in his throat, but no word could pass. And then the door had closed and he was alone. The last man to own it, he could have said that in that moment the sunlight seemed to fade out of his life and leave it in eternal dusk.

It might have been six weeks later that Mr. Bede Grafton started his coachman more than ordinarily by savagely directing him to drive to an obscure suburban street. It was dark. At the corner Mr. Grafton alighted, turned up his coat-collar, muttered something, and moved along the row of absurdly small villas. Now he drew a sharp breath at sight of a name-plate shining boldly in the lamplight. "Geoffrey Arnold, Teacher of Violin. Terms low and tuition thorough." Mad fool!

There was firelight flickering through the front-room Venetian blinds. Old Grafton bent and peered almost like a prospective criminal, peered until he made out the soft, unconscious profile of the girl who had crept out of his life. She had gone from him—gone to this other man, whose spinal weakness prevented him from following any real business, who taught music and begged stray engagements for a living, and whose sole assets in life were a rare old violin and a reputed talent for playing it.

Reputed? That was a sneering word. As if to shame it, there waited suddenly from that room the long-drawn, haunting sound of a bow drawn lovingly, caressingly down four strings. It thrilled old Grafton, held him to the spot; it was like the sound of a loved and lost woman's voice heard echoing in dreams. He could not see the player, but he had to hear the music—such music. Hark! the flood of fast, trembling notes swelled and swelled as if it were a crescendo prelude to the outburst of some mighty celestial choir; then suddenly they dropped to a mere murmur like the wind's moan among far-off trees. And so on and

on through mazes of melody, till, with a rich sweep of chords, it had ended and left a moment's silence like that of a dead world. Old Grafton stumbled back as out of a sleep, realized that other people besides himself had been snared by the spell, and walked away to his carriage.

No; he would never forgive that other man his presumption in tempting away his Annabel. Never! Never! He had seen her face once again, as he wished to do; had heard, incidentally, the man's violin-playing. Now they were both blotted from his life for ever!

Seven years! For seven years the bitter, incredible blank in his life has lasted. It was a bent, stooping, white-haired man who tore open the letters addressed to Mr. Bede Grafton that morning. She had written once—only once! He had kept his word—never answered it.

Nerve shocks were rare in his grim, quiet existence, but two were waiting him this morning. The writing upon one envelope caught his eye and set his hand trembling strangely. He hesitated, half inclined to tear the thing into fragments; then he obeyed the fascination. Yes, from—from Annabel, who had once breathed in this very room.

"Dear Uncle—if I may write that word! I had prayed that the time might never come when I should need to ask your help, but it is here, and for the sake of my dear husband I risk your refusal. We have been very happy, but Geoffrey's health has brought us to a momentary crisis. He does not know I have written, and I dare not say more than that the loan—not the gift—at this moment of one half the sum you once offered me might mean more than you may ever understand. Dare I hope for a reply? If you cannot do so much, it would be much to know that you had forgiven. Oh, dear uncle, every day I have longed to write that life is too brief for bitterness!—Your Annabel."

He stared, the flinty lump forming and crumbling in his throat; then he pushed the letter away—it seemed that her clear, chining brown eyes looked up from it into his. No!

He took up his newspaper, and almost the first words he saw gave the name of that very man—"Geoffrey Arnold." Shock number two. He read through the paragraph, and it told him that Geoffrey Arnold was one of five amateur violinists who had emerged successful from all preliminary tests and entered upon the final stage for the great Danesbury prize—one thousand pounds and a professorship. Musicians from all quarters of the world had competed and—this obscure Arnold fellow was one of five left in the struggle! The crucial hearing was announced for only ten days hence . . . And yet she was writing in suppressed terror and agony to ask his financial help? No! In any case, she had taken her choice of two men, and should consistently abide by it.

Mr. Grafton's servants reported him as pacing his room half that same night. Twice his hand had gone to his cheque-book, and twice was stubbornly withdrawn. He had won, but the struggle was none the less deep. In crushing her he had come near crushing himself. How dared she write? What were the words she dared not put in the letter?

Three days of the ten had ticked by, and old Bede Grafton realized that the uncertainty was a little more than he need bear. He would go and just snatch a look at the house, and possibly catch a glimpse of Annabel, to see whether the man's selfishness was killing her; nothing more. He put a cheque for just fifty pounds in his pocket, but not to give her—or only upon such conditions that her husband could not benefit by it. This time he took a cab stealthily as far as that street corner, and then alighted—precisely as he had done once on a never-forgotten night seven years ago. Eh, what—only seven?

There it was still, bold and bright as ever—"Geoffrey Arnold." The very words irritated him—of course, her name was Arnold now! He walked quickly by, hesitated, glared at the blinds, fought the final bit of a fight, and turned in at the gate. He would knock just once. All would depend upon who answered. If Annabel, he might hear her story and make her a proposal; if the man, he could stride away in contemptuous silence. Yes!

"Rat-a-tat! For a minute no tangible sound. Then, as he brought himself to stoop and peer through the letter-slit—just the once—he became aware of a queer sensation down his spine. Eh, what? Something was bending and breathing on the other side, an inch away; wide brown eyes seemed to be staring into his—he could be almost positive of a glazed, scared expression in them.

"Who's that, pray?" he blurted out shakily. "Is that you, Annabel?"

He waited; and then—

"Oh, however did you know my name?" came back a slow, amazed little voice, soft and clear. "That is funny; I hadn't made a sound. Yes, I'm little Annabel. Please, whoever are you?"

"Little Annabel!" gasping it, he stood back and glared at the letter-slit. The possibility of a little Annabel, strangely enough, had never occurred to the grim old bachelor in this case. "Oh, indeed! Then I'm—er—I shall be told I'm your grand-uncle. I suppose!"

"You are? Really! A grand one? Oh, I'd give worlds if I could let you in just to look at you all over. Why, you must be the one I told Father Christmas to send—the one mamma kept crying about; but you're very late, you know. I haven't open an inch; I promised mamma I wouldn't even go near the door; because of thieves. You might be a burglar just saying that on purpose, mightn't you? Could you stoop a bit lower?"

He stiffened with indignation and yet had to chuckle; the situation suddenly appealed to him. He did stoop, to speak with deliberation.

"Now does my voice sound like a burglar's? Where is your father? Out? Humph! Mother out too? Ah! Well, I've called to see you. Leave the door wide open if I'm such a terrible figure. That's it!"

Doubtfully, dramatically, the door opened a few inches. He pushed impatiently with his stick, but his queer sensation tingled again as he found himself staring down into a wee, oval face with starry, brown eyes, and framed in fair hair. The years seemed to roll back, and he was looking down at the little Annabel his hand had drawn away from a father's death-bed to his own quiet mansion. This little duplicate was full of combined fear and wonder.

"I'm six next week," she breathed, in awe, as he closed the door and grunted his way along to a kitchen. He might turn out to be a burglar yet. "Mamma went out after breakfast. She cried and kissed me, but I said I'd be brave as anything and mind the house. She had to go. Oh, yes, mamma cries a good deal lately but she doesn't let him see, because he's miserable and can't sleep."

"Humph! and why can't he sleep?" he asked gruffly, as he walked round; "why, I say?"

"How do I know? Because he can't play his violin, I think. I heard them talking, and his forehead went down on this table with such a bang, and he said it would kill him if he couldn't play for his prize after all. I don't know where it is; I expect the strings have broken again. So wretched when the strings break, isn't it? I'm sure, I don't think there's anything to offer you—unless—unless you like to cut the cake that mother put away. I'd tell her you felt hungry, and made me have a bit. Daddy? Oh, he goes out every morning, and comes home late, and always says he's met someone and had his dinner out. Mamma went because she had this letter. Daddy's not to know, mind. The cake's in that cupboard."

Mechanically, certainly not realizing old Bede Grafton took down the letter from behind a vase. Next moment he had sucked in his lips sharply, as if to keep back a word. Only a few lines, but luminous ones.

"Dear Madam,—I understand from a friend that you are anxious to obtain occasional employment in fancy-work. If you call here to-morrow at ten o'clock I can employ you for a few hours. I pay fairly, but do not care to be disappointed."

And she had gone; it was to help her Geoffrey, who must not know. He turned again to little Annabel. Small as she was, it struck her that he had never put his hand nicely on a little girl's head before, because he did it with his eyes half shut, as if unwillingly.

"Doesn't your father work? Where does he go every day? Is he—does he still have these pains?"

"Oh, yes!" she whispered, surprised at his ignorance. "And haven't you heard? The doctors said he must stop using his eyes as something was growing over them. I'm sure of it, because, you know, he often looks at me and doesn't see me standing there. One great, big doctor thought he could do something if daddy called at his house, but he said two guineas for a beginning, and daddy couldn't pay that—not till he wins the prize. Oh, he does want to! And yet he hasn't played a note for over a week— isn't it funny? I think—I half believe he goes out to try and find some friends who'll let him have some money. But he doesn't find them—I think they must have moved!"

"Humph! That sort of friend has a knack of melting away," old Bede Grafton drily commented. Lips pursed, he looked round again. The place was neat, but its appointments would not bear too much analysis. Then came a question that staggered himself. "What's he like? I—I've never seen him yet!"

"Never seen daddy! Here!" She led the way into a parlor, clutching his hand confidently now. "There he is, on the wall, beside mamma. Oh, you'd like my daddy! If you could only stay a little and hear him play his pieces! The people clapped him and shouted, and the newspapers said he would win the prize. Then we'll all be so happy—and then you can come to tea and supper, too. Won't it be nice? But daddy had to pay such a lot of money for debts and doctors!"

He glanced into the clever, delicate, sensitive face of Annabel's hero—this man who was to win the Danesbury prize. Nearer and nearer he was drawn; it didn't matter—he should never see the man's features again.

Then—then his eye fell upon a little casket at the back of the mantel-shelf. In it lay a slip of thin cardboard, and a word upon it had caught his attention as being coincidental. He stumbled back—and turned forward to peer again; and went

away with something near a groan, and a hand to his eyes. It was, of course, the suddenness of the revelation—the lightning flash upon the tragedy behind. He had stared at a pledge-ticket. Geoffrey Arnold's rare old violin lay at this moment in the grip of a West-end pawnbroker. The crucial day of the Danesbury prize was next Thursday. Unless Annabel's husband could raise forty-five pounds and interest by that day, his chance was a dead one. Now he knew; now he understood!

His own servants would hardly have recognized old Grafton's face as he turned once more to little Annabel, the duplicate. It was different—convulsed, yet somehow softened as if a mask had fallen away. He stooped and gripped her wrists, jerking forth a husky, penetrating whisper:—

"Brave, are you? Could you let me in, if I get back in an hour? Will you mind the place till then, and not tell a soul I've been?"

She nodded at once; it was becoming rather fantastic and dreamlike to her—as it was partly to himself. And then, as he coughed loudly, his thin old fingers had closed furtively upon that ticket, and he had shuffled out. And little Annabel sat there like a figure of stone, listening, her hands strained together. He had taken something and gone—be was a burglar calling himself a grand-uncle.

But at last—at last came his tap and cough. Yes, it was the same funny old gentleman, with something bulky under his arm. He came in, crept into the parlor, left his parcel there, and tip-toed out.

"Don't touch it. You can kiss me," he whispered. "Er—just say that Uncle Grafton came, and might possibly be up this way again, but he doesn't want any thanks. Remember that? Oh, and this is for little Annabel. Buy a patent lock and keep out burglars! Good-bye."

He was gone, as fearfully as he had come; but she knew he was real, because a sovereign lay shining in the palm of her hand. And on the table, there, under the cloth—yes, he wouldn't mind her having just one peep. She looked, and looked, and puzzled—and then suddenly came the quick rattle of a key in the hall-door. She flew out, screaming breathlessly.

"Look! Why didn't you keep away?—he might have come again! My uncle—such a grand one! A sovereign—and something on the table there—it looks just like daddy's violin . . . Mamma, dear, don't cry! He didn't—he only took one little thing off the mantel-shelf; I watched all the time; he never touched the cake! Ought I to have screamed out? . . . Mamma, what's the matter? Did he steal daddy's violin and bring it back? Can daddy go on playing now? Will he win the prize?"

The mother's whisper was lost. But the world answered little Annabel's question one week later.

And a gruff old "burglar" saw the announcement in the papers. He hadn't looked for it—oh, no! it happened to catch his eye. "It's the fiddle, not the man," he muttered to himself.

And that very evening he alighted furtively at the corner of that same obscure street. Impossible to tell, but it looked very much as if the success of his first felonious attempt had stimulated him to risk another. —London Tit-Bits.

GREAT WARSHIPS.

Facts About Three New British War Vessels.

The three armored cruisers of the current shipbuilding programme which are to be laid down at Portsmouth, Devonport and Pembroke will reach the high water mark in cruiser construction.

The new vessels, which will be named *Minotaur*, *Shannon*, and *Dedence*, will practically be battleships. In both power and size they will exceed anything of their class afloat. The following are the particulars of the ships:—

Guns—Four 9.2-inch; ten 7.5-inch. Shells—380 pounds and 200 pounds. Rate—Four shells per minute. Penetration—2 1/2 feet of iron. Armor belt—300 feet of six-inch steel. Gun protection—Eight-inch steel. Speed—Twenty-three knots. Horse-power—57,000. Boilers—Water-tube. Displacement—14,600 tons. Cost—About—£800,000.

Mr. Philip Watts, the designer, made a study of warship attack when he was in private service at the great firm of Armstrongs, at Yarnside, and his investigation led him to develop a combination of the speed of the cruiser with the battleship's strength in guns.

The broadside discharge will be 100 pounds heavier than in our present best cruisers. The guns will be longer and more powerful, and their striking power three and a half times as great as that of the latest cruisers afloat.

Plainly described, the new cruisers will be as effective at three miles as other cruisers now are at two miles, and in general power they will be half as strong again as vessels of the County class and twice as powerful as those of earlier design.

The power of attack with 2.2-inch that of the newest French ship, the *Edgar Quinet*. The 9.2-inch guns will be mounted in pairs on barbettes on the forecastle and upper aft decks. The 7.5-inch guns will be in barbets on the upper deck, five on each side.

BRITISH RULE IN INDIA

MEN ON WHOM EVERYTHING DEPENDS.

The Work of the District Officers Constitutes the Government.

England's rule in India does not rest "either upon the sword or upon the eternal moralities," but rather upon the practical common sense and hard work of its district officers—"the men in the plains," as Lord Curzon called them, says the *Chicago News*. The 259 districts into which British India is divided vary greatly in area and their populations range, roughly speaking, between 2,000,000 and 750,000. There are infinite varieties of climate, agriculture, race, religion and language, but the unit is the same and the district officers discharge similar functions and incur responsibilities, whether they be working in remote Assam or in more accessible Bombay. The district officer of the plains and the British colleagues live during the summer in the furnace-like heat which Kipling and others have pictured. Lord Curzon is said to have used no exaggeration in describing the fierceness of the summer when he said that "the skies are like brass, the earth is like iron and during the greater part of the day every chink and crevice must be closed to keep out the ravaging air."

HARD-WORKING OFFICIALS.

There is not much leisure for the Englishmen, since the work of ruling a million or so of often very helpless people preoccupies them from dawn to darkness. In the older provinces the district officer is known by the suggestive name of collector, for he is primarily responsible for collecting the dues of the Government. He is, however, something more than a collector; he is a land agent on a grand scale, and is more concerned in enabling the people to live and prosper than he is in exacting the rent or land revenue. This, which is England's oldest source of revenue in India, is also the most important both to the Government, to which it brings over \$95,000,000, and to the people whose well-being and happiness depend chiefly on moderation in assessment and on honesty and humanity in collection.

It is the district officer who must prevent the powerful from throwing their burden of taxation on the weak. He must check oppression, unfairness and prejudice on the part of his Indian subordinates in their dealings with the people, and he must detect at once any signs of decadence or symptom of decay in the village and its agriculture. The district officer must be an all-round man. He superintends the excise and assesses the income, license and other taxes, and he is responsible for the finance of his district. But the collector or land agent has other more important duties. He is the magistrate of the district. He represents the Government, he maintains peace and order, he controls the police, and is responsible for the jail.

MORE THAN IMITATORS.

Japanese Are People of Great Initiative.

Not very long ago the Western world regarded the Japanese as mere imitators; it is now generally admitted that they are a people of great initiative. But they are also good imitators, as the British Consul at Kobe and Osaka shows in his latest report. He records that the import of cotton yarns again shows a big decrease, due to the increased growth of the Japanese industry, which is gradually but surely, ousting Lancashire coarse counts from the market. Among woolen manufactures the outlook for the imported article would not appear to be particularly bright. The consul adds that the manufacture of flannels in Osaka has greatly improved, and the importation has, therefore, decreased considerably. Woolen blankets are being made very satisfactorily, likewise a kind of army cloth which promises to be a severe competitor of the imported article.

Supplementing his remarks in last year's report on the import of indigo, the consul quotes the following statement, made by merchants hitherto engaged in the trade:

"The Indian article is absolutely driven out of the market, and there can be no doubt that the Java product will follow suit, as it is evident that the strides which the German chemists are making that the cost of production is being lessened. So far as we are concerned we have had to give up business. Other British firms are similarly placed, and the whole of the business is in the hands of Germans."

The passing of the Government's Tobacco Manufacturing Monopoly Act will have an important effect on the trade in the fragrant weed, in which British capital is considerably interested. It prohibits the import of all manufactured tobacco except by persons licensed by the State, and the manufacture of tobacco except by the State. The only branch of the tobacco trade still allowed to exist is the export of the leaf.

First Physician—"So the operation was just in the nick of time?" Second Physician—"Yes; in another twenty-four hours the patient would have recovered without it."