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CHAPTER LVIII.

Mr. Rodney was thinking too. He remembered the night that Aline had come home. All that was strange in her manner then was explained away now. He remembered how hard and stern he had been with her; how he had been goaded to desperation by the fear that she was a miserable sinner. A weight of care was lifted from his mind by Oran Delaney's revelation.

"God, I thank Thee!" he cried, lifting his hands involuntarily to heaven, "that my beloved daughter is proved innocent of all the evil laid to her charge."

"She is innocent as an angel," said Oran Delaney. "I do not ask you to believe my unsupported testimony. Mrs. Griffin will confirm all that I have told you."

He was silent for a moment, then added, gravely:

"I wish you to make public to the world all that I have told you, Mr. Rodney. It is my dearest wish, whether I live or die, to have Aline's memory cleared from all stain. 'Let all my folly and shame be known, all my pride and weakness, so that she be proven innocent and deserving.'"

"It is hard upon you, but it is only just to Aline and her family," said Aline's father.

"It is just, and I deserve it," said Oran Delaney. "The world will censure me; but let it do so, I am ready to bear it. Indeed, it will be a relief to my mind to have the truth known. I am weary of evasion and concealment, even if concealment were possible any longer."

A look of grave anxiety was on his pale, drawn face.

"There is a weight upon my heart that nothing can shake off," he said. "Poor Julie Sanson—she whom I swore to the dying never to forsake—oh, what has been her terrible fate? Is she dead in the ruins of Delaney House, or is the drifts of snow?"

"Whichever has been her fate, it is a most happy release for her imprisoned soul," said Mr. Rodney. "You cannot regret her!"

"Not only the horrible manner of her death, if indeed she be dead," Mr. Delaney answered.

"I do not believe that there can be any doubt as to that," said Mr. Rodney. "If she had lived, we must have heard of it. My own opinion is that she never escaped from the burning house."

"It is most unlikely," said Mr. Delaney, and then he lay silent, musing deeply: "Was Julie Sanson, the poor, deformed lunatic dead, indeed? Was he free, indeed? Free—his heart gave a great throb of almost painful rapture at the thought—to marry Aline Rodney if she would give herself to him?"

"Tell me one thing," said Mr. Rodney, breaking in, abruptly, on his musing mood. "Why did Aline come to you that night when I forced out her secret?"

They looked at each other, steadfastly. A hot, red flush mounted to Oran Delaney's face.

"She wished me to save the honor of her name by linking it with mine," he said, in a low, pained voice.

"And you?" said Mr. Rodney, anxiously.

"I was not free, you know. I was bound to Julie Sanson by that wretched farce," answered the other.

"You refused her request?"

"I could do no less," Oran Delaney answered, in a low, tortured voice.

"My God, then, the child has been driven desperate! Who would have dreamed that my fury that night would have driven her to such a step! I shall never see her again. She has gone and died of shame for her thoughtlessness," cried Mr. Rodney, wringing his hands in impotent despair.

"No, no, it was not thoughtlessness. It was the act of an angel," cried Oran Delaney. "It was to save me from the threatened duel. She had no thought of self at all! And I, oh, my God, if she had not been an angel, I should have taken her at her word, for the temptation was almost too great for human endurance. For I love her, Mr. Rodney, with all the madness of a first, great love. Guess how cruelly hard it was to me to hear her sweet voice pleading for that which would have been heaven itself to me, and to be forced to put her away from me!"

CHAPTER LIX.

There was a moment's silence, and Mr. Rodney gazed steadily at the flushed face and sparkling eyes of the man who thus avowed his love for beautiful Aline.

"I love her," he repeated. "She won my heart in the three months she stayed in Delaney House. At first I thought her a spoiled, wilful child, whose sharp tongue and determined obstinacy excited my anger, but as I grew to know her better, when I found out what a warm and tender little heart beat under all her brusqueries and waywardness, she stole into my heart, unconsciously to myself. I would have given all the world for the power to make her my wife. But, alas! even as I love her, she hates me, and justly, too, I own, for she has been deeply wronged by my cowardly silence. I cannot blame her if she never forgives me for my fault."

Mrs. Griffin came in with some tea and toast. While she was arranging it Mr. Delaney asked, suddenly:

"Will you tell me now, Mr. Rodney how you became possessed of the secret of Aline's whereabouts?"

The lawyer glanced with a smile at Mrs. Griffin.

"If I should tell you that your good nurse there is the traitor, would you believe me?" he said.

Mrs. Griffin looked at him, red with indignation.

"Indeed, sir, you need not charge it on me," she said, quickly. "Mr. Delaney knows that no one is more faithful to his interests than I am. Why, sir, I carried him in these arms when he was a baby, and do you think any one could make him believe I would betray anything he wanted kept secret?"

The humorous twinkle in Mr. Rodney's blue eyes deepened. He waited until the old woman had arranged the invalid's repast to his satisfaction, and then said slyly:

"Your new lace cap is very becoming Mrs. Griffin. I should like to know where you bought it?"

It was very fortunate that the nurse had put down the tea-tray, for otherwise she must certainly have dropped it, such a start she gave at those words. She stared at Mr. Rodney, her complexion turning to a brilliant crimson.

"Why, what do you mean, Mr. Rodney?" she gasped amazedly.

"Have you forgotten Cheap Jane?" he asked, smiling.

Instantly Mrs. Griffin's mind went back to that snowy eve when, in her loneliness, she had been overpowered by the temptation to admit the female peddler within the tabood precincts of Delaney House. The guilty red of her cheeks grew brighter. She glanced apprehensively at her master. He was gazing at her in wonder.

"What does he mean?" Oran Delaney asked her.

She shook her head, and glanced inquiringly at Mr. Rodney.

"Yes, I remember Cheap Jane," she said. "But what has that to do with Miss Rodney and my master?"

"If you will tell Mr. Delaney all that you know about Cheap Jane, I will show you the connection," he replied.

Mrs. Griffin was heartily ashamed at the thought of her adventure with Cheap Jane being exposed; but she saw that it was too late to attempt concealment. She made a virtue of necessity, and related the story to Mr. Delaney, frankly apologizing for her fault.

"I know I did wrong," she said, turning to Mr. Rodney; "but still I cannot see what harm was done by my imprudence. The old creature only stayed a little while."

"That is where you are mistaken," said Mr. Rodney. "Cheap Jane spent the night in Delaney House."

"Spent the night?" she echoed, staring at him stupidly.

"Yes," he replied.

"But how could that be?" exclaimed Oran Delaney, looking up from his untasted toast. He was too much excited to eat.

"It happened in this way," said the lawyer. "When Mrs. Griffin went to answer your bell, the peddler slipped into a deserted room, and hid herself and her basket of notions in an unused closet. She thus remained in Delaney House all night."

Mrs. Griffin wrung her plump hands, and cried out, dejectedly:

"The wretch!"

But Oran Delaney did not utter one word; he only gazed inquiringly into the face of the lawyer.

"She remained in Delaney House all night," repeated Mr. Rodney. "After the inmates were locked in unsuspecting slumber, the hidden peddler came forth and prowled through the house. You were sick that night, Mr. Delaney. In your fever and unrest you talked to the walls in your room—you revealed the secret of Aline's stay in your house."

"Great Heaven!" he cried.

"It is strange, but true," said the lawyer. "And your uninvited guest, the peddler, who had stolen into your house like a thief by night, heard all. It was from him I learned all I knew—namely, that Aline had been a wounded prisoner in Delaney House."

"You said 'from him'—yet I understood that the peddler was a woman," exclaimed Oran Delaney, quickly.

"A man in disguise," explained the lawyer.

"Then it was no common person—the plan was a deep-laid one," said Oran Delaney, with an inquiring look into the other's face.

Mr. Rodney shook his head.

"No, it was not I," he said. "It was a detective whom I employed last summer to trace Aline. He failed at first, but when she came back to us and refused to reveal the secret of her absence, he set himself to work to ferret out the truth."

"And succeeded," said Oran Delaney, with bitter sadness. "And where is your clever detective now?"

"He is again on the track of my missing daughter. I have for the second time employed him to find her."

"He shall be richly rewarded if he succeeds," exclaimed Oran Delaney, earnestly.

He lay silent for a moment, and then added gravely and thoughtfully:

"I can bear no resentment against your clever detective. Mr. Rodney, I am glad now that the truth has been found out. A burden is lifted from my heart."

"You are not angry with Mr. Lane for his bold invasion of your house, and his betrayal of your secret?" exclaimed Mr. Rodney.

"No, I am not angry. I am glad that the truth has been revealed. I feel quite curious to see your Mr. Lane."

"Perhaps you will permit me to bring him to see you?" said the lawyer.

"Willingly," answered Oran Delaney.

He did do so the next day, after he had told Mr. Delaney's story to him, and the good-looking detective spent an hour with the wounded man. Mr. Delaney was most anxious that Aline should be found.

"Only find her," he said, earnestly, to Mr. Lane, "and you shall name your own reward."

A strange expression gleamed in the eyes of the detective.

"I shall make every effort to find her," he said. "But I tell you frankly, Mr. Delaney, I am not working up this case for money."

"Of course you have a professional interest and reputation at stake," said Mr. Delaney.

"It is not that, either," said the detective.

They gazed steadily into each other's eyes.

"I will tell you the truth, Mr. Delaney," said Mr. Lane. "I find that my early professional interest in this case has merged into a romantic one. People call me a woman-hater where I am best known, and I confess that female society has hitherto had no charms for me. But the beauty and sweetness of Miss Rodney have won my heart. If I find her I shall ask no reward from her father except her hand, if she will give it to me."

Mr. Lane paused and waited for a reply. He did not dream what an agonizing pang tore through Oran Delaney's heart in that moment.

"Do you think she loves you, Mr. Lane?" he faltered then, in a hollow voice.

"Scarcely; for I have had no chance to woo her," said Mr. Lane. "And yet it is so much better that she should marry that perhaps she will waive that consideration. Afterward I could teach her to love me."

Again that fierce, jealous pang tore through Oran Delaney's heart. A vision came over him of the beautiful young face and the violet eyes with their shady lashes of deepest jet. How much more beautiful it would be when the woman's heart was awakened in her. How that charming face would be glorified by love!

"Ah, Heaven, only to call her mine!" he groaned to himself. "It is cruel, cruel, that this man should take advantage of her trouble to try to win her. He has no right to her. She is far above him. Her beauty and sweetness make her the peer of any one in the land."

He silently repeated some lines to himself:

"A king might lay his sceptre down
But I am no king and might;
The brow might wear an hereditary crown
That wears her in its thought."

He looked fixedly at Mr. Lane.

"Why do you say that it will be better or Miss Rodney to marry?" he added, slowly.

"Surely, you know that her long stay in the Delaney House has so damaged her maiden fame that she can never take her proper place in the world until sheltered by some good man's name," said the detective.

"You forget that I have explained everything, and that Miss Rodney's reputation is cleared from every shadow of blame," exclaimed Mr. Delaney.

"No. I do not forget it. But I know that the world is censorious, and I am not sure whether it will accept your statement as true. At any rate, I am prepared to help Miss Rodney all that I can. I am rich and prosperous. I will marry her and take her away forever from this place where she has suffered so much, if she will have me."

He paused a moment, and then added:

"Of course if you were not already married, Mr. Delaney, you would be the most proper husband for Miss Rodney, but, as it is, I feel myself quite free to woo and wed her if I can, and to save her from all the troubles she would be likely to endure, unmarried."

He went out and left Mr. Delaney to some bitter reflections.

CHAPTER LX.

When Mr. Delaney's physician came next day he declared that his patient was not as well as he had expected to find him. He looked apprehensive over him.

"What have they been doing to you?" he asked, brusquely.

"I have had the best of care, doctor," Mr. Delaney answered.

The old physician looked at him, curiously. The dark, handsome face was grave, and there was a settled sadness on it. But the tone, more than the words, struck the physician. A heartache ran directly through it.

"You are fretting over something," he said. "Come, Delaney, this will not do. You will never get well at this rate."

Oran Delaney only smiled, but he said to himself that he did not greatly care. He had long been tired of his life. What matter how soon the end came. There would be no one to grieve for him, except his faithful old nurse. He thought of Mr. Rodney, but he said to himself that no jury in this southern land would convict him even if his victim died. All would think him justified in avenging his daughter.

That day Mr. Delaney made his will. He left Mrs. Griffin a comfortable legacy, left a large sum of money to take care of the mannie, Julie Sanson, if she was ever found, and the residue of his large fortune he bequeathed unconditionally to Aline Rodney.

And then he said to himself that he was ready to die. He had provided the best he could for the future of the girl whom he loved, and he had no more left to live for. His life had been ruined in its prime by a bad man's treachery. Hope, love, happiness, henceforth could be only names to him. He did not care to live.

A great despair had fallen upon him. He had wakened up to the one grand passion of his life, and it was utterly hopeless. He loved Aline Rodney, but she hated him for the sorrow he had brought into her young life. She would marry Mr. Lane, perhaps, when she came home again, and Oran Delaney said to himself, with a pang of the bitterest despair, that he would rather be dead than live to see the fair young creature he loved the wife of another.

Days went and came, and he lay there wearily and hopelessly, and the physician went and came daily, growing more and more puzzled over him.

"He goes down hill every day, and yet, the case was very favorable at first," he said to Mr. Rodney. "I am puzzled over him. I am afraid it is the mind wearing out the body. What do you think about it?"

"I have the same opinion as you," the lawyer answered. "It is not the wound I gave him, it is the mental trouble that is killing him. It is the old fable of the sword wearing out the scabbard."

"Can nothing be done?" asked the old physician, who had become deeply interested in his new patient.

"Nothing, I am quite sure," Mr. Rodney answered, for he knew now all the pain and sorrow and remorse that were killing Oran Delaney.

"Then he must die. All my medical skill can avail nothing to save him," answered the physician, regretfully.

In the meantime Mr. Rodney had followed out Mr. Delaney's wishes. He had made public all that strange secret, whose keeping had cast that black shadow over Aline's life.

Chester was all agog with curiosity and excitement. It was a nine day's wonder.

As often happens in such cases, there was a complete revulsion of feeling. The great wave of public sentiment rolled toward Aline in a gush of pity and sympathy. The world was not so bad as Mr. Lane had believed it. No one was found to doubt the story Mr. Delaney had told on what all believed to be his death-bed. It was so strange and romantic, it appealed so powerfully to that love of the wonderful and mysterious inherent in all hearts, that every one believed it. If Aline had been at home, society would have made her the heroine of the hour. It would have taken her to its heart of hearts, and worshipped her as blindly as it had wronged her. It would have made atonement for its hasty judgment, but pity and regret were now alike too late. Aline had vanished out of her old life as utterly as if she were dead and buried. The places that had known her knew her now no more. In her home they mourned her as one dead.

In the stress of her trouble and anxiety, poor Mrs. Rodney had taken down to her sick-bed again. The pretty, self-possessed, dignified lady was completely broken down. She blamed herself as the author of all her beautiful daughter's sorrow.

"I was too harsh, too strict with her. Her faults were only those of youth and inexperience united to high spirits. Her punishments were too severe, and I am rightly punished for my hardness of heart," wept and sighed the poor mother, in the long winter nights, while she tossed upon her sleepless bed, tormented with remorse and misery over the treatment she had given Aline.

A month passed away, and it was time for the return of Dr. Anthony and Effie from their bridal tour. They were to settle down to housekeeping in a pretty house the doctor owned at Mayweed.

Mrs. Rodney yearned for Effie's return. She longed to pour into her sympathizing ears all her sorrow and despair at the loss, for the second time, of her beautiful Aline.

The cottage was a most dreary place for sunny-tempered May Rodney in these days. He missed his beautiful sister, the gentle, graceful Aline, and the light-hearted, volatile Aline. His mother was always in tears, now, and seldom left her room. Besides, there was a real invalid in the house, and the enforced quiet was most irksome to the high-spirited lad whose gay voice, blending with his younger sister's, had been wont to make joyous echoes from garret to cellar of the roomy cottage. In despair, Max took to spending the most of his time from home, unperceived by his grief-stricken parents, who had become almost apathetic to their death, agonizing sorrow for their lost daughter.

And one day, when the sun was shining brightly, and the winter snows that had lain for weeks upon the frozen earth were melting under its genial glow, Max came home from a long excursion with "the boys," and burst into his mother's room like a small cyclone or tornado.

"Mamma," he cried, all in a flurry, "may I go into Mr. Delaney's room? I have something to tell him."

Mrs. Rodney looked curiously at the flushed cheeks and sparkling blue eyes of her handsome boy.

"Why, what for, my dear?" she asked. "You know the doctor wishes to keep Mr. Delaney very quiet. He is very low now, and we must do all that we can to make him well; for if the dear people would look upon your dear papa as a murderer!"

She shuddered; but the boy's eyes flashed, and he cried out, proudly:

"No one would call papa a murderer, mamma, even if Mr. Delaney died. He was right to shoot Mr. Delaney if he thought he had my sister shut up in his house. I have heard also of people say so, if I had been a man, I should have shot him myself."

"But you are not a man, Max, so you must not talk so boldly. What is this that you have to tell Mr. Delaney?"

"A bit of news that will cheer him, I dare say," said the boy.

"Oh, Max, is it news of Aline?" quivered the poor mother.

"No, no, mamma; for of course I would tell you that first," said the boy.

"Then what can it be? You know we must not excite Mr. Delaney, dear. It might be his death. You must tell me what you have heard, and then I can decide better if you may be allowed to tell him."

"Oh, mamma, I wanted to be the first to tell him," objected the boy.

"I am sorry; but we must not risk the life, indeed," Mrs. Rodney said.

Max looked disappointed.

"Well, then, I cannot keep it any longer" he burst out. "We—that is, the boys and me—we have found Mr. Delaney's crazy wife—"

"Impossible!" Mrs. Rodney exclaimed.

"Under a melted snow-drift," continued Max. "She must have been dead a long time—ever since that night she set fire to Delaney House, I guess—for she is in a very bad state; but we are perfectly certain that she is the one. She is dressed just as papa described her, in the finery and the jewels. Do you think that Mr. Delaney will be glad, mamma?"

"Glad that the poor creature is dead, Max?" she cried, quite shocked.

"Yes, mamma," he replied, unhesitatingly. "Everybody should be glad, for what pleasure could that poor addicted creature have in her life, and why should one wish her to live? Mr. Delaney will be glad, I know, and no one can blame him."

"Hush, dear, you do not know what you are saying," said his mother; "and besides, this is all slander on your part. It may not be the woman at all."

"Very well, mamma, we shall soon know, for they have sent me to bring Mrs. Griffin to identify her," he said.

It all turned out as the little lad had said. The poor creature who had lain for long weeks under the frozen snow-drifts proved to be Julie Sanson, indeed. The mystery of her fate was solved at last. She had not perished in the fiery flames that consumed Delaney House. She had wandered out into the dark and stormy night and met her death in the cold, white, drifting snow that wrapped the earth like a ghostly winding sheet.

It came upon Oran Delaney with a shock that the deformed maniac was dead. It pained him that death had come to her in such horrible shape. Indeed, the very existence of such a creature upon the earth had always seemed to him something for which one might almost accuse Divine Providence. Why was it permitted?

"I cannot understand it," he said. "And it pains me that she died so hard a death. Yet I cannot be sorry that she is dead. She was a horrible burden upon my life, and her existence was a joyless one. I think God that, having done my duty by her, I am free at last." They buried her quietly and simply, but the circumstances were so well known that a large number of people attended the burial. Every one rejoiced that Oran Delaney was free at last from the horrible fetters that had bound him. He had become quite a hero in these few days.

TO BE CONTINUED.

El Mahdi-Died of Smallpox.

ASSOUAN, July 22.—Major Greenfield telegraphs that a messenger from Gobat reports that El Mahdi died of small pox, June 29.

Stratford was incorporated as a city on Wednesday 22nd inst.