

THE CRIMINAL'S CONFESSION

OR, SYBIL BERNER'S
VINDICATION

CHAPTER XXVII.

Three pair of eyes were turned toward Gem. She was well worth looking at, as she stood there beside the pausing wheel, with the thread of yarn suspended in her hand between the delicate forefinger and thumb, and with her large luminous dark eyes fixed upon the face of the speaker. Yes, look at Gem—a slight, elegant creature, whose form was perfect symmetry, whose every motion was perfect grace, whose small stately head was covered with shining jet-black ringlets that hung down each side and half shaded a bright young face of exceeding beauty—an oval face, with regular features, large, soft, dark-blue eyes, veiled with thick, long lashes, and arched over by slender, jet-black brows, and with rosy cheeks and crimson lips. This will do for a pen and ink sketch; but how can I picture the light, the life, the gleam and glow of that brilliant and beautiful countenance?

She wore a plain brown linsey dress, that perfectly fitted her symmetrical form; and this rustic suit was relieved by a little linen collar that clasped her throat, and a pair of little white linen cuffs that bound her wrists.

The setting was plain enough, but the gem was a very rich and rare jewel, whoever might be destined to wear it.

Only for an instant she stood thus, like a bright and beautiful image, and then she suddenly darted across the room, sunk down beside the old lady's chair, and, looking up into her face, said:

"Grandma! I know more of that awful tragedy than you think I do. Of course, in all these years, I have chanced to hear much from the talk of women and children seen in church or in school. And to-night I have heard too much from you, not now to be told more? What is all this mystery and horror connected with this anniversary of Hallow Eve? And—who am I?"

"You are my own darling child, Gem!" answered the old lady in a trembling voice.

"I know that I am your foster-child, but that is all I, or anyone else except you, seems to know about me! But you know who I am, grandma! Now tell me—who am I?" she pleaded, taking the withered old hands within her own, and gazing imploringly up into the kind old eyes that looked compassionately down on hers.

"You are my pet, and my darling, and my blessing, Gem! That is enough for you to know!" answered the old lady, still in a tremulous tone.

"Am I that prison-born child? Am I the daughter of that poor lady who was crucified and cast out among human creatures? Am I? Am I?" persisted the young girl, beseechingly, while Miss Tabby wept and Miss Libby moaned.

"Gem," said the aged woman, gravely, and sorrowfully pressing the maiden's hands, "Gem, I have been a good grandma to you?"

"Oh, you have! you have! answered the young girl, earnestly.

"And, can you still trust me to be good to you, and true to your best interests?"

"Oh, yes, yes, yes! dear grandma!"

"Then, my own little one, trust me, by obeying me, when I tell you to ask me no questions about yourself; because I cannot answer them yet a while. Will you do so, my little Gem?"

"Yes, yes, I will! I will! But, dear granny, I know! I know! Although you are too tender to tell me, I know!"

"Know—what, Gem?" questioned Mrs. Winterose, in alarm.

"I know that some mystery and horror hung over my birth—hangs over my life! I have known this a long time. They call me 'Ingemisca,' that means, 'Bewail! Bewail!' Some one bewailed my birth, and bade me bewail it! Some one sung the refrain of a requiem at my baptism, as they do at the burial of others! And oh, grandma! to-night! to-night! in what has reached my ears. I have found a clue to the solving of my mystery!"

"Gem! Gem! if ever I have been kind to you, mind me now! Never think, never speak of these things again. Look on yourself as my child, and nothing more," urged the old lady with so much earnestness, and even pain, that her pet hastened to caress her, and to say:

"I will mind you as much as I can, best, dearest granny! I will never speak of this again until you give me leave."

"That is my darling girl! And now put away your wheel and come and sit down here, and let us have a pleasant talk after all this solemn nonsense. And when Joe comes in—Where the mischief is that fellow, and why don't he come with the cones, I wonder? Anyhow, when he does come, I will send him down in the cellar for some nuts and apples, and we will have a little feast."

Gem set back her wheel, and came and took her seat on a stool at the old lady's feet.

"Gem," said Mrs. Winterose, passing her hand through the girl's dark curls, "my two daughters have been horrify-

ing us by telling of some awful events that happened on certain long past Hallow Eves. But they have said nothing of the pleasant things that have happened on later Hallow Eves! They haven't said a word of that Hallow Eve when me and my Libby was a sitting in our cabin without provisions, and wondering where the money to buy them was to come from, and how long the agent would let us live there, seeing as we had no right, after my old man, who was the overseer, died, when in walks the agent himself, and offers of us a home rent free here, with the use of the garden, the orchard and the wood, with a small salary besides, if so be we would come here and live with Tabby, and help keep rats and thieves and rust and mould out of the old house. You may depend, Gem, as we jumped at the offer, and came here the very next day."

"That was all the kindness of my child! It didn't need nobody but me to do all that. But, my sweet angel, she wanted to provide for you and Libby, and to make us all comfortable and happy together," said Miss Tabby.

"Yes, I know. Heaven bless her, wherever she is! And that was a happy Hallow Eve. But the next one was even happier, Gem."

"Yes, dear grandma, I know," smiled the girl.

"Yes, for just one year from that time, when Hallow Eve came around again, I got up early in the morning, as I used to do then, as well as now, and I came down into this very room, and went through to that back door and into the back room, and opened the back porch door to let in the morning air, and there on the porch with the sun shining bright on the scarlet seed-pods of the rose vines all over the shed, there, like a cradle, stood a large wicker basket, with a two-year-old baby comfortably tucked up into it, and fast asleep."

"That was I," said the maiden.

"Yes, Gem, it was you. But just think of my astonishment when I found you there! I stared at you, and was as 'fraid to touch you at first as if you'd been a bombshell to blow me up! I rubbed my eyes to see if I was awake. I crept up to you and shrank back from you ever so many times before I could venture to touch you. Then I saw a card tied to the handle of the basket. I took it off, put on my specks, and read this:

"A Gem for Mrs. Winterose."

"Then, my dear, I saw that somebody that wanted to get shel of a baby, had put it off on to me. And, Lord forgive me, I struck mad as a hop, and said I wouldn't have the brat, and would send it to the almshouse. But, lor! there is a power in helplessness compared to which the power of a monarch is all moonshine! And, however angry I might be at that minute with the unnatural monsters who I thought had dropped the baby there, why, I could no more be sent to the almshouse than I could a smothered it in its basket."

said the soft-hearted old dame, wiping away the tears that rose to her eyes at the very idea of such a piece of cruelty.

"So you took the little creature in?" smiled Gem.

"What else could I do? I was shivering with cold myself. Could I leave it out there? No. I took hold of the handle of the basket—which it was a large open clothes basket with a handle at each end, and very useful I have found it ever since to put the soiled clothes in—and I began to drag it through the door and through the back room into this very room. But he motion waked the baby up, and it opened the darkest blue eyes I ever had seen in my life, and looked at me as calm and quiet as if it had known me all my life, and then it opened its little rosy lips, and said:

"Gamma!"

"Yes, my dear Gem, that was what you called me from the first, 'Gamma.' It went straight to my heart, Gem! And why? Because I was sixty years old then, and my hair was as white as it is now, and I never had a baby in the world to call me grandma; all because Tabby and Libby didn't marry as they ought to have done twenty years before that."

"You're always hitting of us in the teeth about that, mother, as if it was our fault. As for me, I would have married fast enough if William Simpson hadn't a proved false," snivelled Miss Tabby.

"Bosh! there's as good fish in the sea as ever was got out of it," snapped the old lady.

"It was our fate," said the superstitious Miss Libby.

"You made your own fate," answered the inexorable old lady.

"So you adopted the poor little forsaken child," put in Gem, to stop the altercation between the mother and daughters.

"Yes, Gem, of course. But, oh! the day you were given to us was a day of jubilee! While I was lifting you out of the basket, lame-leg Joe came in to make the fire. When he saw me with a babe in my arms he let his wood fall, and

lifted up his arms and opened his eyes in dumb amazement. And when I told him where I found it, he recovered his speech, and advised me to send it to the almshouse.

"Joe! I said, 'if ever you mention almshouses and babies in the same breath to me again you and I will have to part.'"

"Yet, poor old Joe spoke in your interests, grandma," said Gem.

"I know he did, dear, or he thought he did; but my real interest was to keep my Gem, for she has been the brightness of my life, and not only of mine, but of Tabby's and Libby's, poor childish old maids, and of Mopsy's and lame-leg Joe's."

"It is because we all love each other so much, and it is such a happiness to love," said Gem.

"We all loved you, my darling, from the very first. We could not help it! Ah! you should have seen what a sunbeam you were in our dull house that day and all days after that. When I took you out of the basket and set you upon your feet, you tottered all about the room, eagerly examining all that was new to you; the clip-bottom chairs, the turkey-wing fans, the peacock's feathers, even poor Joe's crooked leg. And me and Joe watched you in your little crimson dress, as one watches some bright-plumed bird hopping from twig to twig."

"How I wish I could remember that day, grandma."

"You were too young; not more than two years old. But, oh! you should have seen the surprise and delight of Tabby and Libby, when, after they had made the beds upstairs they came down to help me to get breakfast. They were as silly over you as ever you saw children over a new pet kitten. I thought you would have been pulled to pieces between them, which was another sign they ought to have been married twenty years before."

"Oh, mother!" began Miss Tabby.

"Well, there! I won't say anything more about that. But the way they talked to you, Gem!"

"What's your name, little one? they asked."

"Gem," you answered.

"Who's your mother, baby?"

"Gamma," you replied. You had only them two words, my darling—'Gem' and 'Gamma.'"

"Did you ever afterwards find out who I was, grandma?" inquired the girl.

"Maybe I did, and maybe I didn't, Gem. Anyway, there was no clew to your history there in that basket, Gem. There was heaps of baby clothes, nicely got up and marked 'In-gem-is-ca,' and there was a small bag of gold coins, amounting to just one hundred dollars. That was all. And now, didn't you give me your word never to ask me any questions about yourself?"

"I know I did, grandma, and I will keep my word; but, oh, grandma, I can't help thinking about it and suspecting who I am."

"Hush! hush! Gem! Put away such troublesome thoughts. I had rather see a little natural silliness than so much gravity in one so young as you are. Be a girl while girlhood lasts. The season is short enough. This is Hallow Eve. When I was young, it used to be a gay festival, and not the funeral feast my mournful daughters would make it. When I was young, the lads and lasses, on a Hallow Eve night, used to try spells to find out their sweethearts and lovers. And if ghosts walked then, they were merry sprites who only came to tell the youths and maidens whom they were to love and marry. Come, now, I'll teach you a sure spell. Here are some chestnuts," she said, rising and taking a little basket from the chimney-shelf, and emptying it into Gem's lap.

"What am I to do with these, grandma?" smiled the girl.

"You are to take half-a-dozen large ones, scratch on each the first letter in the name of some young man you know. Then on another, 'Str.' for stranger; on another 'Wid.' for widower; on the last one, a cross, for old maidenhood.

Smilingly Gem complied with the directions, and marked the chestnuts, while the old lady, with spectacles on nose, watched her carefully.

When they were all ready, Gem looked up, saying:

"Well, they are marked! Nine of them altogether."

"Now lay them in a row on the hot hearth, close to the coals, to roast."

"It is done," said Gem, after she had arranged them according to rule.

"Now, then, my dear, you must sit and watch them in perfect silence until they are roasted, when they will begin to pop; and the first one that pops will be your fate, whether it be one of the young men, or the widower, or the stranger, or whether it be the cross that stands for old maidenhood."

Smilingly Gem folded her hands, and composed herself to perfect silence and stillness.

While she watched her roasting chestnuts, the old lady watched her.

Each of these women, the ancient dame and the youthful maiden, was making herself silly to please the other. Mrs. Winterose, wishing to divert Gem from her troublesome thoughts, and Gem, willing to gratify her "grandma."

But the law of silence was not laid upon any one else but the trier of the spell. And Miss Tabby and Miss Libby chattered together like a pair of sister magpies for some minutes, when suddenly Miss Tabby exclaimed:

"Look out, Gem! Your chestnuts are beginning to crack; they will shoot you presently, if you don't mind."

The warning came too late. A blazing chestnut was suddenly shot from the hearth like a small bombshell, and struck Gem upon the right hand, inflaming a slight burn.

With a faint cry she sprang up and shook it off, and she sat down startled

and trembling, for she was very delicate and very sensitive to pain.

"Never mind, never mind a little smarting! When I was young I would have been willing to have been scorched worse than that to have had such a powerful sign that some one loved me so fiercely as all that! Goodness! How he loves you, to be sure! and how quickly he is coming to see you! Come, pick up your chestnut, child, and see what mark it bears. Come, now! Is it Cromartie?" inquired the old lady, with an arch smile.

But the girl made no reply. She had picked up and blown out the blazing emblem that she had playfully made a messenger of fate, and she was gazing upon it. She remained pale and mute.

"Come, come; did you name it for that Auburn-haired youth?" persisted the old lady.

"I named it for—the exile—the lady who was borne from the flooded prison that storm night; I named it for—my mother," answered the maiden in a low tone.

Silence like a panic fell upon the little party.

Mrs. Winterose was the first to break it.

"Gem! how dare you do such dreadful things?" she demanded, speaking more harshly than she had ever before spoken to her spoiled child.

"It's enough to break anybody's heart to hear her say that," whimpered Miss Tabby, wiping her eyes.

"And, oh! what a sign and an omen! If there's any truth in the spell, her mother—if so be she is her mother and is a living—her mother loves her better than any one in the world, and is a hurrying to see her now! For I never knew that to fail," said Miss Libby, clasping her hands and rolling up her eyes.

Gem turned and gazed at the last speaker, while a superstitious faith in the omen crept into her heart.

"There is nothing at all in it! I was only trying to amuse the poor child by the old love spell. I had no thought it would turn out this way," said Mrs. Winterose, glancing uneasily at Gem.

But Miss Tabby sighed, and Miss Libby shook her head, and Gem continued to look very grave.

"Well, I declare! I am out of all patience with Joe!" exclaimed the old lady, by way of changing the whole conversation. "It has been full forty minutes or more since I sent him after them cones! And now I am going to call him!"

And, so saying, she went and opened the back door.

But she had no sooner done so, than she started with a cry of horror and fled back into the room.

And well she might! Behind her came three men, bearing in their arms the mutilated and bleeding body of a third man!

Following them limped lame-legged Joe.

The affrighted women shrank back to the chimney corner, where they clung together in that dumb terror which is the deeper for its very silence.

"Now, don't you be scared, ladies," said Joe, soothingly. "Nobody ain't a-going to do you no harm. It is only some man as has been murdered out there."

"Murdered!" echoed Mrs. Winterose, in an awe-deepened tone.

"Another Hallow Eve murder!" groaned Miss Tabby, wringing her hands.

"It is doom!" muttered Miss Libby, solemnly.

Gem veiled her eyes and said nothing.

"Lay him down here on the floor, men, and let us take a look of him to see if we know him," said Joe, as he took a candle from the table.

The bearers laid their burden gently down.

Joe held the candle to the face of the murdered man.

Old Mrs. Winterose cautiously approached to view it.

"Good angels in heaven!" she exclaimed.

"Who is it, mother?" inquired her daughters, in terrified tones.

"Mr. Horace Blondelle!" she whispered.

(To be continued.)

In the case of the police magistrate, someone has remarked that his work is a fine art.

PRINCESS'S LOVE MATCH.

How an Alpine Adventure Brought About a Royal Mesalliance.

Not far from Berne, on toward the Friberg border and remote from the railway line, is to be found the picturesque country seat where the oldest scion of Old World royalty—a princess—has just celebrated her ninetieth birthday, entirely forgotten by the world. She is the aunt of the reigning Prince of Schwarzburg Sonderhouse, himself a man of seventy-six, and if the last fifty years of her life have been spent in her Swiss retreat, so secluded from the world as to be almost forgotten, it is on account of the romance of her marriage, which created a great sensation just half a century ago.

Princess Charlotte had been travelling in Switzerland, and was passionately fond of Alpine climbing, a form of sport in which she was an adept. On one of her excursions her life was saved by the most wonderful presence of mind, muscular strength and pluck of her Alpine guide, who narrowly escaped being dragged down the precipice over the brink of which she had already disappeared, suspended to the rope, the other end of which was fastened to him, in accordance with mountaineering requirements. He managed not only to withstand the shock of her fall, but likewise to drag her back to safety, though with the utmost difficulty and at the risk of himself slipping, owing to the insecurity of the foothold. The princess naturally was filled with sentiments of gratitude towards her saviour, and as he happened to be an extremely handsome man, possessed of sufficient education to qualify him for a commission in the militia of his canton, she determined to prove to him her gratitude by marrying him. True, she was forty years old at the time, and some ten years his senior. But she was a very good-looking woman and quite rich.

Of course, there was a tremendous outcry on the part of her royal and imperial relatives. For she is connected by ties of blood with two-thirds of the reigning houses of Europe, and all sorts of stories were circulated as to the origin of the romance, the one most generally accepted being to the effect that John Jud, for that was the name of the guide, had been one of the domestics in an inn at which the princess had been staying, and had attracted her attention while engaged in the performance of some menial service. The reigning Prince of Schwarzburg eventually gave his consent to the marriage of the princess, on the condition that she should live abroad with her husband, and thereupon conferred upon the latter, by way of a wedding present, the title of baron.

The union turned out far more happily than mesalliances of this kind do as a rule. The couple bought a very pretty place in the canton of Berne, where the baron died about ten years later. From that time to this his widow has never left the estate. She lives there all the year round, greatly beloved by her neighbors, on account of her boundless charity, of her gentle unaffected manner, and of that gracious consideration for the feelings of others, which, alas! belongs to another generation. Her relatives, however, visit her every year. In fact, there are few royal or imperial personages who visit Berne without driving out to pay their respects to the doyenne of the sovereign houses of Europe, and the heroine of a thrilling Alpine romance of more than fifty years ago.

BOLD INVADERS.

There were some phases of country life with which the little city girl had as yet only one day's acquaintance, but the rights of property-owners and property-renters were firmly fixed in her mind.

"Mother!" she called, in evident excitement, the morning after the family had settled for the summer in Sunset View Cottage, "mother! Just come here and look! There are somebody's hens, wiping their feet on our nice clean grass!"

"What? You marry my daughter?" thundered old Roxley. "You, a mere clerk—" "No, sir," replied young Myrtle, "not a clerk, but a gentleman now. I resigned my job the moment your daughter accepted me."



MISSING HER VOCATION.

"What did your mother teach you, anyway, if you don't know how to sweep a room?"

"O, my mother thought she was sweeping."