

***AUGUSTA
J. EVANS***



INFELICE

Augusta J. Evans

Infelice

EAN 8596547210542

DigiCat, 2022

Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info



TABLE OF CONTENTS

[CHAPTER II.](#)

[CHAPTER III.](#)

[CHAPTER IV.](#)

[CHAPTER V.](#)

[CHAPTER VI.](#)

[CHAPTER VII.](#)

[CHAPTER VIII.](#)

[CHAPTER IX.](#)

[CHAPTER X.](#)

[CHAPTER XI.](#)

[CHAPTER XII.](#)

[CHAPTER XIII.](#)

[CHAPTER XIV.](#)

[CHAPTER XV.](#)

[CHAPTER XVI.](#)

[CHAPTER XVII.](#)

[CHAPTER XVIII.](#)

[CHAPTER XIX.](#)

[CHAPTER XX.](#)

[CHAPTER XXI.](#)

[CHAPTER XXII.](#)

[CHAPTER XXIII.](#)

[CHAPTER XXIV.](#)

[CHAPTER XXV.](#)

[CHAPTER XXVI.](#)

[CHAPTER XXVII.](#)

CHAPTER XXVIII.

CHAPTER XXIX.

CHAPTER XXX.

CHAPTER XXXI.

CHAPTER XXXII.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

CHAPTER XXXV.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

CHAPTER I.

"Did you tell her that Dr. Hargrove is absent?"

"I did, ma'am; but she says she will wait."

"But, Hannah, it is very uncertain when he will return, and the night is so stormy he may remain in town until tomorrow. Advise her to call again in the morning."

"I said as much at the door, but she gave me to understand she came a long way, and should not leave here without seeing the Doctor. She told the driver of the carriage to call for her in about two hours, as she did not wish to miss the railroad train."

"Where did you leave her? Not in that cold, dark parlour, I hope?"

"She sat down on one of the hall chairs, and I left her there."

"A hospitable parsonage reception! Do you wish her to freeze? Go and ask her into the library, to the fire."

As Hannah left the room, Mrs. Lindsay rose and added two sticks of oak wood to the mass of coals that glowed between the shining brass andirons; then carefully removed farther from the flame on the hearth a silver teapot and covered dish, which contained the pastor's supper.

"Walk in, madam. I promise you nobody shall interfere with you. Miss

Elise, she says she wishes to see no one but the Doctor."

Hannah ushered the visitor in, and stood at the door, beckoning to her mistress, who paused irresolute, gazing

curiously at the muffled form and veiled face of the stranger.

"Do not allow me to cause you any inconvenience, madam. My business is solely with Dr. Hargrove, and I do not fear the cold."

The voice of the visitor was very sweet though tremulous, and she would have retreated, but Mrs. Lindsay put her hand on the bolt of the door, partly closing it.

"Pray be seated. This room is at your disposal. Hannah, bring the tea things into the dining-room, and then you need not wait longer; I will lock the doors after my brother comes in."

With an ugly furrow of discontent between her heavy brows, Hannah obeyed, and as she renewed the fire smouldering in the dining-room, she slowly shook her grizzled head: "Many a time I have heard my father say, 'Mystery breeds misery,' and take my word for it, there is always something wrong when a woman shuns women-folks, and hunts sympathy and advice from men."

"Hush, Hannah! Charity,—charity; don't forget that you live in a parsonage, where 'sounding brass or tinkling cymbals' are not tolerated. All kinds of sorrow come here to be cured, and I fear that lady is in distress. Did you notice how her voice trembled?"

"Well, I only hope no silver will be missing to-morrow. I must make up my buckwheat, and set it to rise. Good-night, Miss Elise."

It was a tempestuous night in the latter part of January, and although the rain, which had fallen steadily all day, ceased at dark, the keen blast from the north shook the

branches of the ancient trees encircling the parsonage, and dashed the drops in showers against the windows. Not a star was visible, and as the night wore on the wind increased in violence, roaring through leafless elm limbs, and whistling drearily around the corners of the old brick house, whose ivy-mantled chimneys had battled with the storms of seventy years.

The hands of the china clock on the dining-room mantelpiece pointed to nine, and Mrs. Lindsay expected to hear the clear sweet strokes of the pendulum, when other sounds startled her; the sharp, shrill bark of a dog, and impatient scratching of paws on the hall door. As she hurried forward and withdrew the inside bolt, a middle-aged man entered, followed by a bluish-grey Skye terrier.

"Peyton, what kept you so late?"

"I was called to Beechgrove to baptize Susan Moffat's only daughter. The girl died at eight o'clock, and I sat awhile with the stricken mother, trying to comfort her. Poor Susan! it is a heavy blow, for she idolized the child. Be quiet, Biörn."

Mr. Hargrove was leisurely divesting himself of his heavy overcoat, and the terrier ran up and down the hall, holding his nose high in the air, and barking furiously.

"Biörn's instincts rarely deceive him. A stranger is waiting in the library to see you. Before you go in, let me give you your supper, for you must be tired and hungry."

"Thank you, Elise, but first I must see this visitor, whose errand may be urgent."

He opened the door of the library, and entered so quietly that the occupant seemed unaware of his presence.

A figure draped in black sat before the table which was drawn close to the hearth, and the arms were crossed wearily, and the head bowed upon them. The dog barked and bounded toward her, and then she quickly rose, throwing back her veil, and eagerly advancing.

"You are the Rev. Peyton Hargrove?"

"I am. What can I do for you, madam? Pray take this rocking chair."

She motioned it away, and exclaimed:

"Can you too have forgotten me?"

A puzzled expression crossed his countenance as he gazed searchingly at her, then shook his head.

The glare of the fire, and the mellow glow of the student's lamp fell full on the pale features, whose exceeding delicacy is rarely found outside of the carved gems of the Stosch or Albani Cabinets. On camei and marble dwell the dainty moulding of the oval cheek, the airy arched tracery of the brows, the straight, slender nose, and clearly defined cleft of the rounded chin, and nature only now and then models them as a whole, in flesh. It was the lovely face of a young girl, fair as one of the Frate's heavenly visions, but blanched by some flood of sorrow that had robbed the full tender lips of bloom, and bereft the large soft brown eyes of the gilding glory of hope.

"If I ever knew, I certainly have forgotten you."

"Oh—do not say so! You must recollect me; you are the only person who can identify me. Four years ago I stood here, in this room. Try to recall me."

She came close to him, and he heard her quick and laboured breathing, and saw the convulsive quivering of her

compressed lips.

"What peculiar circumstances marked my former acquaintance with you?

Your voice is quite familiar, but——"

He paused, passed his hand across his eyes, and before he could complete the sentence, she exclaimed:

"Am I then so entirely changed? Did you not one May morning marry in this room Minnie Merle to Cuthbert Laurance?"

"I remember that occasion very vividly, for in opposition to my judgment I performed the ceremony; but Minnie Merle was a low-statured, dark-haired child——" again he paused, and keenly scanned the tall, slender, elegant figure, and the crimped waves of shining hair that lay like a tangled mass of gold net on the low, full, white brow.

"I was Minnie Merle. Your words of benediction made me Minnie Laurance. God—and the angels know it is my name, my lawful name,— but man denies it."

Something like a sob impeded her utterance, and the minister took her hand.

"Where is your husband? Are you widowed so early?"

"Husband—my husband? One to cherish and protect, to watch over, and love, and defend me;—if such be the duties and the tests of a husband,—oh! then indeed I have never had one! Widowed did you say? That means something holy,—sanctified by the shadow of death, and the yearning sympathy and pity of the world; a widow has the right to hug a coffin and a grave all the weary days of her lonely life, and people look tenderly on her sacred weeds. To me, widowhood would be indeed a blessing, Sir, I thought I had

learned composure, self-control, but the sight of this room,—of your countenance,—even the strong breath of the violets and heliotrope there on the mantle, in the same blood-coloured Bohemian vase where they bloomed that day,—that May day,—all these bring back so overpoweringly the time that is for ever dead to me,—that I feel as if I should suffocate."

She walked to the nearest window, threw up the sash, and while she stood with the damp chill wind blowing full upon her the pastor heard a moan, such as comes from meek, dumb creatures, wrung by the throes of dissolution.

When she turned once more to the light, he saw an unnatural sparkle in the dry, lustrous, brown eyes.

"Dr. Hargrove, give me the license that was handed to you by Cuthbert Laurance."

"What value can it possess now?"

"Just now it is worth more to me than everything else in life,—more to me than my hopes of heaven."

"Mrs. Laurance, you must remember that I refused to perform the marriage ceremony, because I believed you were both entirely too young. Your grandmother who came with you assured me she was your sole guardian, and desired the marriage, and your husband, who seemed to me a mere boy, quieted my objections by producing the license, which he said exonerated me from censure, and relieved me of all responsibility. With that morning's work I have never felt fully satisfied, and though I know that any magistrate would probably have performed the ceremony, I have

sometimes thought I acted rashly, and have carefully kept that license as my defence and apology."

"Thank God, that it has been preserved. Give it to me."

"Pardon me if I say frankly, I prefer to retain it. All licenses are recorded by the officer who issued them, and by applying to him you can easily procure a copy."

"Treachery baffles me there. A most opportune fire broke out eighteen months ago in the room where those records were kept, and although the court house was saved, the book containing my marriage license was of course destroyed."

"But the clerk should be able to furnish a certificate of the facts."

"Not when he has been bribed to forget them. Please give me the paper in your possession."

She wrung her slender fingers, and her whole frame trembled like a weed on some bleak hillside, where wintry winds sweep unimpeded.

A troubled look crossed the grave, placid countenance of the pastor, and he clasped his hands firmly behind him, as if girding himself to deny the eloquent pleading of the lovely dark eyes.

"Sit down, madam, and listen to——"

"I cannot! A restless fever is consuming me, and nothing but the possession of that license can quiet me. You have no right to withhold it,—you cannot be so cruel, so wicked,—unless you also have been corrupted, bought off!"

"Be patient enough to hear me. I have always feared there was something wrong about that strange wedding, and your manner confirms my suspicions. Now I must be

made acquainted with all the facts, must know your reason for claiming the paper in my possession, before I surrender it. As a minister of the Gospel, it is incumbent upon me to act cautiously, lest I innocently become auxiliary to deception, —possibly to crime."

A vivid scarlet flamed up in the girl's marble cheeks.

"Of what do you suspect, or accuse me?"

"I accuse you of nothing. I demand your reasons for the request you have made."

"I want that paper because it is the only proof of my marriage. There were two witnesses: my grandmother, who died three years ago on a steamship bound for California, where her only son is living, and Gerbert Audré, a college student, who is supposed to have been lost last summer in a fishing smack off the coast of Labrador or Greenland."

"I am a witness accessible at any time, should my testimony be required."

"Will you live for ever? Nay,—just when I need your evidence, my ill luck will seal your lips, and drive the screws down in your coffin lid."

"What use do you intend to make of the license? Deal candidly with me."

"I want to hold it, as the most precious thing left in life; to keep it concealed securely, until the time comes when it will serve me, save me, avenge me."

"Why is it necessary to prove your marriage? Who disputes it?"

"Cuthbert Laurance and his father."

"Is it possible! Upon what plea?"

"That he was a minor, was only twenty, irresponsible, and that the license was fraudulent."

"Where is your husband?"

"I tell you, I have no husband! It were sacrilege to couple that sacred title with the name of the man who has wronged, deserted, repudiated me; and who intends if possible to add to the robbery of my peace and happiness, that of my fair, stainless name. Less than one month after the day when right here, where I now stand, you pronounced me his wife in the sight of God and man, he was summoned home by a telegram from his father. I have never seen him since. General Laurance took his son immediately to Europe, and, sir, you will find it difficult to believe me, when I tell you that infamous father has actually forced the son by threats of disinheritance to marry again,—to——"

The words seemed to strangle her, and she hastily broke away the ribbons which held her bonnet and were tied beneath her chin.

Mr. Hargrove poured some water into a goblet, and as he held it to her lips, murmured compassionately:

"Poor child! God help you."

Perhaps the genuine pity in the tone brought back sweet memories of the bygone, and for a moment softened the girl's heart, for tears gathered in the large eyes, giving them a strange quivering radiance. As if ashamed of the weakness she threw her head back defiantly, and continued:

"I was the poor little orphan, whose grandmother did washing and mending for the college boys—only little unknown Minnie Merle, with none to aid in asserting her

rights;—and she—the new wife—was a banker's daughter, an heiress, a fashionable belle,—and so Minnie Merle must be trampled out, and the new Mrs. Cuthbert Laurance dashes in her splendid equipage through the Bois de Bologne. Sir, give me my license!"

Mr. Hargrove opened a secret drawer in the tall writing-desk that stood in one corner of the room, and, unlocking a square tin box, took from it a folded slip of paper. After some deliberation he seated himself, and began to write.

Impatiently his visitor paced the floor, followed by Biörn, who now and then growled suspiciously.

At length, when the pastor laid down his pen, his guest came to his side, and held out her hand.

"Madam, the statements you have made are so extraordinary, that you must pardon me if I am unusually cautious in my course. While I have no right to doubt your assertions, they seem almost incredible, and the use you might make of the license——"

"What! you find it so difficult to credit the villainy of a man—and yet so easy to suspect, to believe all possible deceit and wickedness in a poor helpless woman? Oh, man of God! is your mantle of charity cut to cover only your own sex? Can the wail of down-trodden orphanage wake no pity in your heart,—or is it locked against me by the cowardly dread of incurring the hate of the house of Laurance?"

For an instant a dark flush bathed the tranquil brow of the minister, but his kind tone was unchanged when he answered slowly:

"Four years ago I was in doubt concerning my duty, but just now there is clearly but one course for me to pursue.

Unless you wish to make an improper use of it, this paper which I very willingly hand to you will serve your purpose. It is an exact copy of the license, and to it I have appended my certificate, as the officiating clergyman who performed the marriage ceremony. Examine it carefully, and you will find the date, and indeed every syllable rigidly accurate. From the original I shall never part, unless to see it replaced in the court house records."

Bending down close to the lamp, she eagerly read and reread the paper which shook like an aspen in her nervous grasp; then she looked long and searchingly into the grave face beside her, and a sudden light broke over her own.

"Oh, thank you! After all, the original is safer in your hands than in mine. I might be murdered, but they would never dare to molest you,—and if I should die, you would not allow them to rob my baby of her name?"

"Your baby!"

He looked at the young girlish figure and face, and it seemed impossible that the creature before him could be a mother. A melancholy smile curved her lips.

"Oh! that is the sting that sometimes goads me almost to desperation. My own wrongs are sufficiently hard to bear, but when I think of my innocent baby denied the sight of her father's face, and robbed of the protection of her father's name, then—I forget that I am only a woman, I forget that God reigns in heaven to right the wrongs on earth, and——"

There was a moment's silence.

"How old is your child?"

"Three years."

"And you? A mere child now."

"I am only nineteen."

"Poor thing! I pity you from the depths of my soul."

The clock struck ten, and the woman started from the table against which she leaned.

"I must not miss the train; I promised to return promptly."

She put on the grey cloak she had thrown aside, buttoned it about her throat, and tied her bonnet strings.

"Before you go, explain one thing. Was not your hair very dark when you were married?"

"Yes, a dark chestnut brown, but when my child was born I was ill a long time, and my head was shaved and blistered. When the hair grew out, it was just as you see it now. Ah! if we had only died then, baby and I, we might have had a quiet sleep under the violets and daisies. I see, sir, you doubt whether I am really little Minnie Merle. Do you not recollect that when you asked for the wedding ring none had been provided, and Cuthbert took one from his own hand, which was placed on my finger? Ah! there was a grim fitness in the selection! A death's head peeping out of a cinerary urn. You will readily recognize the dainty bridal token."

She drew from her bosom a slender gold chain on which was suspended a quaint antique cameo ring of black agate, with a grinning white skull in the centre, and around the oval border of heavily chased gold glittered a row of large and very brilliant diamonds.

"I distinctly remember the circumstance."

As the minister restored the ring to its owner, she returned it and the chain to its hiding-place.

"I do not wear it, I am biding my time. When General Laurance sent his agent first to attempt to buy me off, and, finding that impossible, to browbeat and terrify me into silence, one of his insolent demands was the restoration of this ring, which he said was an heirloom of untold value in his family, and must belong to none but a Laurance. He offered five hundred dollars for the delivery of it into his possession. I would sooner part with my right arm! Were it iron or lead, its value to me would be the same, for it is the only symbol of my lawful marriage,—is my child's title deed to a legitimate name."

She turned toward the door, and Dr. Hargrove asked:

"Where is your home?"

"I have none. I am a waif drifting from city to city, on the uncertain waves of chance."

"Have you no relatives?"

"Only an uncle, somewhere in the gold mines of California."

"Does General Laurance provide for your maintenance?"

"Three years ago his agent offered me a passage to San Francisco, and five thousand dollars, on condition that I withdrew all claim to my husband and to his name, and pledged myself to 'give the Laurances no further trouble.' Had I been a man, I would have strangled him. Since then no communication of any kind has passed between us, except that all my letters to Cuthbert pleading for his child have been returned without comment."

"How, then are you and the babe supported?"

"That, sir, is my secret."

She drew herself haughtily to her full height, and would have passed him, but he placed himself between her and the door.

"Mrs. Laurance, do not be offended by my friendly frankness. You are so young and so beautiful, and the circumstances of your life render you so peculiarly liable to dangerous associations and influences, that I fear you may ——"

"Fear nothing for me. Can I forget my helpless baby, whose sole dower just now promises to be her mother's spotless name? Blushing for her father's perfidy, she shall never need a purer, whiter shield than her mother's stainless record—so help me, God!"

"Will you do me the favour to put aside for future contingencies this small tribute to your child? The amount is not so large that you should hesitate to receive it; and feeling a deep interest in your poor little babe, it will give me sincere pleasure to know that you accept it for her sake, as a memento of one who will always be glad to hear from you, and to aid you if possible."

With evident embarrassment he tendered an old-fashioned purse of knitted silk, through whose meshes gleamed the sheen of gold pieces. To his astonishment she covered her face with her hands and burst into a fit of passionate weeping. For some seconds she sobbed aloud, leaving him in painful uncertainty concerning the nature of her emotion.

"Oh, sir!—it has been so long since words of sympathy and real kindness were spoken to me, that now they unnerve me. I am strong against calumny and injustice,—

but kindness breaks me down. I thank you in my baby's name, but we cannot take your money. Ministers are never oppressed with riches, and baby and I can live without charity. But since you are so good, I should like to say something in strict confidence to you. I am suspicious now of everybody, but it seems to me I might surely trust you. I do not yet see my way clearly, and if anything should happen to me the child would be thrown helpless upon the world. You have neither wife nor children, and if the time ever comes when I shall be obliged to leave my little girl for any long period, may I send her here for safety, until I can claim her? She shall cost you nothing but care and watchfulness. I could work so much better, if my mind were only easy about her; if I knew she was safely housed in this sanctuary of peace."

Ah! how irresistible was the pathetic pleading of the tearful eyes; but Mr. Hargrove did not immediately respond to the appeal.

"I understand your silence—you think me presumptuous in my request, and I daresay I am, but——"

"No, madam, not at all presumptuous. I hesitate habitually before assuming grave responsibility, and I only regret that I did not hesitate longer—four years ago. A man's first instincts of propriety, of right and wrong, should never be smothered by persuasion, nor wrestled down and overcome by subtle and selfish reasoning. I blame myself for much that has occurred, and I am willing to do all that I can toward repairing my error. If your child should ever really need a guardian, bring or send her to me, and I will shield her to the full extent of my ability." Ere he was aware

of her intention, she caught his hand, and as she carried it to her lips he felt her tears falling fast.

"God bless you for your goodness! I have one thing more to ask; promise me that you will divulge to no one what I have told you. Let it rest between God and you and me."

"I promise."

"In the great city where I labour I bear an assumed name, and none must know, at least for the present, whom I am. Realizing fully the unscrupulous character of the men with whom I have to deal, my only hope of redress is in preserving the secret for some years, and not even my baby can know her real parentage until I see fit to tell her. You will not betray me, even to my child?"

"You may trust me."

"Thank you, more than mere words could ever express."

"May God help you, Mrs. Laurance, to walk circumspectly—to lead a blameless life."

He took his hat from the stand in the hall, and silently they walked down to the parsonage gate. The driver dismounted and opened the carriage door, but the draped figure lingered, with her hand upon the latch.

"If I should die before we meet again, you will not allow them to trample upon my child?"

"I will do my duty faithfully."

"Remember that none must know I am Minnie Laurance until I give you permission; for snares have been set all along my path, and calumny is ambushed at every turn. Good-bye, sir. The God of orphans will one day requite you."

The light from the carriage lamp shone down on her as she turned toward it, and in subsequent years the pastor

was haunted by the marvellous beauty of the spirituelle features, the mournful splendour of the large misty eyes, and the golden glint of the rippling hair that had fallen low upon her temples.

"If it were not so late, I would accompany you to the railway station. You will have a lonely ride. Good-bye, Mrs. Laurance."

"Lonely, sir? Aye—lonely for ever."

She laughed bitterly, and entered the carriage.

"Laughed, and the echoes huddling in affright,
Like Odin's hounds fled baying down the night."

CHAPTER II.

Table of Contents

With the night passed the storm which had rendered it so gloomy, and the fair cold day shone upon a world shrouded in icy cerements; a hushed, windless world, as full of glittering rime-runes as the frozen fields of Jotunheim. Each tree and shrub seemed a springing fountain, suddenly crystallized in mid-air, and not all the mediæval marvels of Murano equalled the fairy fragile tracery of fine spun, glassy web, and film, and fringe that stretched along fences, hung from eaves, and belaced the ivy leaves that lay helpless on the walls. A blanched waning moon, a mere silver crescent, shivered upon the edge of the western horizon, fleeing before the scarlet and orange lances that already bristled along the eastern sky-line, the advance guard of the conqueror, who would ere many moments smite all that weird icy realm with consuming flames. The very air seemed frozen, and refused to vibrate in trills and roulades through the throaty organs of matutinal birds, that hopped and blinked, plumed their diamonded breasts, and scattered brilliants enough to set a tiara; and profound silence brooded over the scene, until rudely broken by a cry of dismay which rang out startlingly from the parsonage. The alarm might very readily have been ascribed to diligent Hannah, who, contemptuous of barometric or thermal

vicissitudes, invariably adhered to the aphorism of Solomon, and, arising "while it is yet night, looketh well to the ways of her household."

With a broom in one hand, and feather dusting-brush in the other, she ran down the front steps, her white cap strings flying like distress signals,—bent down to the ground as a blood-hound might in scenting a trail,—then dashed back into the quiet old house, and uttered a wolfish cry:

"Robbers! Burglars! Thieves!"

Oppressed with compassionate reflections concerning the fate of his visitor, the minister had found himself unable to sleep as soundly as usual, and from the troubled slumber into which he sank after daylight he was aroused by the unwonted excitement that reigned in the hall, upon which his apartment opened. While hastily dressing, his toilette labours were expedited by an impatient rap which only Hannah's heavy hand could have delivered. Wrapped in his dressing-gown he opened the door, saying benignly:

"Is there an earthquake or a cyclone? You thunder as if my room were Mount Celion. Is any one dead?"

"Some one ought to be! The house was broken open last night, and the silver urn is missing. Shameless wretch! This comes of mysteries and veiled women, who are too modest to, look an honest female in the face, but——!"

"Oh, Hannah I that tongue of thine is more murderous than Cyrus' scythed chariots! Here is your urn! I put it away last night, because I saw from the newspapers that a quantity of plate had recently been stolen. Poor Hannah! don't scowl so ferociously because I have spoiled your little

tragedy. I believe you are really sorry to see the dear old thing safe in defiance of your prophecy."

Mrs. Lindsay came downstairs laughing heartily, and menacing irate Hannah with the old-fashioned urn, which had supplied three generations with tea.

"Is that the sole cause of the disturbance?" asked the master, stooping to pat Biörn, who was dancing a tarantella on the good man's velvet slippers.

Somewhat crestfallen the woman seized the urn, began to polish it with her apron, and finally said sulkily:

"I beg pardon for raising a false alarm, but indeed it looked suspicious and smelled of foul play, when I found the library window wide open, two chairs upside down on the carpet,—mud on the window-sill, the inkstand upset,—and no urn on the sideboard. But as usual I am only an old fool, and you, sir, and Miss Elise know best I am very sorry I roused you so early with my racket."

"Did you say the library window wide open? Impossible; I distinctly recollect closing the blinds, and putting down the sash before I went to bed. Elise, were you not with me at the time?"

"Yes, I am sure you secured it, just before bidding me goodnight."

"Well—no matter, facts are ugly, stubborn things. Now you two just see for yourselves, what I found this morning."

Hannah hurried them into the library, where a fire had already been kindled, and her statement was confirmed by the disarranged furniture, and traces of mud on the window-sill and carpet. The inkstand had rolled almost to the hearth,

scattering its contents *en route*, and as he glanced at his desk the minister turned pale.

The secret drawer which opened with a spring had been pulled out to its utmost extent, and he saw that the tin box he had so carefully locked the previous night was missing. Some *MSS* were scattered loosely in the drawer, and the purse filled with gold coins, a handsomely set miniature, and heavy watch chain with seal attached, all lay untouched, though conspicuously alluring to the cupidity of burglars. Bending over his rifled sanctuary, Mr. Hargrove sighed, and a grieved look settled on his countenance.

"Peyton, do you miss anything?"

"Only a box of papers."

"Were they valuable?"

"Pecuniarily no;—at least not convertible into money. In other respects, very important."

"Not your beautiful sermons, I hope," cried his sister, throwing one arm around his neck, and leaning down to examine the remaining contents of the drawer.

"They were more valuable, Elise, than many sermons, and some cannot be replaced."

"But how could the burglars have overlooked the money and jewellery?"

Again the minister sighed heavily, and, closing the drawer, said:

"Perhaps we may discover some trace in the garden."

"Aye, sir,—I searched before I raised an uproar, and here is a handkerchief that I found under that window, on the violet bed. It was frozen fast to the leaves."

Hannah held it up between the tips of her fingers, as if fearful of contamination, and eyed it with an expression of loathing. Mr. Hargrove took it to the light and examined it, while an unwonted frown wrinkled his usually placid brow. It was a dainty square of finest cambric, bordered with a wreath of embroidered lilies, and in one corner exceedingly embellished "O O" stared like wide wondering eyes, at the strange hands that profaned it.

"Do you notice what a curious, outlandish smell it has? It struck my nostrils sharper than hartshorn when I picked it up. No rum-drinking, tobacco-smoking burglar in breeches dropped that lace rag."

Hannah set her stout arms akimbo, and looked "unutterable things" at the delicate fabric, that as if to deprecate its captors was all the while breathing out deliciously sweet but vague hints,—now of eglantine, and now of that subtle spiciness that dwells in daphnes, and anon plays hide-and-seek in nutmeg geranium blooms.

Reluctance to admission of the suspicion of unworthiness in others is the invariable concomitant of true nobility of soul in all pure and exalted natures,—and with that genuine chivalry, which now, alas! is welnigh as rare as the *aumônière* of pilgrims, the pastor bravely cast around the absent woman the broad, soft ermine of his tender charity.

"Hannah, if your insinuations point to the lady who called here last night, I can easily explain the suspicious fact of the handkerchief, which certainly belongs to her; for the room was close, and my visitor, having raised that window and leaned out for fresh air, doubtless dropped her handkerchief without observing the loss."

"Do the initials 'O O' represent her name?" asked Mrs. Lindsay, whose adroitly propounded interrogatories the previous evening had elicited no satisfactory information.

"Do not ladies generally stamp their own monograms when marking articles that compose their wardrobes?" He put the unlucky piece of cambric in his pocket, and pertinacious Hannah suddenly stooped and dealt Biörn a blow, which astonished the spectators even more than the yelping recipient, who dropped something at her feet and crawled behind his master.

"You horrid, greedy pest! Are you in league with the thieves, that you must needs try to devour the signs and tell-tales they dropped in the track of their dirty work? It is only a glove this time, sir, and it was all crumpled, just so,—where I first saw it, when I ran out to hunt for footprints. It was hanging on the end of a rose bush, yonder near the snowball, and you see it was rather too far from the window here to have fallen down with the handkerchief. Look, Miss Elise, your hands are small, but this would pinch even your fingers."

She triumphantly lifted a lady's kid glove, brown in colour and garnished with three small oval silver buttons, the exact mate of one which Mr. Hargrove had noticed the previous evening, when the visitor held up the ring for his inspection. Exulting in the unanswerable logic of this latest fact, Hannah quite unintentionally gave the glove a scornful toss, which caused it to fall into the fireplace, and down between two oak logs, where it shrivelled instantaneously. Unfortunately science is not chivalric, and divulges the unamiable and ungraceful truth, that perverted female

natures from even the lower beastly types are more implacably vindictive, more subtly malicious, more ingeniously cruel than the stronger sex; and when a woman essays to track, to capture, or to punish—*vae victis*.

"Now, Biörn! improve your opportunity and heap coals of fire on slanderous Hannah's head, by assuring her you feel convinced she did not premeditatedly destroy traces, and connive at the escape of the burglars, by burning that most important glove, which might have aided us in identifying them."

As Mr. Hargrove caressed his dog, he smiled, evidently relieved by the opportune accident; but Mrs. Lindsay looked grave, and an indignant flush purpled the harsh, pitiless face of the servant, who sullenly turned away, and busied herself in putting the furniture in order.

"Peyton, were the stolen papers of a character to benefit that person,—or indeed any one but yourself, or your family?"

He knew the soft blue eyes of his sister were watching him keenly, saw too that the old servant stood still, and turned her head to listen, and he answered without hesitation:

"The box contained the deed to a disputed piece of property, those iron and lead mines in Missouri,—and I relied upon it to establish my claim."

"Was the lady who visited you last night in any manner interested in that suit, or its result?"

"Not in the remotest degree. She cannot even be aware of its existence. In addition to the deed, I have lost the policy of insurance on this house, which has always been

entrusted to me and I must immediately notify the company of the fact and obtain a duplicate policy. Elise, will you and Hannah please give me my breakfast as soon as possible, that I may go into town at once?"

Walking to the window, he stood for some moments, with his hands folded behind him, and as he noted the splendour of the spectacle presented by the risen sun shining upon temples and palaces of ice, prism-tinting domes and minarets, and burnishing after the similitude of silver stalactites and arcades which had built themselves into crystal campaniles, more glorious than Giotto's,—the pastor said: "The physical world, just as God left it,—how pure, how lovely, how entirely good;—how sacred from His hallowing touch! Oh that the world of men and women were half as unchangingly true, stainless, and holy!"

An hour later he bent his steps,—not to the lawyer's, nor yet to the insurance office, but to the depot of the only railroad which passed through the quiet, old-fashioned, and comparatively unimportant town of V—.

The station agent was asleep upon a sofa in the reception-room, but when aroused informed Dr. Hargrove that the down train bound south had been accidentally detained four hours, and instead of being "on time," due at eleven p.m., did not pass through V— until after three a.m. A lady, corresponding in all respects with the minister's description, had arrived about seven on the up train, left a small valise, or rather traveller's satchel, for safe keeping in the baggage-room; had inquired at what time she could catch the down train, signifying her intention to return upon it, and had hired one of the carriages always waiting for

passengers, and disappeared. About eleven o'clock she came back, paid the coachman, and dismissed the carriage; seemed very cold, and the agent built a good fire, telling her she could take a nap as the train was behind time, and he would call her when he heard the whistle. He then went home, several squares distant, to see one of his children who was quite ill, and when he returned to the station and peeped into the reception-room to see if it kept warm and comfortable not a soul was visible. He wondered where the lady could have gone at that hour, and upon such a freezing night, but sat down by the grate in the freight-room, and when the down train blew for V—— he took his lantern and went out, and the first person he saw was the missing lady. She asked for her satchel, which he gave her, and he handed her up to the platform, and saw her go into the ladies' car.

"Had she a package or box, when she returned and asked for her satchel?"

"I did not see any, but she wore a waterproof of grey cloth that came down to her feet. There was so much confusion when the train came in that I scarcely noticed her, but remember she shivered a good deal, as if almost frozen."

"Did she buy a return ticket?"

"No, I asked if I should go to the ticket office for her, but she thanked me very politely, and said she would not require anything."

"Can you tell me to what place she was going?"

"I do not know where she came from, nor where she went. She was most uncommonly beautiful."