HER SISTER'S HONOR.

A Tale of English Life.

By Walter Besant.

CHAPTER VI.
OUT AGAIN.

"Hush!" Naomi held up her finger. "I think she is in a sleep."

"At last you have her again," said the librarian.

"Yes—at last. They let her go because she was ill, and the time was so close at hand when she would have her ticket-of-leave. I brought her home yesterday. She was a good deal excited, poor child, but at night she grew composed and told me more than I knew. He was her husband—her husband—think of that! The man went into the witness box and sent his own wife to penal servitude. She did not stab him in her misery because he had deserted her—she wanted to kill herself. I will tell you all presently. He knew that, too. Oh, villain!—villain!"

"Villain! villain!" echoed the librarian.

"You shall see her directly. But she frightened me this morning. She does not know me. She thinks she has got her baby in her lap—it was born in the prison, and died in the prison. But she is a married woman, remember. She thinks her husband—oh, her husband—is with her. Tell me what I should do. Come in. Her eyes are closed. I think she is sleeping."

It was a Sunday morning in midwinter. Outside, the church bells rang, but it was not a quarter where the call to prayer is heeded, and the feet of the people were not set churchwards. Within, a bright fire, a clean room, and in an easy chair the prisoner set free. She had put off her prison dress; they had suffered her hair to grow, her beautiful light hair curling about her forehead; her face, refined by long suffering, seemed in its delicacy and pale beauty to be the face of some Christian saint who spent her days in holy meditation; her eyes were closed, but at the sound of the voices and the shutting of the door she awoke and looked around.

"Naomi, dear," she said, smiling. Thank God! She was once more in her right mind again.

"I have been asleep, I think. I forgot that I was released, and I thought I was in my cell again."

"Dear," said Naomi. "Forget the cell. Oh! Try to forget it. See, I have brought you my friend—my best friend. Oh! my dear, he knows all; he will advise us and help us. He has been very good and kind to me, dear—while we were parted. Because it was lonely without you—and when one thought—no, no, it is all over. Oh! my dear—my dear—it is all over and we are together, and I can bear anything now—anything."

The librarian tried to speak. But he turned away his face, and the tears rolled down his cheeks even to his great gray beard. 'Twas a soft-hearted librarian.

"You have got to grow quite strong and well again, my dear," he said, taking her hand and holding it while he sat down beside her. "Quite strong and well before you think about anything. Poor child!"

"I shall never get strong or well again," she replied. "I heard the doctor in the infirmary say so. That matters nothing, except that I shall be such a trouble to everybody. Oh! Naomi, dear, what a trouble I have been to you! What a dreadful trouble. I have spoiled your whole life, my dear."

"Not you—not you, Ruth," Naomi answered, hoarsely. "But that villain—oh! that villain!"

"Don't, dear. It hurts me that anybody should call him names. At first I was hard upon him for the sake of my baby. It is very terrible for a child to be born in prison, isn't it—and for its mother to be a convict. No child can ever get over that disgrace. But God took the child, and then I was happier. There was only myself to think about, and I began to feel that it was worse for him than for me. Nothing can undo the past. I came to forgive him, dear, and would forget him if I could. But you can't forget your husband. Woman are made so——"

"I THINK SHE IS IN A SLEEP."

"They are," said the librarian. "God knows they are."

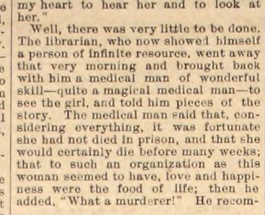
"Naomi, dear, you thought I was overwhelmed with the disgrace and shame of it. No, dear. I never could feel any disgrace—not even in the court. The convict dress was nothing to me, nor the prison rules. I obeyed the rules, and I did not mind them. You see, dear, I was innocent. But I had a sentence at first far more terrible to bear. It was the sentence of my child's disgrace. It was only when I thought of you, dear, that I felt the disgrace to me—and this only—for your sake. For my own I felt nothing. When I told the doctor—it was only the other day—he cried about it. He is a kind man though he is a prison doctor."

"Will you have some breakfast now, dear? You would not eat any an hour ago."

"I thought we had breakfast at 7. Half a pint of cocoa and—and——" She looked about her with troubled eyes; her brain was wandering again. "I must clean the cell and roll up the blankets before work begins. The matron lets me do her room; they are all kind to me. Of course they know I never did it." She shut her eyes as if trying to collect herself. "Give me my baby." She started up and opened her eyes and held out her arms. "Give me my baby. Oh! my precious baby. Hush! He is asleep." She thought the child was in her lap. "He is asleep. Sir, Naomi. You didn't know I had such a lovely baby, did you? He has got his father's eyes exactly, hasn't he? Come and look at your son, Harry. Kiss him, dear. He shall grow up as handsome and as good as his father."

"Oh! my friend," said Naomi. "What shall I do? What shall I do? It tears my heart to hear her and to look at her."

Well, there was very little to be done. The librarian, who now showed himself a person of infinite resource, went away that very morning and brought back with him a medical man of wonderful skill—quite a magical medical man—to see the girl, and told him pieces of the story. The medical man said that, considering everything, it was fortunate she had not died in prison, and that she would certainly die before many weeks; that to such an organization as this woman seemed to have, love and happiness were the food of life; then he added, "What a murderer!" He recommended something or other and went away. But he did more. For this medical magical person had a daughter, one of those who spend their lives in good works. And she, moved deeply by the sadness of the thing, came to nurse the girl, and instead of reading to the patients in the hospitals, sat all day long with Ruth while her sister was at work, and talked to her and prayed over her continually with the sunshine of sympathy and friendship. She also sent in a piano and played to the sick girl. In the evening Naomi came home, and when the librarian could get away, he, too, came and read or talked of grave things, thoughts concerning men and women and the conduct of life and the teaching which is read aloud in the churches without ceasing, and remains as much neglected as ever. So they talked her poor wearied brain into rest. But ever and anon the dying girl's eyes would wander troubled round the room, and she would go back to her prison cell, and she would call again for her baby and dandle the pretty child before his father—the father so handsome and so good.



SHE ALSO SENT IN A PIANO AND PLAYED.

One evening, when she felt a little stronger than usual, she told her sister about her marriage.

"Harry wouldn't marry me openly and take me to his own people," she said, "because he was dependent on his father. But he wouldn't give me up, and one day he told me that he had everything ready and would marry me secretly in a registrar's office. But I was to tell nobody—not even you, dear; and I promised. He took me in a cab, I don't know where. One of his friends, Mr. Middlemist, who was a clerk in his father's office, came with us. We got out of the cab at the office, and went within. So that his father should not find out, he signed a false name. He took his mother's name, and signed himself 'Henry Hendricksen.' "

"And you remember the place, dear?"

"No, I do not know where it was, because I never thought of looking. Afterwards he told me that it was a sham registry, but I know now that it was not, because people who have sham offices do not put up brass plates and print the name of the office in the pillars of the door. Besides, we had to wait while another couple were married. I am his wife, dear, as much as the law can make me."

When Naomi told this to the librarian, he said that now they knew the particulars nothing would be easier than to find out where the marriage took place, because a register is kept, and can be consulted. And he took certain steps unknown to the two sisters.

After this they talked no more about the past. As the bodily frame grew weaker her mind became more restful. During the day she seemed to forget the past. She listened, her hollow eyes looking far away, while her nurse—the physician's daughter—played to her; on the wings of the music she was borne away to the land of holy thought. When she talked it was of the future—now so near—when her child should be restored to her. The past, as she truly told her sister, had left upon her soul no touch of shame—not the least touch. That it had killed her was nothing, because life had nothing left for her. Only in the night she would awake and stretch out her hands, feeling for the walls of her cell, and moan and weep in thinking of the child, born in the prison and dead in the prison. Then Naomi would weep with her and soothe her, until the dying girl, in her turn, soothed and consoled the girl who had to live.

One evening, towards the end of April, when there was a soft breath of early spring, Ruth began to talk of the old days, when the swifts flew about the tower of the cathedral, and the leaves began to come out upon the trees; and she spoke of the sweet service on the Sunday morning, and of the quiet shop, with its shelves of books, round which the canons of the cathedral would slowly walk, reading the titles; and of the dean, who always came to shake hands with her father, and patted her cheek—all the old life—so long ago, so long ago. She talked about this all the evening; it seemed as if she could think of nothing else. When she laid her head upon the pillow she murmured, "Naomi, dear, there is nothing worth remembering but the old days—and you, dear, and you—unless it is my baby. Oh! he is waiting for me. I can see his pretty face; he holds out his pretty hands." Then, with no more words, her eyes closed and she fell asleep. Naomi watched her; she was breathing freely and lightly; she went to bed herself. An hour afterwards she awoke in alarm, and listened. Ruth was breathing lightly and regularly. Naomi fell asleep again. When she awoke again it was morning, and Ruth lay dead.

CHAPTER VII.
LORD PERIVALE.

Mr. Harry Stoke had finished breakfast, and was waiting his wife in order to go to church with her as a respectable and God-fearing gentleman should on Sunday morning. His wife—for he had married with his father's sanction and approval—was none other than Lady Beatrice, daughter of the Earl and Countess of Thordisa. He was himself the Honorable Harry, eldest son of Lord Perivale, the newest creation. No one could grudge elevation of a man who had achieved, single-handed, what all the men in the City are perpetually trying to do with the aid of partners, ancestral connections, inherited capital, and the brains of paid servants; he had amassed an enormous fortune; all governments love to honor the City and the successful children of the City; therefore there was but one murmur of approval when Mr. John Stoke, of Threadneedle street, was elevated to a peerage. And the fact that he had so much money was a sufficient reason for making his children and his children's children, so long as the stock should last, a caste apart, and hereditary legislators.

The honorable gentleman looked perfectly healthy, happy, and contented with himself. Why not? His partnership enabled him to occupy a good house in a good square; his marriage opened a great many good houses to him; he had a brace of fine, strong children, one of whom, the heir to the peerage, a little boy of six, would be brought down to play with him, and was now rolling on the hearth rug. The choicest gifts in store had been poured into his lap, which was like a sack for capacity, and was ready to receive more choice gifts—the more and the choicer the better. Heaven certainly seems very good indeed to the richer creatures.

A footman brought him a card.

"Who is it?" he asked; "I don't know the name. What does he mean by coming on Sunday morning?"

"Gentleman says he has to speak to you on most important private business."

"Oh!" He thought it must be some message from the city, or from his father. "Show him into the study. No, let him come here."

The visitor was an elderly gentleman, dressed plainly, who entered, bowed, and waited to be asked his business.

"Well, sir," asked the Honorable Henry Stoke, "what do you want with me? You said you had important private business with me?"

"Yes. I have brought you some news."

"What news?"

"You gave evidence in a trial about three years and a half ago."

"What about that trial?" The Honorable Harry turned very red and then pale. "Who are you?"

"I am librarian of a free public library. It really does not matter who I am. You gave evidence in a case of alleged stabbing and wounding. Your evidence sent your own wife to penal servitude for seven years."

"My wife? It's a lie—a lie, I say." He said more, but the terror in his eyes greatly detracted from the strength of his words.

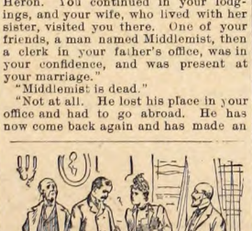
"It is true," said the librarian, calmly. "Your own wife."

"Prove it, if you can."

"I can. It can be proved very easily. You took lodgings in a certain parish under the name of Hendricksen. Under that name you were married at the registrar's of that district to Ruth Heron. You continued in your lodgings, and your wife, who lived with her sister, visited you there. One of your friends, a man named Middlemist, then a clerk in your father's office, was in your confidence, and was present at your marriage."

"Middlemist is dead."

"Not at all. He lost his place in your office and had to go abroad. He has now come back again and has made an affidavit of the facts. We have also obtained an affidavit from the landlady of the lodgings. There is no doubt possible."



"HARRY, WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS?"

"What are you going—going to do?" The man caught the back of the chair and showed a ghastly face. "Man, it is ruin—absolute ruin—to me. You don't know what mischief you may be doing. I will pay anything—anything."

"At the trial your wife would say nothing; a word from her would have ruined you. A word from you would have saved her. What forgiveness—what consideration can you hope?"

"I will buy silence at any price. Look here, there are only you and I present; it doesn't matter what I say. It's all true; I did marry her. I told her it was a false marriage because I was driven nearly mad. I suffered terribly at the time, she ought to think of that; I suffered terribly. I thought it was all over."

"In her lifetime nothing was said. But your wife is dead."

"Dead? Is Ruth dead?" His face brightened again. "Dead! Then it is all right! It doesn't matter to anybody."

"It matters to her memory and to her friends. She is dead, and now the story shall be told. Yes, Mr. Stoke, you will face the whole truth."

Just then the door was thrown open, and Lord Perivale himself walked in; he bore in his hand a little bundle of papers, which he threw upon the table.

"What is the meaning of this announcement, sir?" he asked his son; "and this, and this. In the St. James' Gazette—in the Pall Mall—and in the Observer this morning. What does it mean, I say? 'On Friday, April 29, Ruth, wife of the Honorable Henry Hendricksen Stoke, of Chester Square and Threadneedle Street, daughter of the late Nathaniel Heron, J. P., of Barchester, aged 25.' What is this, I ask?"

His son looked at the announcement, but made no reply.

"What is it?" roared his lordship.

"It means," said the librarian, "what it says. Your son's wife is dead."

"Who put in this announcement?"

"I did."

"Then, sir, you shall smart for it if there is law in the land."

"It is true," the librarian said, quietly. "Your son's wife is dead."

"Who is dead?"

It was Lady Beatrice who stood at the door, dressed ready for church, and asked this question.

"Who is dead?" she repeated.

"This man's wife is dead," said the librarian, pointing to her own husband.

"His wife? What do you mean?"

"His wife died on Friday. She will be buried the day after to-morrow."

"Harry! what is the meaning of this?" She caught her husband by the arm. "Speak! what does this mean?"

"It means—it means——" but he could not finish the sentence.

"It means that his lawful wife is dead," the librarian continued. "This man was married five years ago, at a registrar's office, to Ruth Heron, under the name of Henry Hendricksen, which was his mother's name. She died yesterday at her sister's lodgings."

"Harry! speak."

"It's a lie," he repeated, but feebly.

"By ——," said Lord Perivale, "I believe it is true."

"It is true," said the librarian. "His wife's sister sends me to inform him of this news. All the papers and proofs are in a lawyer's hands. There is no doubt possible."

"Then what am I?" asked Lady Beatrice, looking around helplessly.

The librarian was silent.

"And what are my children?"

"Madam," said Lord Perivale, "if this story is true, you are almost as ill-used a woman as the other, Ruth Heron! You, sir, it was your own wife—your own wife—your own wife—that you sent to a convict prison!"

* * * * *

The reason why Lady Beatrice separated from her husband is not known. Nor is it generally known why the Honorable Harry Stoke left his father's firm and went abroad. His brother knows, however, that he is forbidden on any pretext whatever ever to return to his native country. And what will be done when he dies, and the question of the succession to the title will arise, is doubtful. The second son, the Honorable Joe, is determined that it shall proceed in the legitimate line—that is to say, to himself. And as for Naomi, she is married to the librarian. At sixty, you see, one begins to feel the want of a wife.

[THE END.]

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Was Engaged Before He Knew It.

Five or six agents, guests at a certain hotel, were seated out under the trees one evening talking about the folly of long engagements.

"I'll tell you what," spoke up a young solicitor, pulling his hat over his eyes, as he lazily swung in the hammock. "I was only engaged to my wife two months and we married three months after we met."

"My sister," returned a pretty girl agent, "only knew her husband three weeks and they were only engaged two weeks."

"Is she happy?" asked some one.

"Oh, perfectly. The young man met her on the street one day and declared that she was the very girl for him. Oh, it was so romantic!"

"This only helps to prove my theory," said an old maid of the party with a reminiscent look. "It is a mistake to wait too long."

"One of my friends," chimed in a sprightful voice, "answered a personal in a New York paper, and three days later the couple met by appointment. Would you believe it, they were married next day!"

"I know a true story that beats that," spoke up a Western girl, who evidently wished to keep up the reputation of her State in the story line. "A man whom I knew well was going from Austin, Texas, to a town about forty miles distant. In front of him sat a pretty girl, with whom he struck up an acquaintance. The girl intended to change cars at the station which was the young man's destination. But just think of it! When they reached that town they stepped off the train as lively as you please, got a license and the knot was tied in a jiffy—less than an hour after the couple met."

A blonde young agent in a laborsaving attitude, who had been listening with considerable interest, drawled:

"I know of a case that in its way is quite as interesting. It started out well. I never heard how it ended."

"Do tell it!" spoke up several at once, as the young canvasser seemed about to relapse into thoughtfulness again.

"A girl I know was engaged to a fellow an hour before he was engaged to her."

"Impossible!" exclaimed several. "How did it happen?"

"Well, he lived in Denver, she in Boston, and she answered 'Yes' by telegraph."

The blonde young man looked reflectively at the crowd. All the agents looked mournfully at him, and one by stole back into the hotel.

A Family of 742.

There are so many Housers in Houston county, Ga., that if a candidate can get the family to vote for him, he is generally sure of election. One of the old residents was asked about this recently. "Well," said he, "there are so many Housers in Houston that I can't keep track of them. When one of the family runs for an office, if he can get his relatives to vote for him he's all right. There are just 742 of them in the county."

"All of one family?"

"All of one family, and the old grandfather of them all is alive yet.

In meeting new acquaintances in Houston it is a good policy to say very nice words about the family, for you may be addressing a nephew, a cousin, a brother-in-law, or some kind of a relative of the family.

MERCURY had wings on its heels. He must have had sour feet.

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