

One Man's Evil

By EFFIE ROWLAND

CHAPTER XXI.—(Continued.)

He was only a working man, his clothes were common, his hands sunburned and rough, but his voice was muffled in her ears, and the expression in his eyes seemed to carry her back to her last youth.

"Forgive me," said Ben again, not quite steadily. "Mayhap you don't remember me, Liz. It's many a year, my lass, since we stood face to face. When I look at you," Ben went on, a little hoarsely, "it seems to me as if time must have gone back. You look so like what you used to be."

Sylvia put out her hand.

"Ben," she said, "dear friend Ben." Ben took her hand and pressed it between his two big ones. She had the same sensation upon her as if she were a child who had found a protector.

"Let us sit down here awhile," she said. "You must tell me all about yourself, Ben. I saw you a few mornings ago. You were in the park, speaking with a beautiful girl. Perhaps I should not have recognized you, only that she spoke your name, and then I seemed to see your old self."

They seated themselves upon the other side of the leather couch upon which Gerald Tenby was sitting. Sylvia had forgotten all about him. She forgot everything at this moment, save the strange fact that she, who, for so many years, had done her best to put the seal of secrecy upon her beginning, who had worked diligently to separate herself from all the old people in the North, should find it not only possible but even a happiness to be with Ben.

"My life's not worth the telling, lass," Ben said, as he seated himself, awkwardly enough, beside her graceful figure. "It was just one simple round of daily work; and many's the time, Liz, that I've longed to know how things were with you. I came back to the old country, Liz, not for my own sake, but for the sake of a lad who came into my life by chance. He was one of the old family, and my heart went out to him the first moment I looked upon him. Though he wore a prison dress, and had chains about his feet, I knew him to be what his father was before him—noble at heart, simple and good."

"Are you speaking of that young Tenby who went wrong a few years ago?" asked Sylvia.

Ben nodded his head.

"Then he did not die, Ben?"

"He was alive a week ago!" cried Ben, with the anguish that lived in his heart breaking out in his voice. "What have they done with him, my poor lad?"

"Tell me more, Ben," said Sylvia faintly.

She felt as if she were suffocating. Light seemed to be springing in upon the problem about which she had puzzled so much these last few days.

Ben gave her Hubert's story briefly. He wasted no words in describing all he feared; he mentioned no name, but Sylvia knew what was in his heart, and her own was filled with sudden fear also.

"Till last night," said Ben, "I had not a clue to go upon; but fate was kind to me, and chance was given to me to meet with one who may lead at last to the truth. Last night also I saw you with a man outside the theater. You sent him from you as though he had no right to be with you. This man, Liz, is the man who is constant with Gerald Tenby. What can you tell me about him?"

"Everything, and yet nothing," answered Sylvia. "George Stanton is in one sense a stranger to me, in another he stands closer to me than any living creature at this moment. I have promised to be his wife."

"You love him, Liz?"

"I think I hate him," she said, under her breath. "I have been free for so many years that I cannot easily realize that any man has the right to call himself my master, and that is what George Stanton can do now."

There was such bitterness in her voice that Ben could say nothing for a moment or two; but after she had said so much it seemed to Sylvia a kind of relief to say more.

"Till now," she said, "I have been teaching myself one thing, which was that there was only one thing in the world worth living for, and that was money. Oh, I am changed since the days you knew me, Ben! I sometimes wonder if I am really the same Liz who used to live in that little tumbledown cottage, and go to meet you at the pit's mouth. There is such a world of difference between the girl I was and the woman I am. Yes, I have said to myself all these years that money was the only thing I cared about. And money has come to me." Sylvia said, with almost ruthless candor. "Had I but imagined that Stanton would ever find the means of making me keep my word, I would have bitten out my tongue before I would have spoken as I did."

There was a wildness in her manner and her voice that gave Ben new pain. He put his big hand softly on her arm.

"Nay, lass," he said, tenderly, "don't hurt yourself by telling me any more."

"It does not hurt me," Sylvia answered. "It does me good. Ben, this man used to be a kind of slave. He followed me wherever I went. I did not give him so much as a kind word. Yet he would not

leave me. And one day he came to me with a wild story that he was going to make his fortune. I laughed at him, yet I listened, for I saw that there might come a day when I should need some provision, and he seemed to be in earnest. I told him that the day he brought me one hundred thousand pounds I would promise to be his wife.

"And he brought you this money?" asked, slowly.

"Yes," she said, "he brought me this money, and he claimed my promise. I made him swear to me that the money had come to him honestly, and he swore it. But since then, Ben, I have had no peace, no rest. Something seems to have been awakened in me that cried aloud against this money. Only last night," Sylvia said, agitatedly, "I dreamed a dream. I thought I was counting out this money, and a great hand was placed upon it, and a voice cried in my ear: 'It is the price of blood!' I awoke with a scream."

Sylvia's voice was hushed all at once, for some one had risen from the other side of the couch and had seemed to stumble against it, and, looking around, her eyes had looked into Gerald Tenby's, and the expression on the man's face silenced her lips.

CHAPTER XXII.

Gerald Tenby went out into the sunshine like a man in a dream. He hardly knew which way his steps led him. He wandered on conscious of nothing but that one awful fear which lay like a band of cold iron around his heart.

It was nearly half past three as he reached his chambers. All the old unrest and disquietude rushed back upon him as he let himself in, and met the inquiring eyes of his new servant. He passed into his own room.

There were a number of letters and telegrams scattered on the table—for the world did not intend to let him remain in seclusion too long—and his eyes instantly caught the scribbled address in what he took to be Antonia's handwriting. He bent forward to pick up this note, and then he realized he was not alone.

Stanton was sitting in an armchair, looking at him with a strange smile on his lips. Gerald Tenby had not noticed him when he entered the room at first, and he gave a great start now. The blood rushed to his face, and then receded.

"You are back early," he said.

"Yes," said Stanton; "my work was quickly done. I have come to-day to give you one pleasure, at least. You are heartily sick of seeing me, you fret at my presence. I propose that we shall separate for a short time. I have fulfilled my share of the work we undertook, and I want to rest awhile. I intend to go abroad within the next twenty-four hours, but before I go I wish to make arrangements with you by which a regular income will be paid to me of a sum large enough to satisfy my requirements."

Those words were enough to sting Tenby into something like his old self.

"You have had your last penny from me," he said, firmly; "only the other day I gave you quite a fortune; if you have been foolish enough to pass this money on to a woman like Sylvia Castella, you need not think that you can drain me for more."

"Who told you about Sylvia Castella?" Stanton asked.

"I overheard her myself only this morning telling some man with whom she appeared to be very intimate, that you had bought her promise to marry you."

Stanton's breast heaved. He bit his lips till the blood came.

"Who was this man?" he asked savagely.

"Tenby, if you are lying to me—"

"Why should I lie to you about this?" retorted Tenby. "You must be aware that I am repeating to you the truth, since you yourself have not given me any information."

Stanton sat very still in the chair; his eyes were closed; he looked as if he were suffering, and Gerald Tenby stood and gazed at him a moment in silence. Something in the other man's expression touched him.

"George," he said, "be open with me. You care for this woman?"

"So much," answered Stanton, in a quiet, calmer way, "that for her sake I have done what I have done. It may not be a noble view of love," he went on, bitterly, "but it was the best I could do."

He was gone before Gerald Tenby could speak, and had let himself out of the chambers with a quick sigh, as though he were glad to escape from them.

It was now in the middle of the afternoon. The sun was hot, but up in Sylvia's garden the trees grew thickly together. It was her hour for resting; he would not even ask to see her; he would only sit in that little garden and look up at her window.

A new rush of passion had been born into his heart as he had listened to Gerald Tenby's slighting words of her. By what means Tenby had learned the truth he knew not, but one thing was very sure, it would need far more than this to tear Stanton away from this infatuation. He was a clever, cunning, practical man, and had his senses not been bewitched, he might even have saved himself yet. As it was, he went blindly forward, content

to match at any satisfaction that should come in his way, content even to accept the grudging submission of one whom he knew only too well despised him even as he adored her.

Antonia did not leave her uncle's sick room. There came to her a kind of peace that was almost a comfort as she sat by the bedside of Edward Marchmont and remembered all his manifold goodness.

From the first moment that she had looked upon him Antonia had not deceived herself. She knew that before many more hours had passed this noble heart would be silenced forever. In the early part of the afternoon Lady Betty came in again, with a great rustle of silken skirts.

"Go and rest for awhile, Antonia," she said. "I will stay with Edward."

It was on the girl's lips to refuse. She had no desire to rest, no desire to leave this darkened room; yet it was not possible for her to refuse, and then the thought came to her quickly that perhaps the sick man might find a gleam of joy in the knowledge that his wife was sitting beside him. So she rose.

"I do not need rest," she said, "but I will go into the drawing room, and if you want me, please call me."

"You are so good, dear Antonia," murmured Lady Betty; "but you look so tired, so worn."

Antonia walked softly along the passage, and as she did so Betty Marchmont passed quickly out of her husband's room. She turned as if to go into her own apartments, and then she saw Antonia.

"I want some eau-de-Cologne," she said, hurriedly. "Edward seems to be fainter."

She spoke hurriedly, so hurriedly as to run her words into one another, and Antonia looked at her for an instant. Then without a word she pushed on and entered her uncle's room.

The first thing of which she was conscious was that the atmosphere was charged with a heavy odor—a sickly scent, something that Antonia had never experienced before.

Her brows contracted, and unconsciously her hands stole together. She advanced to the bed and looked down upon the man lying on the pillows.

There was very little difference in his attitude, and yet Antonia knew that a great change had taken place. He lay slumped among the pillows, his eyes were closed, his head a little fallen on his breast.

She bent over and whispered his name and as she did so that strong scent seemed to come more powerfully to her senses.

As she raised herself, while a cold, horrible feeling crept into her heart, Betty Marchmont stole into the room again.

She carried a large flask of eau-de-Cologne.

"This will revive him," she said; but as she advanced to the bed Antonia turned and gripped her by the wrist.

"Leave him!" she said, in a harsh, strained voice. "You have done enough!"

Lady Betty looked at her in a furtive sort of way. She wrenched her hand free.

"What do you mean?" she asked. "Why do you speak to me so strangely?"

For answer Antonia threw her hands up to her face, sank down into a chair, and bent forward, cowering, as it were, beneath some heavy blow; and Lady Betty stood and looked at her with venom in her eyes, and yet with fear.

Quickly she reviewed the position, and she saw herself at the mercy of Antonia, unless she took means to silence the girl.

"I think you must be out of your mind," she said, speaking distinctly. "All this trouble has turned your brain. Because your uncle is asleep—"

"My uncle is dead," said Antonia; "and you know it! You may be able to throw dust into the eyes of other people, but you cannot deceive me. I understand now all that must have been in your mind—that must be in your heart."

She moved to the bed, stooped and kissed the cold brow, then mechanically she turned and walked from the room. But Betty Marchmont did not intend to let her go like this; she followed her.

"You are very wicked to me, Antonia," she said, and her lips trembled. "I don't in the least understand what you mean. If Edward is dead, then he must have died in his sleep. I just sat beside him as you were sitting, and I watched him as you watched him, and then all at once it seemed to me that he was very quiet, and I bent over him and asked him to speak to me, and when he did not answer I thought I would try and revive him, but there was no eau-de-Cologne, so I went to fetch some that I had. Don't—don't you believe me?"

"No, I do not believe you! I know that you are not speaking the truth; but do not be afraid. What I say to you is said; for the rest I am silent. My uncle loved you," said Antonia, her voice trembling; "only an hour ago I saw that love in his eyes. You have trodden this treasure under foot for years, you have turned him into ridicule, you have spurned him and mocked him, and lately he has been a barrier; so—so you have set yourself free. To all the world the death will be a natural one; so let it be, but you will always know that there is one person who could set the world right. I am going away from this house now, and I hope I may never have cause to speak with you again."

Betty Marchmont watched the tall, girlish figure walk slowly down the stairs. Swiftly she made her plans.

Going into the sick room, she first opened all the windows wide, paused to let the air clear, then rang the bell; and as some one hastened to come to her she was found bending over the dead man, bathing his brows with eau-de-Cologne.

"Will you ask Miss Marchmont to come to me?" said Lady Betty in a kind of broken voice. "I fancy she must be in the drawing room. I—I am afraid Mr. Marchmont is worse."

(To be continued.)

Insanity is said to be akin to love—but a man in love doesn't care if he is crazy.

Boil six peach kernels in a quart of milk to be used for custard. It will improve the flavor.

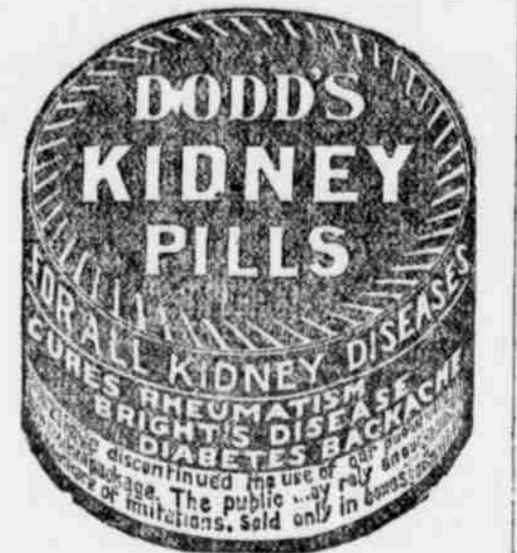
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