

THE FAITHLESS WIFE.

By CHAS. BESSERER.

"Hark!" exclaimed Andy, as the thrilling notes of the Catholic church bells called invitingly the denizens of Auburn and listless miners from surrounding gulches to midnight mass. "Hark!" he repeated earnestly. Then, as though satisfied that his sharp ears had not deceived him, he continued:

"Here, boys, this 'seven up' has to be stopped if you wish to hear the glorious 'Te Deum' and the holy gospel. This is the second bell, and there is no time to waste in paste-board."

"All right, boss!" was the unanimous reply; only hold your horses until we play this land, then we all go."

Andy B— was a man of sterling qualities; an industrious, hard-working miner, of a fine intellect and a noble heart, never indulging in the games of chance common among miners. He loved solitude, spent his leisure hours in company with his shepherd dog hunting, and devoted the long winter evenings to writing. He was far from happy, and seemed to be afflicted with some hidden woe and mystic sorrow. His strange and sometimes even eccentric ways, did not escape the notice of his companions; but, by a silent concession, they strenuously avoided all interrogation, out of respect for Andy's feelings, for he was extremely sensitive.

However, the game had terminated, and all arose simultaneously to accompany their now impatient "boss," as they called him.

"Hold on, boys!" nervously ejaculated Jack Daniels when all were ready to start; "Hold on; I forgot my pipe."

"You need no pipe," said Andy reprovingly; "come along, boys!"

"Why, said Jack, 'can't a fellow smoke in church while listening to the music?'"

But his partners made no further answer, and hurried on after Andy.

The fact is, Jack was an old trapper and miner. The mountains were his home, and his entire belief rested in something good to eat. He was fond of his stomach, and a perfect disciple of Voltaire. He retraced his steps back to the cabin, muttering to himself as he went: "Hang the church, I don't run with that shift! It's a good thing, no doubt, and Christmas eve, too; but it is so long since I was inside of a church, that I would hardly know how to conduct myself, and the chances are, they will take me up and have me bound over to keep the peace. No; I'll stay and prepare a rousing oyster stew and some hot stuff, and give the boys a 'lay out.'"

"Now, then," he again soliloquized, as all was ready and his pipe lit, "let them come; we'll follow up the night, for Christmas comes but once a year, and it's not every day we kill a pig or open half a dozen cans of McMorris's oysters at a lick." "A queer soul," he continued after a pause; "what can trouble Andy, I should like to know. There is something sad in that dark, dreary eye of his."

"Hello, Shep!" (addressing the dog,) "an alarm at the door!"

At that moment Andy stepped in alone and all in a rage, walked the cabin floor, and talked incoherently about "a villain" and "a perfidious wife."

Jack endeavored to calm him, and offered him, in his jolly, droll way, "a nip of the critter;" but Andy looked despondent, and refused to eat or drink. Now Jack, for the first time, ventured to ask questions, but Andy mildly evaded them. Reinforcement was requisite, and Jack quietly waited for his comrades, leaving Andy undisturbed in his musings of days gone by. The dog once more gave the alarm as the other partners returned cold and hungry.

"Why didn't you stay and see the thing out?" queried they. "Is this the way you coax us off to mass, and leave us in the lurch? Come, Andy, tell us why you left so abruptly?"

At first Andy looked wild, but he grad-

ually limbered up, and, after considerable persuasion, took a drink or two.

"That's the medicine," gleefully murmured Jack when he saw that his well-mixed decoctions had the desired effect; "that's the stuff to cheer the heart of Lazarus."

We proposed the health of Andy, and of course all hands joined and circled to the left. Andy was now no longer mute, but a sparkle of his penetrating eyes gave us due notice of a good and well-related adventure. Strictly speaking, I did not belong to the party, but I made their cabin my home during the winter, and of course was considered as one of the family.

"Now," said Andy, will each and every one of you promise never to slip, far less tell, of what I am about to confide to you?"

We willingly and firmly pledged ourselves, and made a semi-circle around the cozy fireplace, over which Jack presided with becoming dignity.

"Of course you all know Miller's ranch on Burnt river?" deliberately began Andy. "Well, it was I who first took up that stand in the spring of '62. Soon after, the Boise mines and the Bannock diggings were discovered, and I struck a little mint. It's true, it kept my wife and me busy day and night, but we made money, and that was quite an auxiliary. I never felt tired; acted landlord in one hour, hostler the next, and chief cook and dishwasher at intervals; but, as I said before, we did a 'land office business,' as the travelers called it, and we felt contented. Our nearest neighbor, Dr. Moushy, who resided on the Farewell Bend, took a lively interest in our welfare, and was a constant visitor at our wayside inn. He made himself very agreeable, and my wife never tired in eulogizing his every word and deed, and his smooth, gentlemanly deportment in particular; but I had no reason to differ with her, neither did I suspect anything wrong or criminal, until too late. Loving my wife as I did, I should have considered it a crime on my part to even suspect her."

"Well, as I said before, all went swimmingly till, one day, my wife fell sick, as though attacked by hysterics. I became alarmed, saddled my best horse and rode over in post haste to summon Dr. Moushy. He had sold out, and was just ready to leave the country. I told him my wife was very sick, and as I said that he smiled a suppressed, cynical smile which I shall never forget. I did not understand it then, but I have learned its origin since. 'I am in earnest, doctor,' I resumed; 'my wife will surely die unless relieved by speedy aid.'"

"What are the symptoms?" laconically inquired the doctor.

"Heaven only knows!" I answered, "but she is subject to some apoplectic disease, and she was in a fit when I left, and rather light in her head."

"He now assumed a serious air, peculiar to quacks, wrote a prescription, and ordered me to hasten to Boise City to have it filled without delay. At that time I was willing to do anything and sacrifice all to save the life of my wife. I dropped into the saddle and sped away, for the distance was great and delay dangerous. On the second evening, just as the Walla Walla stage drove up to the Overland Hotel, I arrived at my destination, having changed horses twice on the road. Here the driver, who knew me well, handed me a note from Dr. M., informing me that my wife was better, but that I should remain in Boise City and await orders, as in case of a relapse he would have to change the prescription and forward the same by express. Well, I felt better, and waited till patience oozed out to give place to gloomy forebodings. Was she dead? And had they buried her, so that I should never gaze on her again? Oh! it was awful to indulge in such conjectures even; how much more would I feel the pang of grief were they stern realities?"

"I arrived home late in the night. All

was still, stark and dreary. I hastened to the house, and called my wife by that, to me, familiar name—'Darling;' but no one answered. I called again and again, but with the same result. I was bewildered—even terrified—though in my own home. Finally I succeeded in procuring a light; then I called again; but even the echo died before it reached my ears. Comrades, I was on the burning ship, *Golden Gate*, and prayed for help to live; and I was once strychnined on the plains, and prayed again to God for help to die, for the anguish was terrible; but the intense suffering which I now suffered was indescribable. Domestic misfortune is indeed a hard master. But, to be brief, my wife had eloped with that villainous, self-styled doctor, robbed me of my little all, and left me penniless and broken-hearted."

"Andy, how did you arrive at such a conclusion?" I asked.

"How did I?" he continued. "A love letter, written by her to him, fell inadvertently into my hands, and disclosed to me all their vile duplicity and treachery. They were gone, and may the curse of a just God, from whose judgment there is no appeal, rest on and abide with them evermore. When love is transformed into hate, its bitterness is venomous."

"But why should you grieve over spilt milk?" would some of my neighbors say, after the news reached far and spread with a lightning rapidity; and some who could not even write their own name, nor knew how many beans it would take to make five, called me a fool for not "smelling a mouse" long ago. Others, again, who would not under ordinary circumstances kill a grasshopper, would now talk loud and furious, advising that I should follow the hound and perforate him with bullets till daylight shone through him. But my best friends counselled differently—advised me to keep cool, and deemed what I thought an affliction a blessing, "for, Andy," said they, "a dog that follows everybody is not worth having and too dear at any price. If she would rather be the concubine of a libertine than the respected wife of an humble though honest man, then thank God, from whom all blessings flow, that you are rid of her."

Here Andy paused, as though unwilling to proceed; but presently he continued in a changed, sad voice:

"The wound gnaws at my very heart-strings, while my bosom burns with eternal vengeance, and here I am, but a wreck of my former self and a hopeless monomaniac."

Here another pause ensued, and I ventured to remark soothingly:

"Andy, you certainly showed a premonition of something wrong. What caused your hasty departure from church to-night?"

"Listen!" he said, with the fire of intense excitement beaming from his eyes. "After we had entered and were fairly seated, who should I see before me but that carnivorous-looking, low-set villain—the author of my ruined home; but I will have vengeance, foul or fair."

"Hush, Andy!" I retorted; "vengeance is mine, saith the Lord!" Remember the inscription upon the British coin: 'Honi soit qui mal y pense!' But if your chequered journey through life was in print—"

"See here, Ben, write nothing concerning this—I know your propensity; but, if I should die and you survive, then sketch my case and do me justice."

Andy seemed to feel lighter-hearted now, since he knew we were no longer strangers to his domestic affairs. We sailed into that hot punch and oysters like hired hands, and a happier crew of jolly miners was not within the mining district of Auburn that night. Morpheus, however, claimed his own one by one till all was peace and rest.

The following morning, as the sun rose majestically over the Blue Mountains, a riderless horse was seen dashing through the gulch and over the rolling hills toward Powder river.

"Something new under the sun," remarked

Jack, and he was correct. A miner became dangerously sick during the night. A physician was summoned, who, according to all accounts, was thrown from his horse and got lost in the mountains, for he was a perfect stranger in the locality. It was no other than Dr. Moushy, Andy's "bosom friend," as we jestingly styled him. A rigorous search was at once instituted, in which, strange to say, Andy took a lively interest. He at once started out with his favorite shepherd dog and trusty rifle, and returned by the light of the moon. "Was it for good or evil?" I mused to myself, for Andy was a fearfully impulsive man, never forgave an injury, and never forgot an act of kindness; but the doctor was still missing. On the third night Andy returned very late, but I was still awake, and his strange behavior roused me to fall consciousness. He proceeded quietly, stirred up the fire, filled a canteen with hot coffee, helped himself to all the biscuits and cold ham and stored it under his ponderous overcoat. I watched him with my eyes half open, wondering whether he had actually gone crazy. What struck me most forcibly at his entrance was the absence of his pet, as well as his wild glances around the cabin. Apparently satisfied that he was unobserved, he cautiously approached my bed and whispered:

"Come along, Ben; make no noise and ask no questions."

Knowing his sacred solicitude for human life, I feared no danger, and forthwith complied with his strange request.

"Caught in a trap," he muttered when we were a respectful distance from the cabin; "have him just where I want him."

"Have whom?" I asked. "The doctor?"

"The same wretch. This evening returning home from my usual hunt, and as I was about six miles from here, my pup made a queer noise some distance ahead. At first I thought he burrowed a rabbit; but when he refused to obey my call, I neared the spot and noticed by the dirt thrown up that it was a deserted shaft. I peered into this gloomy depth, and a pair of black, withal eyes met my wondering gaze. You should have heard his supplications for mercy as he recognized me. It would fill a book. Adam like, he put all the blame on the woman, the castaway coward."

"But you are not going to hang the unfortunate man, and have me as a witness to the execution?" I exclaimed, as I noticed him carrying a strong rope under his arm.

"Far from it," calmly answered Andy; "I came to rescue, not to kill."

The moon gradually disappeared and left us in darkness. To proceed was dangerous, considering the season and wild locality, so we built a fire and waited for the break of day. As soon as possible we started on our way, and at last bore in sight of the vacant shaft, but what a spectacle greeted our vision! It seems that Andy, in order to find the place in the night with nourishment and succor, the helpless prisoner, tied the dog to a tree nearby. A ferocious cougar and hungry mountain wolf were now engaged in a terrible conflict over the little fellow's body, which laid lifeless on the ground. We rushed forward, unmindful of danger, for we were both unarmed; but the rapacious animals kept up the fearful struggle till suddenly, as if by magic, they disappeared. We still rushed on, Andy, the noble soul, taking the lead. As he arrived at the shaft I heard him sing out in a shrill voice, "Oh, my God!" I hurried on; but, lo! a sight greeted my eyes which will never fade from my memory. There, in the bottom of that shaft, the desperate brutes which fell in the strife made a common foe of the half famished doctor, and tore the flesh from his lacerated body. But let me throw a pall over the shocking scene, for an abhorrent description even would cause a savage to shudder and turn pale. Verily, the end of the transgressor is hard.

Ten years nearly have passed over the sad catastrophe, and now, alas! poor Andy, too has bowed to his Master's call. He returned from the Casiar mines, and on the fatal trip of the steamer *Parimet* met his fate, and sleeps beneath the silent waves till Jesus calls.

"What became of the erring woman?" did you say? Ask me not. But the cold and watery grave of the noble-hearted husband is a pillow of golden down compared to the living tomb of "THE FAITHLESS WIFE."

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