

## AFTER MANY YEARS.

BY VELMA CALDWELL MELVILLE.

HE reminded him of a tragedy queen as she stood before him, her face white as the robe she wore, save for the dark flashing eyes, the thread of scarlet that marked the tightly closed lips and a bright spot that burned on either cheek.

"I trust we will still be friends," he was saying, when, with a sudden gesture of scorn, she interrupted:

"Thank you, Mr. Clayton, I would not trust you even as an enemy."

"Blanche, what are you saying? Is this the way you treat me because I have been honest enough to acknowledge that I have been somewhat mistaken in my feelings toward you. I still love you dearly, but fear 'tis more the love of a brother for a favorite sister—"

"That will do, sir; you need not again rehearse that odious speech which you seem to have arranged with such care; and, as I am not in need of either friend or brother, will wish you good-day," and with a mocking bow she walked steadily from the room, leaving him as one suddenly bereft of the power of speech or movement.

His eyes wandered about the familiar apartment where he had spent so many happy hours with beautiful, fascinating Blanche Bird, finally resting on the ring he had mechanically taken from her outstretched hand. In that same room he had given it to her as the seal of their betrothal, less than six months before, on Christmas eve.

He brushed his hand across his forehead, feeling that he must be losing his senses, for here in his fingers was that same silent witness; but Blanche was lost to him forever. He tried to remember what he had said when he first came in, how he had broached the subject. He recollected that for days he had been planning to tell her as gently as possible that he had been mistaken, and that he feared he did not love her as he should to make her life happiness secure in his hands, and yet he knew and she knew that no such thought had ever occurred to him till he had fallen a victim to the wiles of coquettish Olive Older.

When he came in he felt sure that it was folly and madness for him to think of happiness with other than the latter; now he was leaving with the bitter consciousness that the only woman in the world whom he truly loved was as unattainable as the wealth of Golconda.

A dizzy, sickening sensation crept over him as he almost groped his way out into the busy street and on toward his office.

Hours passed and still there was no abatement of the fever tide of remorse that seemed flowing through brain and soul. Dinner hour came, but he had no de-

sire for food; supper he took at a restaurant, and late that night crept like a criminal into his room at the boarding house.

Well he knew that Ollie Older had watched for him all day, but she, of all others, he wished most to avoid. Suddenly the scales seemed to have fallen from his eyes, and he could see how she and an intriguing elder sister had led him on, knowing all the time that he was in honor bound to another. He saw, too, what a dupe and fool he had been. He wondered how he could have thought the girl even pretty beside queenly Blanche Bird; and as for mental endowments, the one was shallow and superficial, the other deep, original and smart; the one, at best, but a toy for man's amusement, the other a companion and helpmeet of whom the best might be proud.

He remembered now what a stimulus Blanche's brave and encouraging words had been to him when success in his profession seemed to mock him, and how cheerily she had promised to "bide his gude fortune." She had believed in him and his ability to succeed when he had lost faith in himself; now she spurned his friendship, and said she would not trust him as an enemy.

No wonder!

But he must do something, he must make one effort at least; he would write and tell her the whole truth; he would tell her he had been laboring under a delusive infatuation, but that it was all dispelled now, and his love for her a more absorbing passion than before; that such another hour of weakness could never again o'ertake him.

He at once executed his purpose, and at midnight lay down to rest with a faint ray of hope shining athwart the dark remorse and despair that had dogged his steps since morning.

Early the following day he dispatched the note, with orders to the messenger to await an answer, then nervously paced his office floor until the boy came leisurely in and handed him—what?

Were his eyes deceiving him?

No, there was no mistake; it was his own letter unopened.

"Whom did you see?" he asked, sharply.

"The young missis in the white gown; met her comin' out the gate as I went in. She asked if Mr. Clayton sent it, and I said ez he did. She jest held it a minute, lookin' whiter'n a snow bank, then said, 'take it back,' 'nd that's all I know, sir."

"That will do. Put Dick in the phaeton and have him around here in ten minutes."

The shock caused a sudden reaction, and a wild feeling of rage and revenge crowded out all other sensations for the time being. He forgot that he alone had been to blame, forgot the misery and mortification