An Episode of New Venice.

BY ALVIN H. SYDENHAM.

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Sitting in the Occident dining room one morning running my eye down the local columns, I came across the following item, under the caption of "Wharf and Wave:"

"The body of an unknown woman was found by some fishermen floating along the water front near the People's Cannery about six o'clock last evening. Close inquiry fails to establish any clew to identity, and there is no reason to believe that the woman is known in this city. After careful investigation the coroner's jury returned a verdict of, 'Death by drowning—suicide of person unknown.' Circumstances point to the fact that the body is that of one of those unfortunate creatures which infest the portion of the city called Swilltown; that the suicide was commited during a fit of despondency; and through lack of friends and acquaintances the disappearance failed to attract notice. The body appears to have lain in the water about three weeks."

Possibly true. She might have settled up her outstanding obligations and left her boarding place in a fit of anger, declaring that she would never enter the town again, cursing and swearing at her erstwhile companions, and started to take the Portland boat, leaving them utterly indifferent as to any event touching her future happiness. Such things happen every day, for these people are at home under any roof, and have no care in the world more serious than amassing money. If at such a time they should jump into the river and drown, who would be wiser? And if the body lay in the stream until all of those companions also left by the Portland boat at the end of the "flush" season, who on earth would there be to attach a name or fix a responsibility, or asign any other burial place than the pauper's lot? What can a poor coroner's jury determine with no brighter lights than circumstances?

Nevertheless, it appears that in the city of Yokahama, in Japan, died one John Martin, overseer, leaving a daughter, Ruth Martin, seventeen years of age, without a living relative in the world except her father's brother, Maurice Martin, living in Astoria, a town of Oregon, in America. To this latter, being guardian by nature, it was the plain duty of the administrators to send the child, and they determined to devote the sale of John Martin's effects to the accomplishment of this purpose. A letter borne on her person and addressed to "Maurice Martin, Astoria, Oregon, U. S. A." would answer as pathfinder and serve to deliver her into the proper hands at her journey's end. There was no time for correspondence. Men of business cannot be bothered with orphans. Affairs must move, and we all have our own families to look after.

Many years before, John Martin had gone to Yokahama in the employ of a wealthy London firm, and ever since, as foreman, had held as favored a position as men of little education usually attain. Her mother having died in childbirth, his little Ruth was all that was left to him, and his sole care consisted in keeping her pure in heart and unspotted from the world. He found his salary ample for their support, but like many other men, being made financially near-sighted by the certain periodical appearance of a bank draft of known value, he had failed to provide for the unlikely which is sure to happen, and therefore one day found himself pillowed up in bed under the blighting influence of Japan fever, watched over by his daughter, and looking with increasing sorrow, upon a rapidly decreasing store of guineas, wasting away under the heavy expenses of illness. Like all great and good corporations the firm had stopped his pay; kindly filling his place with a substitute on lower salary, and holding it expectant of his recovery. Good men being useful to corporations, are welcome; but to draw pay they must be present during work hours.

Knowing of the frailties of his fellow men he had shielded his daughter from the reproach of strangers with the most studied care. She had learned little of worldly dangers and nothing of social evils, so at the age of seventeen she was more of a child than many at seven. He had selected her books and taught her to read them himself. Thus their evenings were spent. The handful of English people in the colony found enough amusement among themselves to keep them from prying into their neighbors, affairs, so their seclusion was not molested. There was little to attract one toward the natives. Thus had she grown to almost womanhood, looking upon the world at if it were little short of Paradise.

A gold band ring, her mother's wedding memorial, was all her jewelry. This her father wished her to keep. "Forever," he said, "and be as pure as the gold from which it is made."

But men die and ther hopes die with them. If the hand which waters the rose in the desert be stricken, the rose will wither away.

Thus, when the father died, Ruth sailed in the "Star and Crescent" for Astoria with a letter to Maurice Martin, two guineas, twelve-pence, and a heavy heart.

At the restaurant, or sailor's boarding house to which the captain conducted her on reaching port, they knew Maurice Martin. He was captain of a fishing boat—a plunger—and his business was to buy fish from the trappers and gill-netters in the mouth of the Columbia river. He met his niece with proper affection, embraced her and said he was glad to see her; then took her to live at the house of a friend, "where she would not see so many of the boys with a jag on." But business kept him away daytimes. He was a man of limited means, and being open-handed, he found another mouth to feed more of a burden than he cared to assume. The girl would have to do something. Therefore she went out and tried service; but her fragile frame, littled used to severe labor, broke quickly under the strain of rising at four and slaving for hungry fishermen until after dark.

Gloomy labor, gloomier still in a land where the floods never cease to descend and where the sun never shines during the long months of winter. There was a week of illness followed by two or three of idleness. The additional burden of board bills and doctor's bills came upon Maurice Martin, for the two guineas and twelve-pence had faded away very soon after reaching American soil.

One morning he led her along the planked streets through the rain to a great red painted building of iron that stood near the water front. That was the morning which punctuated the great change in her life, although to outward eyes it appeared very much as other mornings in New Venice. The rush of the tide through the pilings underfoot was audible above the clatter of the rain; the tugs were darting among the ships on the water front; mosquito fleets of fishing boats were starting out for their day's haul on the river convoying cannery plungers; and one great ocean steamer had cast loose and was heading for the mouth of the river. As they entered the building the rumble and crash of machinery drowned their voices. There was perplexing odor of steam, and dripping oil, and villainous ventilation. It was the great can factory where all the cans for the salmon canneries along the Columbia are made, a hundred thousand a day.

The superintendent was in his office. Was a girl needed? Yes, if she was willing to work thirteen hours a day for three dollars and a half a week. The work was light but confining. It required care and strict attention. Among so much rapidly moving machinery accidents were apt to follow carelessness. Someone's fingers were cut on the sharp edges of the tin plate every day, more or less severely; occurrences scarcely to be avoided among a hundred operators. Yes, fingers had been lost in the shears and rolls, hands had been burned in the melted solder bath, arms had been crushed in the presses. But all factory business is liable to accidents, and they are easily avoided by care.

She would have to begin at three dollars and a half a week—she would spoil considerable tin at first and that had to be considered in assigning beginner's wages. After a few months, when she had acquired skill in handling the plates, she would receive more.

Not the best of terms, but better than none—at least for Maurice Martin, whose sense of duty would not permit him openly to desert his niece. It was well to have her self-supporting at any price.

The next morning she went to work in this place, with a heart heavier than ever, and almost no hope. Nevertheless friends were not to be won by tearful glances. Smiles were better than a clouded face. Sorrow avails little to an orphan in a strange land. Ruth's atom of common sense made her struggle inwardly to look happy in spit of her dark thoughts. In a short time she became accustomed to the noise of the machines, the endless procession of shining cans, end-on, side-on, rolling, gliding, fed by endless belts, revolving plates, knotted ropes, and slotted chains. As the novelty wore away she looked around and tried to understand her situation.

She began with watching the cans as they came from the shaper. If any were bent she had to pick them out and throw them to one side. All day long the endless procession filed by her, gliding through the trough on an endles chain. Little enough chance in this for observation. It was weeks before she realized that a hundred beside herself were dragging out a painful existence in all that clangor and din. The evening brought nothing but aching head and heavy eyes and stiff limbs. Time and increasing skill brought promotion.

But Ruth was cursed with a pretty face and an exquisitely moulded figure—cursed, because such gifts of nature are a curse to a factory girl. Many of whom she was unaware turned toward her every day with admiring regard, and many feet lingered near her, hoping that some chance would give them leave to speak. Only the foreman, however, had duties which brought him into conservation with her; and he wrought his soul into the privelege. He taught her little tricks that saved the eyes, brought comfortable chairs, and when better positions were vacated, promoted her to them. Aside from a few words occasionally during work hours she gave him no opportunity to speak. Arriving promptly on the hour for starting the machinery, never remaining an instant after it stopped, few had heard the sound of her voice. So Tim, little favored as he was, enjoyed higher privleges than any of the others.

After the weeks had broadened into months she found herself at the pattern shears, starting the metal plates on the journey which ending in finished cans. The work was known as skilled labor, and the regular operator was paid two dollars a day, but Ruth only received one. Still she was glad, for at this post she needed to work only with her hands; her eyes were free to wander about, watch the visitors, and form mental impressions of her fellow slaves. The rolling cans and rattling machinery had ceased to annoy her; she minded them now no more than a watchmaker minds the ticking of his clocks.

Among the visitors whom she noticed frequently passing through the factory, was an erect young man in a dark suit, with keen black eyes, and black hair. Several times he had endeavored to catch her eye, and since she assumed charge of the pattern shears he seemed to take an unusual interest in the working of that machine. He examined its movement closely, and several times ventured to ask questions of Ruth, which she answered in monosyllables. The foreman told her the young man's name was Simpson, and that he was buying cans for an up-river cannery. At any rate Ruth thought him handsome—the handsomest man she had ever seen. Perhaps no one else would have dreamed that such was the case, but there is no accounting for the tastes of women. Though at first she resented his encroachments upon her reserve with emphasis, he seemed so kind and polite and careful not to give offense, that finally one day after the machinery had stopped for the noon half hour, she told him all about her work, and a little about herself; also her name.

For some days thereafter Ruth did not see him, and, as most girls would under the same circumstances, she missed him. The day he returned a full force was working, and the plate had to be fed swiftly and incessantly. She watched him coming up the stairs talking to the foreman. She wore that day a full sleeved waist, her tidiest silk one; possibly because she hoped she might see him, and to feed plates at high speed with flowing sleeves with one's eyes and mind entirely absent from one's body constitutes that carelessness of which we have been warned. Ruth did not know that she was careless—no one ever does at the time, but the full sleeve of the waist caught under the feed roll, drew her arm against the guides, and in a twinkling had cut an artery.

No one noticed the accident more quickly than Mr. Simpson. He heard her scream and saw her fall to the floor fainting. Before the others looked up he was kneeling beside her, binding a handkerchief around her arm above the wound. They watched him bear her in his arms to the superintendent's office and lay her gently down upon the sofa.

A carriage was summoned and a physician; but the carriage arrived first. Mr. Simpson left the name of a hotel and lifted her into the carriage, still fainting, explaining that he was a personal friend of the girl's uncle, and would care for her until he arrived. A factory girl's family connections and acquaintances not being a matter of unusual importance, the explanation was satisfactory.

When Ruth's eyes opened on the papered walls of a hotel parlor, she was weak and bewildered but the flow of blood was stopped and the wound dressed. She had fainted no doubt from horror at seeing her arm drawn rapidly toward the roller, from which only the most miraculous tearing of the silken sleeve had prevented its being withdrawn useless and mangled. The loss of blood from the cut had prevented the return of consciousness for more than an hour.

The physician having performed his task, withdrew, and she was left alone with the only man who had ever in any way attracted her. She felt some strange magnetism in his presence.

"Ruth," he was saying to her, "I have loved you from the minute I first saw you in the factory, and have waited weeks hoping that by some chance you would notice me. Today, by this accident, you have fallen into my hands just as if you had always been intended for me. You have no one to care for you now, but if you would consent to be married in an hour, it would become the right of one who cares most for you of any one in the world. Your uncle is away on the river—may not be back for a week—and you are in need of money and care. You have no one to go to but me. Listen! Let me bring a clergyman."

But she would not listen. She loved him, she knew it; at least she knew she would do anything, give anything, for him that was right. But her uncle ought to know all about it first. An innate sense of propriety forbade her encouraging this relation without first consulting him.

She told him to wait. It was too sudden; she must have time to think. If not him, then she loved no one—he must not think her unkind—but now he must take her to the boarding house—all the home she had.

Mr. Simpson's dark brows clouded perceptibly, but there was no other sign of displeasure. His art forbade impolitic remarks. Lifting her from the sofa he pressed her in his arms and kissed her—at least she must grant that little privilege. She feigned displeasure, and answered sharply that gentlemen never took advantage of women who were alone and unprotected. For which he doubly endeared himself by skillfully worded apology.

After a few days of rest she returned to work. Tim, the foreman, took advantage of the first nooning to warn her against that "black-haired villain." "He means no good by ye, Miss Martin," he said. But Ruth put this remark down as jealuosy, and cautioned Tim to go about his business. She felt able to take care of her own.

That evening, after hours, she found Mr. Simpson waiting at the door to walk home with her. It had occurred to him that for a young girl to walk alone in that city was injudicious, unsafe. He felt that she ought to be protected, and as no one else seemed to do it, he hoped she would permit him. At the gate he kissed her, and this time she did not resist.

Word reached her a few days later from her uncle that he would soon be in the city to buy supplies for a trip to Shoalwater Bay, fish were cheap and plenty there, and the trip would pay in a business way. He might be gone several weeks—perhaps until after the fishing season.

This message reached Mr. Simpson quite as soon as it did Ruth.

That evening as he walked home with her he said she must now consent to become his wife. Her uncle was going away and she would be left all alone. He could not bear to think of it. He would obtain the uncle's consent, and the following day they would be married.

Just how it came about she never remembered, but someway she answered, "Yes;" and then, instead of going straight home, she accompanied him to a restaurant and a supper. He was entertaining and ardent and explained to her many things she never knew before. But all was quiet, and she was not known, and she did not seek entrance at the boarding house at a very unseasonable hour, therefore no one else was wiser for what happened.

Of all consents in the world the uncle's was the easiest to obtain. He was glad to be eased of the increased weight of responsibilty. In reply to his inquiries concerning Mr. Simpson he was told that the young man was about to start a new cannery near Saint Helen's. And as all the information was furnished by acquaintances of Mr. Simpson, it was undoubtedly accurate. A most promising match! His fish would bring a better figure and a son-in-law in the business. Some day he might work into the cannery himself, and sell out the mosquito fleet.

Therefore when Ruth had packed her slender belongings and taken leave of her former place, he accompanied the twain to the office of the notary, gave them his blessing and twenty dollars, and afterward departed for Shoalwater Bay.

Then Ruth took up her abode in furnished apartments as Mrs. Simpson. The new landlady was a trifle coarse and entertained considerable noisy company; but they went out for meals, and the room looked out over the river, so she did not mind. Her husband was very busy during the day and often at night. "buying supplies and hiring hands," and during his absence she occupied her hands making dresses preparatory to starting up the river for the "new cannery," and her mind thinking of him. Though she saw little of him, when he was near her he was always attentive and considerate, and every day she fell more deeply in love with him.

Thus the days passed until almost the end of the fishing season. The hour arrived for departure, the boxes had gone, and it was nearly time for the boat to start. Darkness had fallen when they took leave of their lodgings "for the Portland night liner."

Down one street, up another, they hurried on,—none of them familiar to Ruth, for none lay along her daily path when she worked in the can factory, and that was the only portion of the city with which she was familiar. They approached the water front and the boat landings. Suddenly her husband stopped in front of a house in a side street where lights were burning brightly. Lace curtains backed by red shades gave forth a lurid illumination.

"Come, my dear," he said. "I must see a friend on business a moment before we start." He rang the bell, and a colored servant appeared. She cautioned him not to delay too long.

The servant led the way to a rear apartment gaudily furnished, and withdrew. An oily individual with sleekly brushed hair and waxed mustache came forward to meet them.

"My dear, this is my friend, Mr. Stein; I hope you will like each other. And by the way—I might as well explain a little, since we have been married so long. I am tired of keeping you—you can start in now and keep me a while. This is as near Portland as you'll get this year, and I think you'll find Mr. Stein as good a second mate to a husband as any man on the water front. Oh, there's no use getting shocked! You're caught—you are fooled! You might as well waltz right up to your medicine without any kicking, and be pleasant about it. You're not the first one that's married to me, and they all had to come to this sooner or later. You've been with me long enough! Now try Mr. Stein?"

So saying, Mr. Simpson, tin horn gambler, general confidence and shanghai man, owner of wigs, masks, and make-ups, and puller-in for sailors' boarding houses, backed out of the door—and out of this history.

Ruth had fallen back into a chair too stunned, too perfectly dumfounded, to utter a word. She stared wildly about in senseless bewilderment, helpless, like one in a night-mare. The blow had fallen so suddenly, and with such terrible force that there was no rallying. Every rock, every vestage of anchorage of her belief had been shattered and scattered by this volcano eruption of awful revelation.

But there was danger in sitting resistless. Already the oily creature had approached her and was making unnameable requests. She rose and rushed to the door. It was locked. She screamed and called for help. There was no answer, nor would there ever be any. The man commanded her to stop. He had heard such screams before; they were useless.

It happens that the city, for a depth of two or three streets near the water front, is built on pilings. Under the buildings the tide ebbs and flows at full depth, and many are built beyond the low-water line. Some buildings, the cheaper ones, where trade of a respectable sort is not carried on, are frequently not planked around at all, or at least only where communication is needed. The place is a true Venice, dirty, infantile, with the canals planked over.

There was a window in the room, and Ruth rushed toward it. Her captor folded his arms, and placed his back against the door, smiling. He thought she would yield now, certainly. She raised the sash and looked out—upon court yard with a salt water pavement, with moon-beams reflecting restlessly. It was like the court yard of the can factory. The sea was washing among the pilings—she could hear the murmur of the current.

"Will you let me go" she screamed, looking backward over her shoulder.

"Never," coolly answered the salamander.

There was a swish of clothing through the open window, a heavy splash, a struggle, a choking cough below—and Mr. Stein suddenly became aware that he was solo witness in a case of sudden death that would not bear investigation. From that moment important business in unknown parts demanded his personal attention.

The connection between this passing episode and the clipping from the morning journal were established later by Tim, the foreman, and Maurice Martin, when on his return from Shoalwater Bay he was informed how the bursting of the up-river cannery bubble. But as catching comes before hanging there has never been any hanging. Two months and no direct evidence is a broad road for any knave to travel, and many there be that walk in it. From all of which it may appear that unprotected innocence is a diamond that goes not long uncut; and being cut is sometimes rendered commercially valueless in the cutting.—Published by permission.