



## CHAPTER X.

DEAD OR ALIVE?

Ghostly fell the snow!  
Like a curtain, a shroud, it had closed  
about the devoted form of Edna Deane  
that wild, tempestuous night, when the  
poor child of destiny had sunk ex-  
hausted and despairing at the very  
threshold of safety.

The siren-hearted Beatrice Mercer  
had spied to sunshy luxury and gold,  
with no thought of the cost of the  
girl whose name she had assumed,  
whose loyal lover she had determined to  
win.

More merciful than she, the soft snow  
had drifted gently over the inanimate  
wanderer, striving to shut out from the  
rigor of storm and tempest the frail  
form that had succumbed to the chill of  
winter like a tender lily.

Upon that same eventful night another  
figure braved the storm, and, breathing  
its fierceness, took his way along the  
same road, down which Edna Deane's  
dumb guide had so nearly led her to  
shelter.

"A night to get housed, I pity the  
homeless or belated!" breathed heavily,  
puffing John Blake, as he struggled  
through the deep drifts. "Ah! nearly  
here! The dear old dear wife wait-  
ing to welcome me with a warm sup-  
per, I'll warrant."

Farmer John neared the unpreten-  
tious cottage that resembled a Lapland-  
er's hut, with its eaves hung deep with  
snow festoons. A doleful neigh from  
the wagon-shed aroused his human  
heart, however, to turn from his path.  
He found there the exhausted animal  
that had led Edna hither, bestowed the  
wandering brute in its stall, and started  
again for the house.

"Ho, there, my dear!" sang out the  
bluff, great-hearted old fellow, as he  
made up a huge snowball and sent it six  
feet away dashing against the door of  
the cottage.

He entered. An eager, motherly face  
showed in the lamplight.

"Dear, dear! Is it you, John? I've  
been so worried. Always a boy, throw-  
ing snowballs and singing out like a  
patriot. Will you never mend?"

"Never while this jolly snow reminds  
me of our schoolday sleighrides, and  
your pretty, blooming face, you dear old  
girl!" retorted happy John. "Come,  
throw me a broom to beat path, so I  
won't be dragging the snow all over that  
rag carpet you think more of than you  
do of me."

"Did you ever!"

"Been lonesome?" sang out John, in-  
dustriously sweeping a path to the door.

"Terrible! Did you just come, John?"

"Did you come? You waverer I haven't  
been prosing around for fun, with  
snow chuck two feet down my neck, and  
that nice warm supper on the table!"

"Because I thought I heard some one  
cry out a bit ago."

"Pigeons, maybe."

"No. It was a human cry for help."

"Pshaw! Fancies. The wind toots  
like an engine-whistle to-night—laway  
me!"

Farmer John uttered a sharp cry,  
stumbled, recoiled. The broom fell  
from his hand, and there he stood star-  
ing blankly down at the ground at his  
feet.

"What now, John?" ejaculated his  
wife, peering, too.

"Something in th path. Bag of oats  
—a sheep—no! Jane, look!"

He had leaned over to examine the  
object at his feet.

His great, soulful eyes glowed like  
two stars.

He saw that he had dragged a human  
hand limp and nerveless.

A soggy dress-sleeve followed and  
then a terrible cry rang from his wife's  
lips.

Out into the snow she dashed. Down  
beside the inanimate form, disengaged  
from its snowy mound, she knelt.  
"John! John!" she wailed, peering in-  
to the white, cold face of the insensible  
Edna Deane—"it's a woman—  
young girl. Oh, John! look at the bonny face,"  
and the quick tears rained down in wild,  
motherly pity. "Oh, John! dead or alive?"

## CHAPTER XI.

PLOTTERS IN COUNCIL

The false Alice Ralston, the real  
Beatrice Mercer, sat straight to Hop-  
dale after leaving the house where she  
had found a father and fortune.

She took no risks in her movements.  
Ralston did not know of her destination,  
had not known that she was at the  
Hopdale Institution through the years  
Rodney, the man who had died at the  
bridge, his friend, his advisor, had the  
sole charge of placing the real Edna at  
the seminary, for, as Beatrice knew,  
when father and daughter had parted  
years before the former was a fugitive  
from justice.

She had told the anxious Ralston that  
she would return speedily. She had  
secured a large sum of money. She  
made sure that no one followed her to  
the train. To break possible trail  
she changed her name at a large city nearby  
to Hopdale and made several mysterious  
purchases at a costumer's and at a hair  
dresser's shop.

When the next morning Beatrice  
Mercer alighted from a sleeper on the  
train at the nearest railroad town to  
Hopdale, and took a carriage to her  
home, her best friend would not have  
recognized her.

For she was completely disguised.  
She had come to act a part, and she had  
come fully prepared. In dress and face  
she had effected a marvelous change,  
and when she reached the Hopdale  
hotel, and ordered a suite of rooms, no  
one formerly familiar with the trim,  
smart, and rather attractive figure of  
the half-pay school teacher of Hopdale  
Seminary, about the village, would for  
a moment have suspected the true iden-  
tity of this new Beatrice Mercer.

She had come hither with an object,  
a definite object. She had come to seek  
a trace of the man she had loved, Ray-  
mond Marshall. She had resolved to  
win his love. Ruthlessly she had striven  
to destroy his faith in Edna Deane, as  
ruthlessly she had covered the trail of  
the young girl, when she disappeared,  
she had robbed her trusting friend of  
name, father and fortune, and now she  
would steal her loyal, broken-hearted  
lover from her. This was her plot, and  
her spirit never quailed at the upbraiding  
of an outraged, hardened con-  
science.

"He shall be mine! Wealth is nothing  
without him." She had told herself,  
and forthwith set herself at work to  
consummate her designs. She had  
money—that could buy information, co-  
operation. She had an ally in reserve,  
and after remaining in her room to rest

"I would violate my duty to my ch-  
eants if I deferred it a day longer."

"Then—  
To-morrow I go into court and submit  
these documents. They represent a  
personal indebtedness of \$8,000. They  
represent your indenture for \$2,000  
more. The distressing feature of the  
latter amount is that the alleged maker  
of the note denies its validity. In other  
words, it is a forgery."

A groan rang from the lips of the un-  
happy man.

"You are right," he murmured in a  
hollow, broken tone of deep despair.  
"My personal indebtedness does not worth-  
while. I should never have been called  
upon to bear it, for I never personally  
contracted a dollar of it. However, pen-  
ury, destitution myself and family might  
honorably endure, but dishonor, never!  
If that two-thousand-dollar claim is  
presented in court—"

"You will be accused of forgery."

"Which I never committed!" cried the  
Colonel. "You believe me?"

"I certainly do, but will a jury? Those  
documents go in as evidence on their  
face, showing you are responsible for  
them."

"But I have explained to you! That  
sounder of a partner of mine drew out  
of the firm a few months since on the  
pretext of ill-health. He took nearly  
all the ready cash, and not until after  
he had got safe in a foreign land did I  
learn that the alleged valuable assets he  
had left as my share of the business  
were only waste paper. Worse than  
the burden of debt, he left those forged  
notes. I hypothesized them! Now I  
am accused of uttering them!"

"Can you not take them up?" insin-  
uated the lawyer.

"Impossible! I have vainly tried to  
borrow. My son, a dependence usually,  
has lost all interest in business and  
wanders about half-crazed over the dis-  
astrousness of his business jilt. No, ruin  
stares me in the face—worse, the pris-  
on-door, dishonor, death!"

"Beatrice Mercer!" he ejaculated in  
genuine surprise.

"Your cousin. Yes, I need aid. I  
do not know a person in the village I  
can trust but you. First, I desire com-  
plete secrecy. Next, certain informa-  
tion you can glean for me. Perhaps a  
week's attention off and on will do. For  
all this I will pay you \$500."

"You—will—pay—me!" gasped the per-  
plexed doctor, wondering if the friendless  
girl had known as a dependent at the  
seminary had taken leave of her senses.

"Five hundred dollars. Are not my  
words plain enough?"

"Where would you get that sum of  
money?"

His incredulity nettled Beatrice.

"Out of my pocket-book! Five one-  
hundred-dollar bills. Count them. Take  
them; they won't burn you. I pay you  
in advance."

She had extended the amount in question.  
Its unexpected possession, the munificence of the reward, fairly  
stunned the Doctor.

"I can't understand how you come to  
have so much money," he began.

"Don't try to," interrupted Beatrice,  
impatiently. "Briefly, I have come into  
possession of several thousand dollars.  
I choose to spend the money as I like.  
I offer you \$500 to help me. Do you  
agree?"

"Yes, indeed!"

"First, my identity and plans are to  
be a dead secret between us, now and  
hereafter."

"Trust me for that."

"But, you are to obey me implicitly."

"With such pay for my services, I am  
your slave!"

"Very good. First and foremost, I  
wish you to go now, and at once, and  
learn all you can about the whereabouts  
of Raymond and Marshall."

"Eh!" ejaculated the Doctor, with a  
start. "I don't think he is in the vil-  
lage."

"Then ascertain where he is."

"I'll try."

"Next, find out about the whispered  
financial complications in the affairs of  
his father, Col. Marshall."

"That is more easy."

"And report progress to me as soon as  
you can."

"There shall be no delay."

Dr. Simms departed. Beatrice looked  
excited, suspenseful.

"The ball set in motion—oh! with a  
tangled, ally and unlimited wealth, a  
tall, in the scheme I have added."

She counted the hours until late in  
the afternoon. Her face underwent  
vivid changes of color and expression  
as there was a knock at the door finally.  
"Come in!"

It was her ally, Dr. Simms. He  
looked tired and excited.

"Well!" she demanded imperiously.

"I've had an afternoon of it."

"You have found Raymond Mar-  
shall?"

"He returned home this morning."

"From where?"

"From a fruitless, heartbroken quest  
for that girl he was spoony on at the  
seminary—the one who disappeared so  
mysterious."

"Edna Deane, you mean?"

"Yes; that's the name. He's been  
searching for her everywhere, neglecting  
business, growing so thin and pale  
that they say he is fast breaking down."

"And his father?"

"Added trouble there! Dark rumors  
say that his business integrity is at  
stake, that a financial crash threatens.  
I made circum-spect but close inquiries.  
He is at the office of the lawyer now,  
striving to adjust affairs. You see—"

"You need not tell me more," inter-  
rupted Beatrice, impatiently.

"I know more than you do, probably, about that.  
At the lawyer's office?" she continued,  
arising and putting on her wraps. "Re-  
port to me here about eight o'clock this  
evening."

"You are not going?"

"To the lawyer's office myself."

She left the hotel alone. In ten min-  
utes she entered the outer office of the  
lawyer her informant had referred to.  
She sank to a chair near to the half-  
open door of the compartment marked  
"Private," adjoining. Then she bent  
her ear and listened eagerly.

Voices sounded quite clearly. Her  
eyes glowed with satisfaction as she  
realized that accident had enabled her  
to enter the office and linger unper-  
ceived. Her heart beat quicker as she  
recognized the broken, pleading tones  
of Col. Marshall, Raymond's father,  
and the man he had loved.

"Ten thousand dollars! Impossible!  
I tell you that unless I have time, un-  
less those documents are suppressed or  
destroyed, I am ruined now."

"Just in time! I shall win. Every-  
thing favors me!" fell in a batailful,  
triumphant murmur from the lips of the  
confident Beatrice Mercer.

CHAPTER XII.

SAVED.

Beatrice Mercer drew nearer to the  
half-open door, as those ominous words  
sound forth:

"Unless those documents are sup-  
pressed or destroyed, I am a ruined man!"

A strong man spoke them, but the  
voice, while mournful, bore a token of  
planning, despising agony.

The man knew that the speaker  
was the father of Raymond Marshall.  
What she already knew of his business  
complications had brought her to Her-  
cule. It was through the father that  
she relied upon reaching the son.

There was the rustling of papers, and  
then the lawyer's voice reached her ears:

"I am very sorry, Colonel Marshall,  
but I have my orders to act."

"You can defer action."



could possibly lay beyond that pinnacle of earthly grandeur and success?

"Excuse me for to-night," pleaded  
Penrith. "I am tired of it all. Oh,  
if out of it all I could extract one  
grain of comfort, one genuine emotion  
of enjoyment—something akin to the  
old boyish zest—something tangible!"

Something tangible! He dwelt on  
the words at the stately dinner table.  
They lingered with him as he tried  
to settle down to a quiet smoke in the  
library. There arose in his mind a  
picture of the past. It was poverty,  
obscurity then; but a thought of the  
bare-footed rambles through the  
woods, of the real coziness of the lit-  
tle attic-room back at the old home-  
stead, of ambitions tinged with ideal  
sentiment and glowing hopes, glorified  
the years now dead.

He glanced from the window at  
the dying cold. Mournful, inexpress-  
ibly cold, repellent, unlovely, seemed  
the wilderness of stately mansions and  
stiff, precise equipages on the street without.  
How different the dear old village where he was born!

The narrow streets, its quaint homes,  
its heart-warming people floated  
across his vision now, and seemed  
part of another world.

It was not so very far away. That  
little country town nestled among  
the hills was only an hour's ride from  
the great metropolis. Was he getting  
sentimental? What was this strange  
impulse that lured him to steal  
thither like a thief ashamed, and try  
to warm the frozen currents of his  
dreary life at the ashes of a dead past?

Ah! the dear old town. How  
natural it looked! The old red  
school-house, the rickety depot, the  
broad common—once again, for the  
first time in ten years, Richard Penrith  
trud his native soil that night.

He wandered about the place like  
an uneasy ghost haunting the scenes  
of former experiences. He felt a  
keen pang of actual envy as he peered  
through the frost-crested windows of  
the homely village store, and saw its  
proprietor, happy, serene, all one  
glow of perfect delight over the  
gathering in of an extra few dollars  
for holiday business