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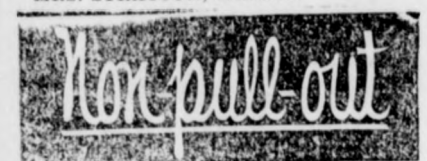
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LOVE OR MONEY;

OR,

A PERILOUS SECRET.

BY CHARLES READE.

Author of "Put Yourself in His Place," etc., etc., etc.

When he had packed off Burnley, he got back into his hiding-place, and only just in time, for Hope came back again upon the wings of love, and Grace, whose elastic nature had revived, saw him coming, and came out to meet him. Hope scolded her gently; why had she got off the sofa when repose was so necessary for her?

"You are mistaken, dear father," said she. "I am wonderfully strong and healthy; I never faint away in my life, and my mind will not let me rest at present—I have been longing so for my father."

"Ah, precious word!" murmured Hope. "Keep saying that word to me, darling. Oh, the years that I have pined for it!"

"Dear father, we will make up for all those years. Oh, papa, let us not part again, never, never, not even for a day."

"My child, we never will. What am I saying? I shall have to give you back to one who has a stronger claim than I—to your husband."

"My husband?" said Mary, turning pale.

"Yes," said Hope: "for you know you have a husband. Oh, I heard a few words there before I interfered; but it is not to me you'll say 'I don't know.'"

That was good enough for Bartley and a lot of strangers. Come, Grace, dear, take my arm: have no concealments from me. Trust to a father's infinite love, even if you have been imprudent or betrayed; but that's a thing I shall never believe except from your lips. Take a turn with me, my child, since you cannot lie down and rest a little air, and gentle movement on your father's arm, and close to your father's heart, will be the next best thing for you. Then they walked to and fro like lovers.

"Why, Grace, my child," said he, "of course I understand it all. No doubt you promised to keep your marriage secret, or had some powerful reason for withholding it from strangers; and, indeed, why should you reveal such a secret to insolence or to mere curiosity. But you will tell the truth to me, your father and your best friend; you will tell me you are a wife."

"Father," said Mary, trembling, and her eyes roved as if she was looking out for the means of flight.

Hope saw this look, and it made him sick at heart, for he had lived too long, and observed too keenly, not to know that innocence and purity are dangers, and are more often protected by the safeguards of society than by themselves.

"Oh, my child," said he, "anything is better than this suspense; why do you not answer me? Why do you torture me? Are you Walter Clifford's wife?"

Mary began to pant and sob. "Oh, papa, have patience with me. You do not know the danger. Wait till he comes back. I dare not; I cannot."

"Then, by Heaven, he shall!"

He dropped her arm, and his countenance became terrible. She clung to him directly.

"No, no; wait till I have seen him. He will be back this very evening. Do not judge hastily; and oh, papa, as you love your child, do not act rashly."

"I shall act firmly," was Hope's firm reply. "You have come from a sham father to a real one, and you will be protected as well as loved. This lover has forbidden you to confide in your father (he did not know that I was your father, but that makes no difference); it looks very ugly, and if he has wronged you he shall do you justice, or I will have his life."

"Oh, papa," screamed Mary, "his life? Why, mine is bound up with it."

"I fear so," said Hope. "But what's our life to us without our honor, especially to a woman? He is the true Cain that destroys a pure virgin."

Then he put both his hands on her shoulder, and said, "Look at me, Grace. She looked at him full with eyes as brave as a lion's and as gentle as a gazelle's."

In a moment his senses enlightened him beyond the power of circumstances to deceive. "It's a lie," said he; "men are always lying and circumstances deceiving; there is no blush of shame upon these cheeks, no sin nor frailty in these pure eyes. You are his wife."

"I am!" cried Grace, unable to resist any longer.

"Thank God!" cried Hope, and father and daughter were locked that moment in a tender embrace.

"Yes, papa, you shall know all, and then I shall have to fall on my knees and ask you not to punish me. I love—er—a fault committed years ago. You will have pity on us both. Walter and I were married at the altar, and I am his wife in the eyes of Heaven. But, oh, papa, I fear I am not his lawful wife."

"Not his lawful wife, child! Why, what nonsense!"

"I would to Heaven it was; but this morning I learned for the first time that he had been married before. Oh, it was years ago; but she is alive."

"Impossible! He could not be so base."

"Papa," said Mary, very gravely, "I have seen the certificate."

"The certificate?" said Hope, in dismay. "What certificate?"

"Of the Registry Office. It was shown me by a gentleman he sent expressly to warn me; she had no idea that Walter and I were married, but she had heard somehow of our courtship. I try to thank her, and I tried, and always will, to save him from a prison and his family from disgrace."

"And sacrifice yourself?" cried Hope, in agony.

"I love him," said Mary, "and you must spare him."

"I will have justice for my child."

Grace was in such terror lest her father should punish Walter that she begged him to consider whether in sacrificing herself she really had not been unintentionally wise. What could she gain by publishing that she had married another woman's husband? "I have lost my husband," said she, "but I have found my father. Oh, take me away and let me rest my broken heart upon yours far from all who know me. Every wound seems to be cured in this world, and if time won't cure this my wound, even with my father's help, the grave will."

"Oh, misery!" cried Hope: "do I hear such words as these from my child just entering upon life and all its joys?"

"Hush, papa," said Grace; "there is that man."

That man was Mr. Bartley. He looked very much distressed, and proceeded at once to express his penitence.

CHAPTER XIX.

A WOMAN OUTWITS TWO MEN.

"Oh, Mary, what can I say! I was simply mad—stung into fury by that foul-mouthed ruffian. Mary, I am deeply sorry, and thoroughly ashamed of my violence and my cruelty, and I implore you to think of the very many happy years we have spent together without an angry word—not that you ever deserved one. Let us silence all comments; return to me as the head of my house and the heir of my fortune; you will bind Mr. Hope to me still more strongly; he shall be my partner, and he will not be so selfish as to ruin your future."

"Ay," said Hope, "that's the specious argument you tempted me with twelve years ago. But she was a helpless child then; she is a woman now, and can decide for herself. As for me, I will not be your partner. I have a small royalty on your coal, and that is enough for me; but Grace shall do as she pleases. My child, will you go to the brilliant future that his wealth can secure you, or share my modest independence, which will need all my love to brighten it? Think before you answer; your own future life depends upon yourself."

With this he turned his back and walked for some distance very stoutly, then leaned upon the palings with his back toward Grace; but even a back can speak, and the young lady looked at him and her eyes filled; then she turned toward Bartley, and those clear eyes dried as if the fire in the heart had scorched them.

"In the first place, sir," said she, with a cold and cutting voice, very unusual for her, "my name is not Mary, it is Grace; and I assure you, if there were not another roof in all the world to shelter me, if I was helpless, friendless, and fatherless, I would die in the nearest ditch rather than set my foot in the house from which I was thrust out with shame and insult such as no lady ever yet forgave. But, thank Heaven, I am not at your mercy at all. He to whom nature has drawn me all these years is my father—Oh, papa, come to me; is it for you to stand aloof? It is into your hands, with all the trust and love you have earned so well from your poor Grace, I give my love, my veneration, and my heart and soul forever." Then she flung herself panting on his bosom, and he cried over her. The next moment he led her to the house, where he made her promise to repose now after this fresh trial; and, indeed, he would have followed her, but Bartley implored him so piteously for the sake of old times not to refuse him one word more, that he relented so far as to come out to him, though he felt it was a waste of time.

He said, "Mr. Bartley, it's no use; nothing can undo this morning's work; our paths lie apart. From something Walter Clifford left fall one day, I suspect he is the person you robbed, and induced me to rob of a large fortune."

"Well, what is he to you? Have pity upon me; be silent, and name your own price."

"Wrong Walter Clifford with my eyes open? He is the last man in the world that I would wrong in money matters. I have got a stern account against him, and I will begin it by speaking the truth and giving him back his own."

Here the interview was interrupted by an honest miner, one Jim Perkins. He came in hurriedly, and like people of that class, thrust everybody else's business out of his way. "You are wanted at the mine, Mr. Hope. The shoring of the old works is giving way, and there's a deal of water collecting in another part."

"I'll come at once," said Hope: "the mine's lives must not be endangered. Have the cage ready." Jim walked away.

Hope turned to Bartley.

"Pray understand, Mr. Bartley, that this is my last visit to your mine."

"One moment, Hope," cried Bartley, in despair. "We have been friends so long, surely you owe me something."

"I do."

"Well, then, I'll make you rich for life if you will but let Mary return to me and only just be silent; speak neither for me nor against me; surely that is not much for an old friend to ask. What is your answer?"

"That I will speak the truth, and keep my conscience and my child."

This answer literally crushed Bartley. His knees knocked together; he leaned against the palings sick at heart. He saw that Colonel Clifford would extort not only Walter's legacy, but what the lawyers call the mesne profits, that is to say, the interest and the various proceeds from the fraud during fourteen years.

Whilst he was in this condition of bodily collapse and mental horror, a cold, cynical voice dropped icicles, so to speak, into his ear.

"In a fix, governor, eh? The girl won't come back, and Hope won't hold his tongue."

Bartley looked round in amazement, and saw the cadaverous face and diabolical sneer of Leonard Monckton. Fourteen years and evil passions had furrowed that bloodless cheek; but there was no mistaking the man. It was a surprise to Bartley to see him there, and he spoke to him by a name which had tried to rob him; but he was too full of his immediate trouble to think much of minor things.

"What do you know about it?" said he, roughly.

"I'll tell you," said Monckton, coolly. He then walked in a most leisurely way to the gate that led into the meadow, whose eastern boundary was Hope's quickest hedge, and he came in the same leisurely way up to Mr. Bartley, and leaned his back, with his hands behind him, with perfect effrontery, against the palings.

"I know all," said he. "I overheard you in your office fourteen years ago, when you changed children with Hope."

Bartley uttered an exclamation of dismay.

"And I've been hovering about here all day, and watched the little game, and now I am fly, and no mistake."

Bartley threw up his hands in dismay. "Then it's all over; I am doubly ruined. I cannot hope to silence you both."

"Don't speak so loud, governor."

"Why not?" said Bartley; "others will, if I don't." He lowered his voice for all that, and wondered what was coming.

"Listen to me," said Monckton, exchanging his cynical manner for a quiet and weighty one.

Bartley began to wonder and look at him with a sort of awe. The words now dropped out of Monckton's thin lips as if they were chips of granite, so full of meaning was every syllable; and Bartley felt it.

"It's not so bad as it looks. There are only two men that know you are a felon."

Bartley winced visibly.

The villain paused, and looked Bartley in the face.

"That depends. Suppose you were to offer me what you offered Hope, and suppose Hope—was never—to come up again."

"No such luck," said Bartley, shaking his head sorrowfully.

"Luck?" said Monckton, contemptuously. "We make our own luck. Do you see that vagabond lying under the tree? That's Ben Burnley."

"Ah!" said Bartley; "the ruffian Hope discharged."

"The same, and a man that is burning to be revenged on him. He's your luck, Mr. Bartley. I know the man, and what he has done in a mine before to-day."

Then he drew near to Bartley's ear, and hissed into it these fearful words: "Send him down the mine; promise him five hundred pounds—if William Hope—never comes up again—and William Hope never will."

Bartley drew back aghast. "Assassination!" he cried; and by generous impulse of horror he half fled from the tempter. But Monckton followed him up, and laid his hand upon his shoulder.

"Hush," said he; "you are getting too near that window, and it is open. Let me see there's nobody inside."

He looked in. There was nobody. Grace was up-stairs, but it did so happen that she came into the room soon after.

"Nothing of the kind. Accident. Talking of luck, this mine was declared dangerous this very day."

"No, no!" groaned Bartley, trembling in every limb. "It's a horrible crime; I dare not risk it."

"It is but risk. The alternative is certain. You will be indicted for fraud by the Cliffords."

Bartley groaned.

"They'll live in your home, they'll revel in your money, while you wear a cropped head—and a convict dress—in a stone cell at Portland."

"No, never!" screamed Bartley. "Man, man, you are tempting me to my perdition."

"I am saving you. Just consider—where is the risk? It is only an accident, and who will suspect you? Men don't ruin their own mines. Here just let me call him."

Bartley made a faint gesture to forbid it, but Monckton pretended to take that as an assent.

"Hy, Ben," he cried, "come here."

"No, no!" cried Bartley; "I'll have nothing to do with him."

Well, said Monckton, "then don't, but hear what he has got to say; he'll tell you how easily accidents happen in a mine."

Then Burnley came in, but stood at some distance. Bartley turned his back upon them both, and edged away from them a little; but Monckton stood between the two men, determined to bring them together.

"Ben," said he, "Mr. Bartley takes you on again at my request; no thanks to Mr. Hope."

"No, curse him! I know that."

"Talking of that, Ben, how was it that you got rid of that troublesome overseer in the Welsh colliery?"

Ben started and looked aghast for a moment, but soon recovered himself, and told his tale of blood, with a strange mixture of satisfaction and awe, washing his hands in the air nervously all the time.

"Well, you see, sir, we put some gun-cotton in a small canister, with a fuse cut to last four minutes, and hid it in one of the old workings the men had left; then they felt it over their throats 't water was coming in by quicky."

He got there just in time; and what with 't explosion, fire-damp, and fallen coal, we never saw 't overseer again."

"Dear me," said Monckton; "and Mr. Hope has gone down the mine expressly to inspect old workings. Is it not a strange coincidence? Now, if such an accident was to befall Mr. Hope, it's my belief Mr. Bartley would give you five hundred pounds."

Bartley made no reply; the perspiration was pouring down his face, and he looked a picture of abject guilt and terror.

Monckton looked at him, and decided for him. He went softly, like a cat, to Ben Burnley, and said, "If an accident does occur, and that man never comes up again, you are to have five hundred pounds."

"Five hundred pounds!" shouted Ben. "I'll do 't job. Nay, nay, but," said he, "and his countenance fell—"they will not let me go down the mine."

The diabolical agent went cat-like to Bartley.

"Please give me a written order to let this man go to work again in the mine."

Bartley trembled and hesitated, but at last took out his pocket-book, and wrote on a leaf:

"Take Burnley on again."

R. BARTLEY.

Whilst writing it his hand shook, and when it was written he would not tear it out. He panted and quivered, and was as pale as ashes, and said, "No, no, it's a death-warrant; I cannot; and his trembling hand tried to convey the note-book back to his pocket, but it fell from his shaking fingers, and Monckton took it up, and quietly tore the leaf out, and took it across to Burnley, in spite of a feeble gesture the struggling wretch made to detain him. He gave Ben the paper, and whispered, "Be off, before he changes his mind."

"You'll hear of an accident in the mine before the day's over," said Burnley; and he went off without a grain of remorse under the double stimulus of revenge and lucre.

"He'll do it," cried Monckton triumphantly. "And Hope will end his days in the Bartley mine."

These words were hardly out of his lips when Grace Hope walked out of the house, pale, and with her eyes gleaming, and walked rapidly past them. She had nothing on her head but a white handkerchief that was tied under her chin. Her appearance and her manner struck the conspirators with terror. Bartley stood aghast, but the more resolute villain seized her as she passed him. She was not a bit frightened at that, but utterly amazed. It was a public road.

"How dare you touch me, you villain!" she cried. "Let me go. Ah, I shall know you again, with your face like a corpse and your villainous eyes. Let me go, or I'll have you hung."

"Where are you going?" said Bartley, trembling.

"To my father."

"He is not your father; it is a conspiracy. You must come home with me."

"Never!" cried Grace, and by a sudden and violent effort she flung Monckton off.

But Bartley, mad with terror, seized her that moment, and gave Monckton time to recover and seize her again by the arm.

She screamed and struggled so violently that with all their efforts they could hardly hold her. Then the devil Monckton began to cry louder still. "She's mad, she's mad; help! to secure a mad woman." This terrified Grace Hope. She had read of the villainies that had been done under cover of that accusation, which, indeed, had too often prevented honest men from interfering with deeds of lawless violence. But she had all her wits about her, woman's wit included. She let them drag her past the cottage door. Then she cried out with delight. "Ah! here is my father." They followed the direction of her eye, and relaxed their grasp. Instantly she drew her hands vigorously downward, got clear of them, gave them each a furious push that sent them flying forward, then darted back through the open door, closed it, and bolted it inside just as Monckton, recovering himself, quickly dashed furiously against it—in vain.

The quick-witted villain saw the pressing danger in a moment. "To the back door, or we are lost!" he yelled. Bartley dashed round to that door with a cry of dismay.

But Grace was before him just half a minute. She ran through the house. Alas! the infernal door was secure. The woman had locked it when she went out. Grace came flying back to the front, and drew the bolt softly. But as she did so she heard a hammering, and found the door was fast. Unluckily Hope's tool basket was on the window-ledge, and Monckton drove a heavy nail obliquely through the bottom of the door, and it was immovable. Then Grace slipped with cat-like step to the window, and had her hand on the sill to vault clean out into the road; she was perfectly capable, it being one of her calisthenic exercises. But here again her watchful enemy encountered her.

He raised his hammer as if to strike her hand—though perhaps he might not have gone that length—but she was a woman, and drew back at that cruel gesture. Instantly he closed the outside shutters; he didn't trouble about the window, but these outside shutters he proceeded to nail up; and, as the trap was now complete, he took his time, and by a natural reaction from his fears, he permitted himself to exult a little.

"Thank you, Mr. Hope, for the use of your tools." (Rat-tat-tat.) "There, my little bird, you're caged." (Rat-tat-tat.) "Did you really think (rat-tat) 'two men' (rat-tat-tat) 'were to be beaten by one woman'?"

The prisoner thus secured, he drew aside with justifiable pride to admire his work. This action enabled him to see the side of the cottage he had secured so cleverly in front and behind, and there was Grace Hope coming down from her bedroom window. She had tied two crimson curtains together by a useful knot, which is called at sea a fisherman's bend; fastened one end to the bed or something, and she was coming down this extemporized rope hand over hand alternately with as much ease and grace as if she was walking down marble steps. Monckton flung his arm and body wildly over the paling, and grabbed her finger-ends. She gave a spang with her heels against the wall, and took a bold leap away from him into a tulip bed ten feet distant at least. He yelled to Bartley, "To the garden," and not losing a moment, flung his leg over the paling to catch her with Bartley's help in this new trap. Grace dashed off without a moment's hesitation at the quickest hedge. She did not run up to it and hesitate, like a woman, for it was not to be wriggled through; she went at it with the momentum and impetus of a race-horse, and through it as if it was made of blotting-paper, leaving a wonderfully small hole, but some shreds of her dress, and across the meadow at a pace that neither Bartley nor Monckton, men past their prime, could hope to rival even if she had not got the start. They gazed aghast at one another; at the premises so suddenly emptied as if by magic; at the crimson curtain floating like a banner, and glowing beautifully amongst the green creepers; and at that flying figure, with her hair that glittered in the sun, and streamed horizontal in the wind with her velocity; flying to the mine to save William Hope, and give these baffled conspirators a life of penal servitude.

CHAPTER XX.

CALAMITY.

The baffled conspirators saw Grace Hope bound over a stile like a deer and dash up to the mine; then there was a hurried colloquy, and some men were seen to start from the mine, and run to Grace Hope's cottage. What actually took place was this: She arrived panting, and begged to be sent down the mine at once; the deputy said, "You cannot, miss, without an order from Mr. Hope."

"I am his daughter, sir," said she, "He has claimed me from Mr. Bartley this day."

At that word the man took off his hat to her.

"Let me down this instant; there's a plot to fire the mine, and destroy my dear father."

"A plot to fire the mine!" said the man, all aghast. "Why, who by? Hy! cage ready, there!"

"One Burnley; but he's bribed by a stranger. Send me down to warn my father; but you run and seize that villain; you cannot mistake him. He wears a light suit of tweed, all one color. He has very black eye-brows, and a face like a corpse, and a large gold ring on the little finger of his right hand. You find him somewhere near my father's cottage. Neither you nor I have a moment to lose."

Then the deputy called three more men, and made for Hope's cottage, while Grace went down in the cage.

Bartley fled in mortal terror to his own house, and began to pack up his things to leave the country. Monckton withdrew to the clump of fir-trees, and from that thin shelter watched the mine, intending to levitate as soon as he should see Hope come up safe and sound; but when he saw three or four men start from the mine and run across to him, he took the alarm and sought the thicker shelter of a copse hard by. It was very thick cover, good for temporary concealment; but he soon found it was so narrow that he couldn't emerge from it on either side without being seen at once, and his quick wit told him that Grace had denounced him and probably described him accurately to the miners; he was in mortal terror, but not unprepared for this sort of danger.

CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

Peculiar to Itself

So eminently successful has Hood's Sarsaparilla been that many leading citizens from all over the United States furnish testimonials of cures which seem almost miraculous. Hood's Sarsaparilla is not an accident, but the ripe fruit of industry and study. It possesses merit