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A MORAL CRISIS.

I.

THE hands of the clock in the railway station pointed to twenty minutes past ten. The big room was comparatively empty and quiet. The hurry and bustle of the day was over, and only a few silent and sleepy travelers were waiting for the next train. A little later the gay groups of out of town theater goers would come trooping in, but just now the business of the place was at a standstill.

Sitting in an angle formed by a projecting partition which partially screened him from sight, was a young man—a tall, slender young fellow—who was evidently on the watch for something or somebody.

For a couple of hours he had occupied that corner, and during most of the time his eyes had been fixed upon the great doors which gave entrance from the street, scanning every newcomer with eager anxiety, almost fear, in his gaze.

Then, as the stranger drew nearer, or passed him by, his face would brighten as if with glad relief, and for a moment the cloud would pass from his brow.

But only for a moment—for presently the trouble and the fear would return to shadow his face once more, and he would rest his head against the wall with a weary sigh.

He took out his watch now, and compared it with the clock.

"Only ten minutes more—he *must* take this train if he goes tonight—unless he gives it up! He may have come to his senses—God grant it, for his own sake as well as Edith's!"

This was what he was thinking as he put up his watch and fixed his eyes once more upon the entrance.

The slow minutes ticked themselves away—one by one the few passengers passed through the gate into the yard where the train was waiting—five minutes had gone—six—seven—eight—*nine!* and the young man's face lit with a joyful hope.

And then, just as he rose from his seat, picked up a small traveling bag, and seemed about to depart, there was one more arrival, at sight of whom the young fellow sat down again, suddenly pallid and trembling.

This last comer made his way swiftly to the ticket seller's window, gathered up tickets and change as if in headlong haste, and passed out of the station without looking about him. Instantly the young man sprang up and followed him, fumbling for his ticket as he crossed the room. He passed through the gate, his steps hastened by the clang of the warning bell, his eyes keenly intent upon the man before him.

The pursued, unconscious of his pursuer, had gone into the smoker, and there the young fellow followed. The train was already in motion as he swung himself upon the platform and opened the door of the smoker, which, as it happened, was nearly empty.

He walked quickly down the aisle to the corner where the man he sought had already ensconced himself, and dropping into the seat beside him said only,

"Halsey!"

A perceptible start and a look of angry amazement were his answer. He shrank from that look visibly, and for a moment he wavered and seemed to hesitate. Then he spoke timidly, hurriedly, with many pauses:

"Don't be angry, Halsey—I came because I couldn't help coming. Don't you see I had to come? And you'll let me talk to you; you'll listen to me, won't you, Halsey?"

He looked so young, so boyish, as he spoke, his blue eyes fastened imploringly on the dark, handsome, angry face beside him, his lips quivering with the agitation he was trying to suppress.

But his companion ignored his appeal. He asked sharply,

"How did you know where to find me? What made you come *here?*"

The young man's face flushed.

"I know where you are going, and with whom. I have been waiting for you," he answered.

"How did you get your information?"

"From the letter you dropped——"

"So you read other people's letters! A fine employment for an honorable man!"

Halsey had thrust his hand into his breast pocket and was hastily examining its contents as he spoke.

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"Stop, Halsey, stop! You shall not say such things to me! I can explain——"

"Then will you kindly explain how long you have been prying into my private affairs? How often you have read my letters?"

"You can insult me, but you must give me a chance to speak. I tell you I never read a letter of yours until today, when I picked up the one you must have dropped as you left the office. I swear to you, Halsey, that I picked it up and opened it without a thought of *you*, for the envelope was gone, and your name was not mentioned, as you may remember. It was not until I came to the signature that a suspicion of the truth flashed upon me, and at first I would not, because I *could* not, believe it. But as I sat there, bewildered and fearful, a great many things, over which I had wondered lately, came back to me and made my suspicions certainty. And I determined to follow you, and——"

"Interfere still further in what did not concern you!" sneeringly.

"Doesn't it concern me? It certainly concerns my sister, you will allow."

"I acknowledge her right to an explanation, but I deny yours. You have taken the wrong way with me, Edgar. You have followed me, spied upon my movements, and now you would crown your presumption by attempting to show me the folly of my ways! But I tell you once for all that I submit to no dictation—I am old enough to take my own course, and I want no arguments."

Edgar did not answer his last words; he only said, "After I read that miserable letter, it seemed to me as if I had lost my ideal, for you were always my ideal, Halsey; you were the one I set myself to imitate from my schoolboy days onward. And that boyish admiration and confidence has never changed—it only grew stronger with years. But now——" His voice failed.

There was a short pause. When Halsey spoke again the angry look had softened, his voice was more gentle, though still cold. "You are a good boy, Edgar. I am sorry I spoke so harshly to you, but I was excited. Forgive my unkind words, and let our conversation end here."

"Give me a few minutes now, only let me show you——"

"There is nothing that you could say that would have the least effect on my purpose. Do you suppose I could take such a step as I am taking tonight and not know all it entails? Do you think that I—with my ambitions, my love of social prestige, my pride,

my sensitiveness to disapproval—do you suppose I am not fully aware of the consequences of my action?"

"I think you must be dreaming, and I want to waken you before it is too late."

Halsey frowned. "Say, rather, that I am awake at last, and have put aside some foolish dreams," he said. "I am acting from no passing impulse. On the contrary, I have been thinking of what I am now doing for weeks."

"And you are willing to give up everything and everybody you once cared for?"

"If you weigh the love of the only woman in the world who can make my happiness against 'everything and everybody,' yes, more than willing."

"You think, then, that the companionship of this woman—false wife, faithless mother, treacherous friend (for she knows Edith well), will make you happy? You are not afraid? Afraid that as she has so easily broken her marriage vows she——"

"Not another word! What do you know about the life she has led with that brute? Four years of torture—a hell upon earth—and you dare to blame her for escaping from it! Why, it will need a lifetime of love and devotion to make her forget all she has suffered with Mallock! But she shall have it—and she deserves it, let the world say what it will."

Edgar's eyes lit with sudden resentment. "What, then, does Edith deserve? Have you no pity for her? Or have the wrongs of Mrs. Mallock made you entirely forgetful of all other rights?"

"Ah, Edgar, you may believe me or not, just as you choose, but that is the only regret I have. Yet it all grew out of a mistaken idea—a mistake, and nothing more. I was acting ignorantly—I had always looked up to your sister, revered her, felt myself unworthy of her in so many ways—and I thought that that was love when it was only worship. It was the adoration I might have given to a saint, not the warm, human passion whose impetuous tide sweeps away every barrier and silences every scruple! I know the difference only too well now."

Again there was a short silence, broken by Halsey.

"Now listen to me, Edgar. Your mission has failed—you can see that—and your wisest course will be to leave the train at the first stopping place and go home. Your presence is not only useless, it is painful. Besides——" he hesitated a moment—"I shall not be alone many hours now, and you must not force yourself upon *her*."

"And what am I to say to Edith, and to my father? Tell them all?"

"By no means. I will write tomorrow, and say all that need be said. You can return quietly, say nothing of where you have been, and leave the future to shape itself. The less said the easier for Edith, and I would spare her all unnecessary pain."

"You are very considerate! I trust Edith will appreciate your care for her!"

"That will do, Edgar. Have you anything more to say?"

"What more can I say if you are bent on self destruction? If you are determined——"

"I am."

"To sacrifice everything that makes life worth living for an unlawful love, what is to be done? And all for that weak, unprincipled woman! I could curse her for the evil she has wrought!"

"Edgar, you misjudge her. She is as good, as pure, as any woman in the world, but she believes and feels that marriage should be sanctified by love, and that marriage without love is a sin—only more heinous because sanctified by the church and accepted by the world."

"How about love without marriage? That is a virtue, I suppose!"

"It has this virtue, that it does not make one's whole life an acted lie! Social prejudices condemn such unions, but human laws are not infallible. You would not punish a starving wretch who stole a loaf of bread. Why, then, be less merciful to the starved heart if it snatch the love for which it is hungering and dying, without asking the world's sanction?"

"Oh, Halsey, can *you* stoop to pacify your conscience with paltry sophistries like these? Your counsels, your example, have helped and guided me from my boyhood, and must I lose my faith in you now? Am I to think of you henceforth only with sorrow and shame? Once more, let me implore you——"

The sentence was never to be finished. A sudden jerk—a swaying movement—then a violent lurch sideways and forward, and the next instant a crash, and all was blank!

II.

HALSEY BROCKTON tried to sit up and look about him. The movement was gently but firmly prevented. Then, as his sight grew clearer, he saw that a man was bending over him, cutting the sleeve from his right arm with the deftness born of practice. With a reassuring smile the stranger answered Halsey's questions as he worked.

"Yes, your arm is broken, and you have a few cuts and bruises, but nothing to worry about. You'll be very comfortable when I've set your arm and taken a couple of stitches in your head. Just lie still, that's all."

"But tell me, what happened? Did we run into a train?"

"No, but it was just as bad. The engine jumped the track and carried the train down a steep embankment. We made a hospital of a big barn close to the spot, for tonight. That's where you are now. The wonder is that everybody wasn't killed outright, after such a fall."

The last words roused Halsey, still dazed and bewildered, to sudden remembrance. He said anxiously,

"There was a young man with me—rather boyish looking, with blue eyes and fair hair—is he among the wounded, too? Have you seen him?"

The doctor was apparently too busy with his preparations for setting the broken arm to hear him, and Halsey repeated his question, adding,

"If he isn't hurt I want to see him. Couldn't you bring him here?"

But the doctor only shook his head, saying very decidedly,

"See here, my dear sir, you've had about enough excitement for tonight. That was a stunning knock you got on the head, and unless you want to be worse instead of better in the morning, you must keep perfectly quiet."

Halsey felt himself too weak for further argument just then. He was conscious of a strange sinking, when everything seemed to be slipping away from him, and the voices of the doctor and his assistant sounded dull and far away. And then, later in the night, when the pain and fever kept him sleepless, his thoughts were all of the woman who awaited his coming a hundred miles away, and to whom he could send no word. He tormented himself with vain surmises. What would she think when she found he had failed her? What would she do? If she saw his name among the list of wounded in the newspapers she would understand, but where would she go? Where *could* she go? Would she wait in that strange city, alone in the hotel he had named, until he could join her? And when would that be possible? Edgar, too—could he get rid of him now? And suppose Edgar had sent a telegram to his father, might not Mr. Forrest think it his duty to obey the summons? More than that, might he not bring Edith?

Oh, what a pitiful, what an almost ludi-

crous situation that would be! What a cruel trick malignant fate had played him!

The blood rushed to his face as these thoughts presented themselves, and sleep became impossible. So the long night wore away, until at daybreak an incautious whisper from an attendant near his bed completed his misery.

"There's another one dead!" was what he heard. "That young fellow we took out of the smoker, you know. He roused up once, and the doctor got his name. It's Edgar Forrest, and they've telegraphed to his folks. Too bad, isn't it?—he was so young."

Halsey turned faint and sick with the sudden shock. *Edgar dead?* It must be a dream; he would not believe it—it was too awful! *Dead for his fault!*

Involuntarily he uttered a groan of anguish. The attendants heard him, and came to inquire what he wanted.

He asked only one question.

"Mr. Forrest—did you say he was dead?" Then, without waiting for an answer, he fell back on the pillow from which he had tried to lift himself, and was unconscious.

III.

HALSEY'S broken arm mended rapidly enough, but his other injuries seemed to be more serious than the doctors had supposed them to be at first. At least that was the reason given for the excessively high fever and delirium from which he had suffered for more than a week after the accident.

But they had brought him home at last, and only his useless arm and excessive weakness proclaimed him an invalid.

But when Edith came to see him (which she did every day with her father), she thought he must be very ill, indeed, for he was so listless and silent. He would lie on the sofa with his eyes closed, most of the time, yet he was not asleep. He said that it fatigued him too much to speak often. So Edith, full of tenderest compassion for his weakness, would sit beside him, sometimes silent, and sometimes reading aloud, sometimes stroking his forehead with soft touches, and never suspecting that his soul was in a turmoil of unrest and uncertainty.

And there was no relief for him. From the hour of the accident he had heard not a word of the woman whose happiness he believed was in his keeping. To ask any questions was impossible. To write to her (even if he could have managed it with his left hand) was equally impossible, since he did not know where she might be. Her

silence, too, was unaccountable. Why did she not write to *him*? Of course, she must know all about the railway disaster, for the story had been published in many papers, yet there came no word from her to relieve his suspense.

Well, then, he must battle with his fears and his disquiet until he was able to go out and make inquiries for himself. Very often (for Halsey was not heartless) he would escape from the pressure of his anxieties and think of Edgar. Then he would remember, with a pang, that the poor boy's fatal journey had been undertaken for his sake, and he would shiver as he looked at Edith in her mourning.

Indeed at such times he almost shrank from her in the depth of his self reproach, and then he would determine that as soon as he was a little stronger he would tell her all—lay the whole story before her, and accept the penalty, whatever it might be.

Meanwhile another fortnight had worn away, and in those long, slow days a change began to come over Halsey of which he was quite unconscious at first. The glamor and illusion of his mad passion paled and faded, and the true value and importance of all that he had so nearly thrown away became clear to him. He began to be glad that the die was not yet cast—then, with a sudden dismay, to wonder if he was not yet bound by his promises, whatever happened. Yet her silence—was it not possible that Laura Mallock, too, had seen the folly and the wrong she meditated, and had chosen this way of letting him know that she absolved him from his vows?

Oh, if this were only true, then his course would be clear, and all would be well. For after all, *was* there any necessity for telling Edith what would only make her unhappy? Edith loved him—how sweet and tender and trusting she was! Why, then, should he grieve her with the tale of his foolish infatuation? Besides, it was over; it was a mere madness, and it had passed, and he was sure now that he had loved Edith all the time, even when he had planned to leave her forever. He knew now that his *heart* had never swerved from her—never—only his fancy had been led astray. But it might not be possible to make her understand this, so it was easier to say nothing.

Edith had discontinued her visits before this climax was reached, but Mr. Forrest sent his carriage daily, and Halsey spent all his afternoons with them. As the days passed and brought him no tidings his hopes grew apace, and his listlessness and taciturnity disappeared altogether.

To Edith he was once more the ardent, devoted lover, and apparently the sky was cloudless above them.

IV.

A DAY came when Halsey declared himself well, and with his arm still in a sling he turned his steps towards his club. Cordial greetings met him on every side; all the gay functions he had missed were described to him by one of the most accomplished gossips of the club; all the new jokes and witticisms retailed for his benefit, until he felt himself once more in touch with his world—the world he had almost forsworn!

It was then that some one mentioned the name he had been so anxious yet half afraid to hear.

"Oh, yes," said one of a group near him. "Yes, I've heard all about it. Was there ever such an infernally lucky dog as Fred Mallock? No sooner does that fellow get to the end of his fortune than an old uncle dies most conveniently and leaves him half a million more!"

"It's too much luck for one man; just a beastly way of fortune, to pile all her favors on one fellow! Wonder what good it'll do him?" said another. "He'll only throw it away, of course."

"Oh, no, not this time," answered a third. "Fred has really turned over a new leaf. He has sold his racing stud, forsworn poker, and gone abroad with his wife and boy. They sailed today, to be gone a year."

"Why, I understood that his wife was awfully down on him, even threatened to leave him," said a fourth man, looking up from his paper.

One of the listeners laughed. "So she was, after he lost all his money, but the situation has changed now; I fancy Laura Mallock couldn't be *very* unforgiving to a husband with half a million."

"No, indeed," said the first speaker; "besides, the rôle of the injured wife was a favorite one with Mrs. Mallock—I've admired her in it more than once."

When Halsey left the club he felt at once intensely relieved and very much humiliated. He had been saved from the folly and ruin he had planned, but what a vain fool he had been! He had believed that this woman loved him—he had absolutely believed that he was necessary to her happiness—and all the time she had led him captive for her own ends!

The afternoon was so nearly gone that he

decided not to go to Edith until after dinner.

As he entered the house Mr. Forrest met him and drew him into his study, explaining that Edith was engaged at the moment but would make her appearance presently.

Halsey saw at once that his companion was agitated. Several times he began to speak, and then paused, as if uncertain. Once or twice he opened a drawer in his desk, hesitated, and then closed it again with an impatient sigh. He started from his seat at last and walked nervously up and down the room.

Then, stopping in front of Halsey, he said abruptly,

"I know all about it; I know the reason of poor Edgar's last journey, and it has almost broken my heart! Did you think you could keep it from me, Halsey?"

Halsey could not move or speak; he could only listen. He bent his head to avoid meeting Mr. Forrest's eyes, and endeavored to steady himself, to gain control of his voice before answering, for he knew he must answer, though he knew not what to say.

The elder man meanwhile kept up his restless walk to and fro, speaking in quick, short sentences, with many pauses.

"Yes! I know only too well what took Edgar away—and you—yet I would like to hear all you can tell me. I have waited—I hoped you would speak—but of course you shrank from such a task—I understand. But now you must tell me all, without concealment—I can bear it."

Halsey raised a pale, miserable face to his questioner.

"Don't ask me—*don't!*" he said hoarsely. "How can you expect me to tell *you*? I want to forget it—it was a madness, nothing more!"

Mr. Forrest sat down and covered his eyes with one hand.

"You are right, it was madness, but that makes it the harder to understand. Edith would not let me ask you at first; she—"

"Edith! Does Edith know? Has she known all the time?" interrupted Halsey, his pale face suddenly crimson, his eyes bent on the floor.

"Yes, why not? Whom else had I to show my grief? And in the first shock of my discovery I told her all."

"Oh, I am sorry! I did not want *her* to know—I would have kept it from her, not for my sake, but for her own," Halsey groaned.

"The only reason for keeping it from her would have been for Edgar's sake, of

course, but it was impossible. Tell me truly, how long had this folly been going on? Why did you not take counsel with me at first?"

"How can I answer such questions? It is impossible, as I have told you already. Besides, it can do no good *now*—everything is ended, and it is left to you to pass sentence."

"I have no sentence to pass, Halsey. As far as my forgiveness goes it is full and free. All anger died out of my heart when I stood by Edgar's grave, and left only an undying sorrow in its place."

"Then you pity me—you do not think me altogether to blame?" asked Halsey eagerly. Mr. Forrest looked surprised.

"Why should I blame you because he meditated a great wrong?"

"What wrong?"

"Halsey, you irritate me with these subterfuges. You *know* that Edgar went to meet another man's wife that night—you *know* she left her husband to elope with him. Can you deny this?"

"I can, and I do! You are mistaken, terribly, utterly mistaken!" exclaimed Halsey. "Edgar took that journey for a very different purpose, and——"

"Can you tell me that purpose?" interrupted Mr. Forrest incredulously.

Halsey had suddenly checked himself.

He had been on the brink of a full confession when Mr. Forrest's last question interrupted him. In that momentary pause it occurred to him that perhaps the elder man did not know as much as he thought he knew. And in that case a discreet silence might yet save him from the disclosure he dreaded more and more. So he kept silent until Mr. Forrest said impatiently,

"Will you tell me the purpose for which he went, if I am mistaken?"

"Is it not sufficient if I tell you that Edgar's act was a noble one, pure, unselfish as his life? Won't you believe me? On my honor, my sacred honor, I tell you so!"

Mr. Forrest looked at him sorrowfully for a moment, without speaking. Then he unlocked a drawer in his desk, took out a crumpled note, and held it up, saying quietly,

"I am sorry I cannot believe you, Halsey, but this letter makes it impossible. I found it in poor Edgar's pocket, and it tells its own story, despite your efforts to screen him. Better read it!"—holding out the paper. "Though if you had not known what it says, how could you have followed him?"

Halsey's sudden exclamation as he put

out his hand for the paper, was his only answer. In an instant he had realized Mr. Forrest's mistake, and it had stupefied him. But the other was still speaking, and he tried to listen.

"And for that attempt to save him I shall ever be grateful to you, Halsey. As Edith says, it was just like you, just what she would have expected you to do. As soon as you knew the folly and the wrong he proposed, you followed him to win him back—to save him from himself. And to think how nearly you lost your own life in the attempt! But Edith must reward you—for I cannot."

And Halsey, holding in his hand the letter whose every word he knew so well, listened in a tumult of self contempt and fear. What should he say? The way of deliverance was open before him, but it was also the way of dishonor. To leave Edgar's father and sister in their error, to cast this stain on Edgar's memory, would be the basest treachery. He could not, would not, do it!

Yet to take the only honorable course and confess the truth would cost him too much! He would lose Edith—of that he felt sure—the gulf his revelations would open between them would be forever impassable. He would despise himself if he took advantage of this deception, yet how could he give her up?

He sprang suddenly to his feet and walked to the door, regardless of Mr. Forrest's inquiries and protests. Turning back as he opened it, he said hurriedly,

"I am still very weak, I find, and all this talk has overcome me strangely. Will you excuse me if I leave you so abruptly? I must get home at once."

"But Edith—she will be here in a moment—you can rest."

"You must ask her to forgive me, but I cannot see her tonight. I must go; good night."

Mr. Forrest accompanied him into the hall with sudden apprehension.

"My dear Halsey, I fear you are ill; I will go home with you."

"No, no; I want no one. I shall do well enough. I need the air, but nothing more, thank you."

Halsey was sure that he heard Edith's voice, her sweet laugh, the soft rustle of her gown upon the stairs, but he dared not see her tonight. Tomorrow, perhaps—when his decision had been made and his course chosen—but not now!

The next moment he had crossed the threshold, and passed out into the night.

E. T. Corbett.

LITERARY WORKERS OF THE SOUTH.

The remarkable development of literary activity in the South, the men and women who have taken leading places in the movement, and their especially important contribution to the American fiction of the day.

UNTIL a comparatively recent date, there were almost no men and women in the South who made a profession of literature. Before the war, there was here and there a man who amused himself by writing a book. William Gilmore Simms, indeed, was a professed literary man; so was Poe, but he left the South early in his career. The books of John Pendleton Kennedy, secretary of the navy under Fillmore,

are still sold; and few Southern sketches surpass those of Judge Longstreet. There was no end to the verse makers. Still, as a generality, it is true to say that literature as a serious business of life was not known. Every man and woman of education was taught to express himself or herself on paper with force and elegance; but it was considered as an accomplishment in the woman, and as a necessary adjunct to his position in life



Eliza J. Nicholson.

From a photograph by Simon, New Orleans.