TRUE STORIES OF THE NEWS.

A DRAMA OF CHATHAM SQUARE.

Peter Behrens Wedded Mary Vaterson, and Boasted of Her Fidelity and Frugality; but There Was a Sinister Purpose in It.

She Had a Husband in Jail, in the Fatherland, and for Ten Years She Hoarded Peter's Earnings that She Might Go Back to Her First Husband—Gone to Germany with Peter's Naturalization Papers and a Pair of Boots.

The chances are that honest Peter Behrens, the expressman, who lives at No. 3 Doyer street, would still be the same simple, happy fellow that he had been were it not that, a fortnight since, he struck a match and went groping among the things which his Frau had carefully packed away before she set sail two months ago for the Fatherland. But the truth would have had to come out sooner or later. When it burst upon poor Peter's sluggish brain it took him almost the whole of a day to comprehend its real meaning. Peter has never been the same man since.

On the evening in question Peter was hunting for the pair of boots which he knew his wife had bought for him before she bade him good-by. When she left she told him that she would be back inside of a month. The shoes which Peter was then wearing should have stood the wear and tear of that length of time. But with that characteristic capriciousness of all footgear, just as the expressman had got that pair fairly broken in they gave out with not a moment's warning.

So Peter went to the closet to find the new ones. After rummaging about for a short time he found the objects of his quest. And then a strange thing happened. Peter wears a No. 8. The shoes hidden away in the cupboard were No. 7. His wife had been in the habit of selecting his shoes for years. How could she have made such a mistake? And slowly, slowly, as Peter began to turn matters over in his mind, the truth dawned on his brain. His Mary, for whom he had labored and driven his horse from Chatham Square sometimes even up as far as Westchester County at a late hour of the night, was not what she had claimed to be for all those years. She had never meant those shoes for him at all.

Then Peter began to puzzle over the contents of that letter from Germany which had come for his absent wife only a week before. He could not understand the meaning of the missive at the time, though it had perplexed him sorely. But those boots! He comprehended the state of things at last. Those "Number sevens" hidden away behind the trunk in the closet were a revelation.

Peter sat down alone in the little front room to think. Could it be possible? She who had lived with him for ten years and had taken from him every cent of money which he had been earning in that time—could it be that she had been playing with him as if he were a toy? Yes. He saw everything in its true light now. And all the queer little incidents which seemed so strange at the moment, but which in his simplicity and the security of his love, he had forgotten as soon as one day passed into another, he now saw clearly as if he were looking into a mirror.

And as the simple, honest fellow sat alone there in the little front room this is what he thought about:

He had married Mary Vatersom in 1881. He had loved her from the first time he saw her. They had met in this city. He was twenty-five at the time, and she told him that she was of the same age. He knew that she had been married in the Fatherland, but she explained to him that she was a widow. The children whom she had borne her first husband had died, and she was alone in the world just as much as though she had never changed her maiden name. She was a big, robust German woman, and while Peter loved her he was afraid of her. Her acceptance of his hand and humble lot in life was almost a command. And ever since that day of their betrothal Peter has been in awe of her and implicitly obeyed her.

He never for a moment supposed that her story was untrue, that her first husband was still alive and that in reality she was not his own. And if you had told Peter that he was the fool and dupe of a designing woman he would have hit you a good, swinging blow from that big, muscular arm of his, provided you had not got out of his reach before his simple, heavy mind had time to grasp the import of the insult. And yet poor Peter, who could hold his own with his strong right arm all night among the drunken revellers of the Bowery, was the biggest coward in the world when he entered No. 3 in Doyer street, where he and his wife, as he thought her, had pitched their tent.

It took Peter ten years to find out what every one of his neighbors and associates began to suspect long ago—that something was wrong with Mrs. Behrens. She was very "close"—everybody around Chatham square will tell you that—and she never was given to reminiscences, like the other women of the vicinity, about the virtues of her first man. If Peter happened to forget of a night a stray dime which he had kept in his waistcoat pocket against the desire of a couple of beers the next day, "you should have seen," Mrs. O'Toole, the janitress of the tenement at No. 3 Doyer street, said yesterday, "the way in which the woman would pitch into him." People in crooked little Doyer street respected the quasi Mrs. Peter Behrens, but they didn't like her. Beer had no effect upon her loquacity, and that is a deadly sin among the women in the vicinity of Chatham square.

And as Peter sat alone that night after he had tried on the shoes, found that they did not fit him and then upon examination that they were No. 7's, he began to reflect upon the many rumors which had come to his ears during the past several years. He had brushed them all aside as lightly as he whisked away with his whip the flies which annoyed his good horse Bismarck while standing before the door of an express office awaiting a commission.

But as he gazed down upon the floor in his dejection, every strange act of his wedded wife which he could not explain before, suddenly became glued the one to the other like a mosaic. And poor Peter went out to the stable of "Mad Jack," in Pell street, where he kept his horse, and cried like a child.

On Feb. 11 Peter's wife had told him that she was going back to Germany for a visit. Peter had been so long accustomed to accept any dictum of his big frau without remonstrance that he had no objection to interpose. In his honest heart the feeling dawned upon him, when time had given him a chance to understand it, that he would miss his Mary. But before that was accomplished she had her two big valises packed, had set her house in order, and had called a cab from Chatham square to drive her to the ferry at the foot of Barclay street, to catch the German steamer which was to sail away the next day.

Peter knew nothing about the letter which had come for his wife by the previous Hamburg packet. If he had, perhaps he might better have understood the reason of his wife's sudden departure for the Old World. Nor did he know that almost every month for the past six or seven years letters had been coming to his helpmate directed in the same handwriting. But that last one must have contained very important news. It must have told the woman whom Peter believed to be his wife that her only true husband was at last free from the jail where he had been imprisoned for a dozen years. The law had been satisfied for the murder in which he had been implicated.

Had Mary Vatersom, or Behrens, been waiting for twelve years till she got that letter? Had she been toying with poor Peter, the expressman, till the postman should bring her that long-awaited missive? Every night that Peter returned to her she had gone through his pockets and taken thence every penny which he had earned since he went out early in the morning. She had lived frugally and no one about the tenement ever knew of her spending a cent on beer or cakes except when her few friends happened to drop in from uptown, which happened about thrice a year.

She had a "good bit" snugly put away in the bank. Every one about Chatham Square knew that. For while Mary didn't say much, Peter boasted of it. In the same breath, too, he would brag of the good qualities of his "woman" who never let Saturday night go by without "putting down something on the book." And so Peter was proud of his wife and declared that there wasn't such another the whole length of the Bowery. He never drank more than two schoppen of beer during the day, for that was the limit imposed upon him by his watchful Mary.

When she went away she took with her all the savings for those ten years. She left just enough for Peter to protect him in case he should fall sick. He saw her in her carriage, tucked away carefully her two big valises and fondly kissed her good-by, never dreaming that if she wanted to visit the Fatherland once in ten years it wasn't her due.

But since his discovery of the shoes in the closet, and since he has learned the truth of a dozen other things which he never suspected before Mary went away, Peter has developed a strength of determination that no one ever gave him credit for heretofore. He has had one letter since from his companion of a decade in which she plainly tells him the facts of which the boots, the strange letter and a half a hundred rumors had already made him an unwilling believer. In that charmingly candid epistle Mary writes to Peter—she is so sure of the clay which she has been moulding for ten years—that she will return soon and bring with her the "only original" husband which she left behind when she set sail from Germany. Then the concludes with the statement, like the ending of the old fairy tales, that all three will live together and be happy ever after. She had that end in view when she bought those boots. She had, in writing that strange letter, as much faith in her Peter as Peter formerly had in his Mary.

But now that Peter's eyes have been opened, Mary will have a hard time on her hands to shut them again. She did that once with her fists, when she found an odd dollar unaccounted for in Peter's pockets. When the expressman learned that the woman, with her ex-convict, was about to land at Castle Garden, he went right down to the Barge Office and informed Col. Weber of the case. And when Mary Vatersom and her husband arrive, they will find a pleasant surprise awaiting them. For Peter is going to sell out his flat, dispose of his horse and truck and go away for a while to some place where Mary cannot find him. Peter has still a lingering dread of her fists and superior intellect. In spite of the assurance of Col. Weber that the couple will not be allowed to stay here, the fear with which he has been accustomed to regard his whilom "wife" still haunts him.

Packed tight in one of her valises, Mary carried away with her Peter's naturalization papers, by which she hoped to smuggle her Vatersom into the country. When the Colonel was apprised of that fact he explained to Peter that the woman could never land with her husband. But Peter thinks that Mary will manage to secure her ends somehow. And his personal experience, perhaps, justifies him in his opinion.

"To think she was such a two-faced creature," moaned Mrs. O'Toole, the housekeeper, yesterday. "And him, as couldn't do too much for her. Why, Petey bought her a phaeton—do yez call it?—that he might take her out ridin' every Sunday. And he paid $50 for it, too. If you had seen them drivin' away together on an afternoon you would never have suspected that they came out of Doyers street. 'Shure, an' there never was anything too good for his wife,' Petey used to say."

"They may have my money and welcome to it," soliloquizes Peter, "but they can't play me for a fool any more."

The phaeton is now at Naughton's undertaking establishment awaiting a purchaser, and the horse, truck and the furniture in the ground flat of No. 3 Doyers street are also for sale.

Col. Weber is waiting for a man to appear at the Barge Office with the naturalization papers of Peter Behrens in his pocket, and it is all a curious little Chatham Square drama.