

## "A Poor Devil."

BY WINNIE EATON, MONTREAL.

[WRITTEN FOR THE METROPOLITAN.]

Since I was first able to think I have had intense longings for wealth. To have money, to have honor, greatness, grandeur and splendour; to have all this, was to live. Money, to me, was everything. As no man ever longed before, as no one ever could long, I longed for wealth. Oh! to be able to put one's hand in the pocket and feel the roll of bank-notes, the clink of gold and silver, to be able to sit at a desk and write off a cheque for whatever amount I desired—to have wealth, to have wealth, I prayed God to grant it to me.

I was a law clerk. When I say "law clerk," please do not suppose I mean a "law student." The student in a law office studies his profession and eventually becomes a lawyer; but the law clerk, stay, I am going to define to you what a law clerk is. He is the poor devil in the office who is bullied by the partners, patronized by the students, pitied by the typewriter and envied by the office boy. He it is who looks after everything that comes in and goes out of the office, who does the book-keeping, assists the typewriter, goes messages, and after giving ten years of his precious life to one firm actually receives the magnificent sum of \$10 per week!

I had only one relative in the world—my mother. She lived in the country, and I had not seen her since I was a boy of fourteen, when I came to the city to earn my living. Nevertheless, I had to support her, and out of my \$10 a week I sent her half. With the other half I had to pay my board, buy my clothes, in fact, keep body and soul together.

Stern men, who condemn me now, who know not what my past had been, of my trials, my poverty, my longings, pause, and wonder not that I committed crime.

To others I appeared quiet, reserved, reticent. The student in the office getting up a party to go snowshoeing, skating, or on some other amusement, refrained from asking Blake to go, "because he does not care for such things, you know," not out of unkindness, for I firmly believe that they all, more or less, liked me. For was not Blake the one that could be blamed for everything, who never interfered, never quarrelled, never tattled. I was quiet, and they thought me absent-minded. Was I absent-minded? Never! Why, nothing escaped me. Did I not observe, reflect on everything? Every person I met I thought of. Every word they uttered I caught up and dissected. Yes, I understood them thoroughly, and I despised them. They were all the same, dull or clever, good or bad, they had all one thought—self.

You think love impossible to one who looks at human nature as I did. Fools! I loved, I loved, I loved. With all my heart, with all my strength, with all my soul, I loved a woman—a woman who seemed as far above me as my God, the God I did and did not believe in, the God I said I did not believe in, and yet to whom I prayed to for help and forgiveness—my only friend.

How I hated that man! I hated him for his wealth, for his pompousness, his good breeding, his pitying contempt for me. I wanted to be rich myself, but I hated, I detested, all who had wealth, for they seemed to mock me. He was the man who had brought us to poverty, who had sold my father up, beggared him, killed him. And yet he dared to pity me. He was the proprietor of a large manufactory, a man who paid poor girls to work for him from 75 cents to \$1 a week, and yet was a pillar of his church, an M. P., an Honorable, in fact, my employer's best client. One day he came to me and offered to help me, to give me his old clothes. I refused quietly at first, but when he had left me I went nearly mad. To be offered old clothes! Had it come to this, to be offered charity by mine enemy? Great God! Was I becoming so poor, so wretched looking that I was insulted so? I who was so proud. After a time he returned and he brought her with him. I had never seen her before, and she seemed at first to me like any commonplace girl. He came to me, and with a few words meant to be gracious, laid something on my desk. All the time she stood by him, a half curious, half pitying smile on her face. I looked at the thing. It was a \$10 bill. I stared at it dully, then I picked it up and flung it in his face. "Go," I yelled; "go before I kill you." He stepped back. He was so amazed he could utter not a word. He had expected to be overwhelmed with thanks, but his face was smarting at the strength with which I flung the bill at him. Gradually he recovered himself, but he was too well-bred to call me names, or to even upbraid me for ingratitude. He quietly picked the bill up and replaced it in his pocketbook. A sickly smile trembled on his face as he said, "I will not forget this young man," and I knew he intended to work for my discharge, but she, his daughter, took my hand and said, "I am sorry, oh, I am very, very sorry," and then I looked at her. I saw her beauty, her great violet eyes, the gold of her hair, her grace, and I loved her, I worshipped her. Next to having what one desires it is best to pretend that one has it. I imagined I had what I had not—the woman I loved.

I found out where she lived, and every morning before work, and every night after work, I was in front of her house—near her. She would take a walk each morning with an elderly woman, evidently her maid, and I always managed to meet them. I think she must have forgotten me, but seeing me so often in her neighborhood, she seemed to grow accustomed to my face. She would look at me when we met with a quiet, puzzled look, as if wondering where she had seen me before, although I evidently passed out of her memory almost as quickly as I passed her by. But when I passed her, I wanted to touch her, to look into her eyes. I have seen her taken to balls, theatres, helped into carriages by other men. I have seen her hold the arm of another and I have gone half mad.

Hitherto I was able to keep my passion to myself, and we met each day as ordinary strangers, but there came a time when I could not keep away from her. I would hang round her house every spare moment I had. I got a few holidays, and I spent them in wandering up and down in

front of her house. Wherever she went I followed her, dogged her. I was a shadow over her, and when I think of it now, I pity her. She must have begun to suspect, for when we met now she would look nervous and troubled. Then, I think, she began to fear me. She would come to the door and glance quickly up the street to see if I were around. If she saw me she would retreat quickly into the house and not come out again. I would keep in a place where she could not see me till directly on the street, and when once there she never turned back.

My love grew stronger each day, and, as it grew stronger, more repellant did I seem to appear to her. From the looks she gave me I think she hated me. Of her father I saw little. If he had forgiven or forgotten my treatment of him he did not show it. He manifested neither like nor dislike, for he never even glanced at me when in the office. Perhaps, had I not been so wrapped up in her, I might have seen that he was treating me with silent contempt. How my blood would have boiled at another time, but now—now I was in a dream.

A rumor went around. He and his daughter were leaving the country. I would not believe it at first and made enquiries, but only to find the rumor corroborated. They were really going. And then one day he came to the office and bade them all good-bye, saying that they were leaving for the old country on the following day. In a half dazed way I noticed that he carried a small leather valise in his hand. Someone remarked, "What have you there?" and he answered, with a smile, "Everything I possess in this world," but I did not pay much attention to that. All my thought was engrossed in this—he was leaving the country, perhaps never to return, and taking her with him, and she would be lost to me forever.

The rest of the day was a blur to me, for I remember nothing distinctly. I only know that it was long, long. There was no ending to it. How I got through my work, what blunders I made, I know not, but at last it came to an end.

I left the office dazed and bewildered. I wandered up and down, anywhere, everywhere. My thoughts were in confusion, and I was feverish, sick, wretched and reckless. I determined to leave the city, and walked towards the railway station. I went in, but I had no money. I put my hand in my pocket, but it was empty, and I wandered out again.

It had been one of those days in April, dreary and wet, with a sleeting sort of rain, half snow. The station stood close by the river wharf, and there were few or no people around at this hour. I was alone—alone with my wretched thoughts. I sat down on some lumber and began to reason with myself. "It is much better that you should die. What have you to live for? It is all one to everyone whether you live or die. Why not end it all? There is the railway track, there the river. 'Choose.' A voice almost seemed speaking to me. Mechanically I answered, 'the river.' I got up and walked slowly towards it; but I wanted to live. I was so young. I looked at the water. How black and still it looked. No! Life I love you. I will *not* die.

Suddenly my eyes were riveted by an object that seemed to be moving at a short distance



away along the beach. It came nearer and nearer towards me, and at last I could see plainly. It was a man—a little man—and he was carrying something in his arms. There was something suspicious looking about the way in which he glanced stealthily to the right and left, as if fearful of being seen. Then he whistled, a low, cautious whistle. He was evidently expecting some comrade to join him. It was pitch dark, but the flickering light from an electric lamp on the wharf gave me sufficient light to see him. I stood in the shadow, and, as I stepped further back, I returned his whistle. He grew alert, glanced around, saw me. In the half light he must have mistaken me for someone else, for, as he came towards me, he said, "I've got it, Jim. I had a pretty tough thing of it, but here it is," holding up a bag. "He held on to it like Old Harry, but he——" He stopped. I had stepped forward into the light. I saw him step back in his fright. He was a little, cringing, sly, weak looking fellow, evidently the tool of another. Now, if there was one thing I prided myself on that was my honesty. If I could be nothing else, I could be honest. A thief stood before me.

"What have you there?" I said sternly.

His fright was so strong that his teeth chattered and his eyes started out. He could not answer.

"You have been stealing," I cried. "Give that to me or I will give you in charge of the police." At the word "police" he recovered his speech, and, as I stretched forth my hand to take the bag, he held on to it with all his strength, crying out that he was merely carrying it for a gentleman who was to have met him at the station. He swore he was honest, and begged me to let him go in peace. There was such a ring of truth in his voice that for a moment I paused irresolute. After all, might it not be possible that this man's master might be going away and had told his servant to meet him at the station with his bag. But the words he had spoken at first recurred to me and I looked at him. In that glance I knew he lied. I saw there a look of such cunning, such vileness, that I recoiled. He took the opportunity to spring forward, but, with a bound, I was upon him. There together at the water's edge we struggled, but it was not a fair fight, for he was a little, weak fellow, and I a big, powerful man. Under such circumstances the struggle could not last long, and at last I had him under me; but he moaned and begged to be set free. "Let me go, I beg you, I pray to you to let me go. That bag contains so much, and I have so little. I need money, I am starving. Oh! I beg you, I beg you do not give me to the police. I have just left prison, I've been there half my life; oh, for God's sake, have mercy. You don't know what it is to be in prison. It is dreadful—it is awful! You go mad because you want to feel the air, to see someone, to hear a noise. Don't give me up. Have mercy, have mercy!"

(To be continued.)

Waiter (yelling down the kitchen tube)—"Hey, Alphonso, make that chop a steak." Alphonso—"Sacre! Vat you t'nk? I'm a chef; not a magician!"



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