

A PERILOUS SECRET

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A perilous secret by Charles Reade

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A PERILOUS SECRET

CHAPTER I

THE POOR MAN'S CHILD

Two worn travellers, a young man and a fair girl about four years old, sat on the towing-path by the side of the Trent.

The young man had his coat off, by which you might infer it was very hot; but no, it was a keen October day, and an east wind sweeping down the river. The coat was wrapped tightly round the little girl, so that only her fair face with blue eyes and golden hair peeped out; and the young father sat in his shirt sleeves, looking down on her with a loving but anxious look. Her mother, his wife, had died of consumption, and he was in mortal terror lest biting winds and scanty food should wither this sweet flower too, his one remaining joy.

William Hope was a man full of talent; self-educated, and wonderfully quick at learning anything; he was a linguist, a mechanic, a mineralogist, a draughtsman, and inventor. Item, a bit of a farrier, and half a surgeon; could play the fiddle and the guitar; could draw and paint and drive a four-in-hand. Almost the only thing he could not do was to make money and keep it.

Versatility seldom pays. But, to tell the truth, luck was against him; and although in a long life every deserving man seems to get a chance, yet Fortune does baffle some meritorious men for a limited time. Generally, we think, good fortune and ill fortune succeed each other rapidly, like red cards and black; but to some ill luck comes in great, long slices; and if they don't drink or despair, by-and-by good luck comes continuously, and everything turns to gold with him who has waited and deserved.

A PERILOUS SECRET

Well, for years Fortune was hard on William Hope. It never let him get his head above water. If he got a good place, the employer died or sold his business. If he patented an invention, and exhausted his savings to pay the fees, no capitalist would work it, or some other inventor proved he had invented something so like it that there was no basis for a monopoly.

At last there fell on him the heaviest blow of all. He had accumulated £50 as a merchant's clerk, and was in negotiation for a small, independent business, when his wife, whom he loved tenderly, sickened.

For eight months he was distracted with hopes and fears. These gave way to dismal certainty. She died, and left him broken-hearted and poor, impoverished by the doctors, and pauperised by the undertaker. Then his crushed heart had but one desire—to fly from the home that had lost its sunshine, and the very country which had been calamitous to him.

He had one staunch friend, who had lately returned rich from New Zealand, and had offered to send him out as his agent, and to lend him money in the colony. Hope had declined, and his friend had taken the buff, and had not written to him since. But Hope knew he was settled in Hull, and too good-hearted at bottom to go from his word in his friend's present sad condition. So William Hope paid every debt he owed in Liverpool, took his child to her mother's tombstone, and prayed by it, and started to cross the island, and then leave it for many a long day.

He had a bundle, with one brush, one comb, a piece of yellow soap, and two changes of linen, one for himself, and one for his little Grace—item, his fiddle and a reaping-hook; for it was a late harvest in the north, and he foresaw he should have to work his way and pay his way, or else beg, and he was too much of a man for that. His child's face won her many a ride in a waggon, and many a cup of milk from humble women standing at their cottage doors.

Now and then he got a day's work in the fields, and the farmer's wife took care of little Grace, and washed her linen, and gave them both clean straw in the barn to lie on, and a blanket to cover them. Once he fell in with a harvest-home, and his fiddle earned him ten shillings, all in sixpences. But on unlucky days he had to take his fiddle under his arm and carry his girl on his back; these unlucky days came so often that still, as he travelled, his