

**THE BEAUTIFUL WRETCH.
THE FOUR MACNICOLS.
THE PUPIL OF AURELIUS;
THREE STORIES. VOL. III**

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The beautiful wretch. The four MacNicolis. The pupil of Aurelius; three stories. Vol. III by William Black

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WILLIAM BLACK

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THE
BEAUTIFUL WRETCH
THE FOUR MACNICOLS
THE PUPIL OF AURELIUS

Three Stories, in Three Volumes

BY

WILLIAM BLACK

AUTHOR OF 'MACLEOD OF DARE,' 'SUNRISE,' ETC.

VOLUME III.

THE PUPIL OF AURELIUS

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CHAPTER XXIII.

AT LAST.

HE found Frank King in the little room in Cleveland Row, alone, sitting before the fire, a shut book on the small table beside him.

'I've got bad news for you, King,' he said, bluntly. 'I wish it hadn't been my sister. But you know what women are. It's better to have nothing at all to do with them.'

'But what is it?' Frank King said, with some alarm on his face.

'Madge has bolted.'

‘Madge has bolted?’ the other repeated, staring at Mr. Tom in a bewildered sort of way.

‘Yes. Gone and married that fellow Hanbury. This morning. I’m very sorry I have to come to you with a story like that about my own sister.’

Mr. Tom was very much surprised to find his friend jump up from the chair and seize him by the arm.

‘Do you know this, Beresford,’ he said, in great excitement, ‘you have taken a millstone from my neck. I have been sitting wondering whether I shouldn’t cut my throat at once, or make off for Australia——’

‘Oh, come, I say!’ interposed Mr. Tom, with a quick flush.

‘Oh, you needn’t think I have anything to say against your sister,’ exclaimed his

friend—on whose face there was a sudden and quite radiant gladness. ‘You don’t understand it at all, Beresford. It will take some explanation. But I assure you you could not have brought me pleasanter news; and yet I have not a word to say against your sister. I know that is a privilege you reserve for yourself; and quite right too.’

It was manifestly clear that Captain King was not shamming satisfaction: not for many a day had his face looked so bright.

‘Well, I’m glad you take it that way,’ said Mr. Tom. ‘I thought you would be cut up. Most fellows are; though they pretend not to be. I really do believe you’re rather glad that Madge has given you the slip.’

‘Sit down, Beresford, and I will tell you

all about it. I proposed to your sister Anne years ago.'

'To Nan? Why wasn't I told?'

'These things are not generally preached from the house-tops. She refused me point-blank; and I knew she was a girl who knew her own mind. Then I rejoined my ship; and remained mostly abroad for a long time. I fancied it would all blow over; but it didn't; I was harder hit than I thought; and then, you know, sailors are driven to think of bygone things. Well, you remember when I came home—when I met you in the street. I thought I should like to have just another glimpse of Nan—of Miss Anne, I mean—before she married the parson. Do you remember my going into the drawing-room? Madge was there—the perfect image of Nan! Indeed, I thought at first

she was Nan herself. And wasn't it natural I should imagine the two sisters must be alike in disposition too? And then, as it was hopeless about Nan, I fancied—I imagined—well, the truth is, I made a most confounded mistake, Beresford; and the only thing I have been thinking of, day and night, of late, was what was the proper and manly thing to do—whether to tell Madge frankly—or whether to say nothing, with the hope that after marriage it would all come right. And now you needn't wonder at my being precious glad she has herself settled the affair; and there is not a human being in the world more heartily wishes her lifelong happiness than I do. And I wish to goodness I knew some way of letting her know that too.'

Tom stretched out his legs—his hands