

The Mother and Son

The Experiences of a Barrister, #4

by Samuel Warren, 1807-1877

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Dinner had been over about half an hour one Sunday afternoon.—the only day on which for years I had been able to enjoy a dinner—and I was leisurely sipping a glass of wine, when a carriage drove rapidly up to the door, a loud *rat-tat* followed, and my friend Dr. Curteis, to my great surprise, was announced.

"I have called," said the doctor as we shook hands, "to ask you to accompany me to Mount Place. I have just received a hurried note from Miss Armitage, stating that her mother, after a very brief illness, is rapidly sinking, and requesting my attendance, as well as that of a legal gentleman, immediately."

"Mrs. Armitage!" I exclaimed, inexpressibly shocked. "Why, it is scarcely more than a fortnight ago that I met her at the Rochfords' in brilliant health and spirits."

"Even so. But will you accompany me? I don't know where to find any one else for the moment, and time presses."

"It is an attorney, probably, rather than a barrister, that is needed; but under the circumstances, and knowing her as I do, I cannot hesitate."

We were soon bowling along at a rapid pace, and in little more than an hour reached the dying lady's residence, situated in the county of Essex, and distant about ten miles from London. We entered together; and Dr. Curteis, leaving me in the library, proceeded at once to the sick chamber. About ten minutes afterwards the housekeeper, a tall, foreign-looking, and rather handsome woman, came into the room, and announced that the doctor wished to see me. She was deadly pale, and, I observed, trembled like an aspen. I motioned her to precede me; and she, with unsteady steps, immediately led the way. So great was her agitation, that twice, in ascending the stairs, she only saved herself from falling by grasping the banister-rail. The presage I drew from the exhibition of such overpowering emotion, by a person whom I knew to have been long not only in the service, but in the confidence of Mrs. Armitage, was soon confirmed by Dr. Curteis, whom we met coming out of the chamber of the expiring patient.

"Step this way," said he, addressing me, and leading to an adjoining apartment. "We do not require your attendance, Mrs. Bourdon," said he, as soon as we reached it, to the housekeeper, who had swiftly followed us, and now stood staring with eager eyes in the doctor's face, as if life and death hung on his lips. "Have the goodness to leave us," he added tartly, perceiving she did not stir, but continued her fearful, scrutinizing glance. She started at his altered tone, flushed crimson, then paled to a chalky whiteness, and muttering, left the apartment.

"The danger of her mistress has bewildered her," I remarked.

"Perhaps so," remarked Dr. Curteis. "Be that as it may, Mrs. Armitage is beyond all human help. In another hour she will be, as we say, no more."

"I feared so. What is the nature of her disorder?"

"A rapid wasting away, as I am informed. The appearances presented are those of a person expiring of atrophy, or extreme emaciation."

"Indeed. And so sudden too!"

"Yes. I am glad you are come, although your professional services will not, it seems, be required—a neighboring attorney having performed the necessary duty—something, I believe, relative to the will of the dying lady. We will speak further together by and by. In the meantime," continued Dr. Curteis, with a perceptible tremor in his voice, "it will do neither of us any harm to witness the closing scene of the life of Mary Rawdon, whom you and I twenty years ago worshipped as one of the gentlest and most beautiful of beings with which the Creator ever graced his universe. It will be a peaceful parting. Come."

Just as, with noiseless footsteps, we entered the silent death-chamber, the last rays of the setting sun were falling upon the figure of Ellen Armitage—who knelt in speechless agony by the bedside of her expiring parent—and faintly lighting up the pale, emaciated, sunken features of the so lately brilliant, courted Mrs. Armitage! But for the ineffaceable splendor of her deep-blue eyes, I should scarcely have

recognized her. Standing in the shadow, as thrown by the heavy bed-drapery, we gazed and listened unperceived.

"Ellen," murmured the dying lady, "come nearer to me. It is growing dark, and I cannot see you plainly. Now, then, read to me, beginning at the verse you finished with, as good Dr. Curteis entered. Ay," she faintly whispered, "it is thus, Ellen, with thy hand clasped in mine, and with the words of the holy book sounding from thy dear lips, that I would pass away!"

Ellen, interrupted only by her blinding tears, making sad stops, complied. Twilight stole on, and threw its shadow over the solemn scene, deepening its holiness of sorrow. Night came with all her train; and the silver radiance kissed into ethereal beauty the pale face of the weeping girl, still pursuing her sad and sacred task. We hesitated to disturb, by the slightest movement the repose of a death-bed over which belief and hope, those only potent ministers, shed light and calm! At length Dr. Curteis advanced gently towards the bed, and taking the daughter's hand, said in a low voice, "Had you not better retire, my dear young lady, for a few moments?" She understood him, and rising from her knees, threw herself in an ecstasy of grief upon the corpse, from which the spirit had just passed away. Assistance was summoned, and the sobbing girl was borne from the chamber.

I descended, full of emotion, to the library, where Dr. Curteis promised shortly to join me. Noiselessly entering the room, I came suddenly upon the housekeeper and a tall young man, standing with their backs towards me in the recesses of one of the windows, and partly shrouded by the heavy cloth curtains. They were evidently in earnest conference, and several words, the significance of which did not at the moment strike me, reached my ears before they perceived my approach. The instant they did so, they turned hastily round, and eyed me with an expression of flurried alarm, which at the time surprised me not a little. "All is over, Mrs. Bourdon," said I, finding she did not speak; "and your presence is probably needed by Miss Armitage." A flash of intelligence, as I spoke, passed between the pair; but whether indicative of grief or joy, so momentary was the glance, I should have been puzzled to determine. The housekeeper immediately left the room, keeping her eyes, as she passed, fixed upon me with the same nervous apprehensive look which had before irritated Dr. Curteis. The young man followed more slowly. He was a tall and rather handsome youth, apparently about one or two-and-twenty years of age. His hair was black as jet, and his dark eyes were of singular brilliancy; but the expression, I thought, was scarcely a refined or highly-intellectual one. His resemblance to Mrs. Bourdon, whose son indeed he was, was very striking. He bowed slightly, but courteously, as to an equal, as he closed the door, and I was left to the undisturbed enjoyment of my own reflections, which, ill-defined and indistinct as they were, were anything but pleasant company. My reverie was at length interrupted by the entrance of the doctor, with the announcement that the carriage was in waiting to re-convey us to town.

We had journeyed several miles on our return before a word was spoken by either of us. My companion was apparently even more painfully pre-occupied than myself. He was, however, the first to break silence. "The emaciated corpse we have just left little resembles the gay, beautiful girl, for whose smiles you and I were

once disposed to shoot each other!" The doctor's voice trembled with emotion, and his face, I perceived, was pale as marble.

"Mary Rawdon," I remarked, "lives again in her daughter."

"Yes; her very image. Do you know," continued he, speaking with rapid energy, "I suspect Mary Rawdon—Mrs. Armitage, I would say—has been foully, treacherously dealt with!"

I started with amazement; and yet the announcement but embodied and gave form and color to my own ill-defined and shadowy suspicions.

"Good heavens! How? By whom?"

"Unless I am greatly mistaken, she has been poisoned by an adept in the use of such destructive agents."

"Mrs. Bourdon?"

"No; by her son. At least my suspicions point that way. She is probably cognizant of the crime. But in order that you should understand the grounds upon which my conjectures are principally founded, I must enter into a short explanation. Mrs. Bourdon, a woman of Spanish extraction, and who formerly occupied a much higher position than she does now, has lived with Mrs. Armitage from the period of her husband's death, now about sixteen years ago. Mrs. Bourdon has a son, a tall, good-looking fellow enough, whom you may have seen."

"He was with his mother in the library as I entered it after leaving you."

"Ah! well, hem! This boy, in his mother's opinion—but that perhaps is somewhat excusable—exhibited early indications of having been born a *genius*. Mrs. Armitage, who had been first struck by the beauty of the child, gradually acquired the same notion; and the result was, that he was little by little invested—with at least her tacit approval—with the privileges supposed to be the lawful inheritance of such gifted spirits; namely, the right to be as idle as he pleased—geniuses, you know, can, according to the popular notion, attain any conceivable amount of knowledge *per saltum* at a bound—and to exalt himself in the stilts of his own conceit above the useful and honorable pursuits suited to the station in life in which Providence had cast his lot. The fruit of such training soon showed itself. Young Bourdon grew up a conceited and essentially-ignorant puppy, capable of nothing but bad verses, and thoroughly impressed with but one important fact, which was, that he, Alfred Bourdon, was the most gifted and the most ill-used of all God's creatures. To genius, in any intelligible sense of the term, he has in truth no pretension. He is endowed, however, with a kind of reflective talent, which is often mistaken by fools for *creative* power. The morbid fancies and melancholy scorn of a Byron, for instance, such gentry reflect back from their foggy imaginations in exaggerated and distorted feebleness of whining versicles, and so on with other lights celestial or infernal. This, however, by the way. The only rational pursuit he ever followed, and that only by fits and starts, and to gratify his faculty of *wonder*, I fancy, was chemistry. A small laboratory was fitted up for him in the little summer-house you may have observed at the further corner of the lawn. This study of his, if study such desultory snatches at science may be called, led him, in his examination of vegetable bodies, to a smattering acquaintance with botany, a science of which Ellen Armitage is an enthusiastic student. They were foolishly permitted to *botanize* together, and the result was, that Alfred Bourdon, acting upon the principle that genius—whether sham or

real—levels all merely mundane distinctions, had the impudence to aspire to the hand of Miss Armitage. His passion, sincere or simulated, has never been, I have reason to know, in the slightest degree reciprocated by its object; but so blind is vanity, that when, about six weeks ago, an *éclaircissement* took place, and the fellow's dream was somewhat rudely dissipated, the untoward rejection of his preposterous suit was, there is every reason to believe, attributed by both mother and son to the repugnance of Mrs. Armitage alone; and to this idiotic hallucination she has, I fear, fallen a sacrifice. Judging from the emaciated appearance of the body, and other phenomena communicated to me by her ordinary medical attendant—a blundering ignoramus, who ought to have called in assistance long before—she has been poisoned with *iodine*, which, administered in certain quantities, would produce precisely the same symptoms. Happily there is no mode of destroying human life which so surely leads to the detection of the murderer as the use of such agents; and of this truth the post mortem examination of the body, which takes place to-morrow morning, will, if I am not grossly mistaken, supply another vivid illustration. Legal assistance will no doubt be necessary, and I am sure I do not err in expecting that *you* will aid me in bringing to justice the murderer of Mary Rawdon?"

A pressure of his hand was my only answer. "I shall call for you at ten o'clock" said he, as he put me down at my own door. I bowed, and the carriage drove off.

"Well!" said I, as Dr. Curteis and Mr. ___ the eminent surgeon entered the library at Mount Place the following morning after a long absence.

"As I anticipated," replied the doctor with a choking voice: "she has been poisoned!"

I started to my feet. "And the murderer?"

"Our suspicions still point to young Bourdon; but the persons of both mother and son have been secured."

"Apart?"

"Yes; and I have despatched a servant to request the presence of a neighbor—a county magistrate. I expect him momentarily."

After a brief consultation, we all three directed our steps to the summer-house which contained young Bourdon's laboratory. In the room itself nothing of importance was discovered; but in an enclosed recess, which we broke open, we found a curiously-fashioned glass bottle half full of iodine.

"This is it!" said Mr. ___; "and in a powdered state too—just ready for mixing with brandy or any other available dissolvent." The powder had somewhat the appearance of fine black lead. Nothing further of any consequence being observed, we returned to the house, where the magistrate had already arrived.

Alfred Bourdon was first brought in; and he having been duly cautioned that he was not obliged to answer any question, and that what he did say would be taken down, and, if necessary, used against him, I proposed the following questions:

"Have you the key of your laboratory?"

"No; the door is always open."

"Well, then, of any door or cupboard in the room?"

At this question his face flushed purple: he stammered, "There is no"—and abruptly paused.

"Do I understand you to say there is no cupboard or place of concealment in the room?"

"No: here is the key."

"Has any one had access to the cupboard or recess of which this is the key, except yourself?"

The young man shook as if smitten with ague: his lips chattered, but no articulate sound escaped them.

"You need not answer the question," said the magistrate, "unless you choose to do so. I again warn you that all you say will, if necessary, be used against you."

"No one," he at length gasped, mastering his hesitation by a strong exertion of the will—"no one can have had access to the place but myself. I have never parted with the key."

Mrs. Bourdon was now called in. After interchanging a glance of intense agony, and, as it seemed to me, of affectionate intelligence with her son, she calmly answered the questions put to her. They were unimportant, except the last, and that acted upon her like a galvanic shock. It was this—"Did you ever struggle with your son on the landing leading to the bedroom of the deceased for the possession of this bottle?" and I held up that which we had found in the recess.

A slight scream escaped her lips; and then she stood rigid, erect, motionless, glaring alternately at me and at the fatal bottle with eyes that seemed starting from their sockets. I glanced towards the son; he was also affected in a terrible manner. His knees smote each other, and a clammy perspiration burst forth and settled upon his pallid forehead.

"Again I caution you," iterated the magistrate, "that you are not bound to answer any of these questions."

The woman's lips moved. "No—never!" she almost inaudibly gasped, and fell senseless on the floor.

As soon as she was removed, Jane Withers was called. She deposed that three days previously, as she was, just before dusk, arranging some linen in a room a few yards distant from the bedroom of her late mistress, she was surprised at hearing a noise just outside the door, as of persons struggling and speaking in low but earnest tones. She drew aside a corner of the muslin curtain of the window which looked upon the passage or corridor, and there saw Mrs. Bourdon striving to wrest something from her son's hand. She heard Mrs. Bourdon say, "You shall not do it, or you shall not have it"—she could not be sure which. A noise of some sort seemed to alarm them: they ceased struggling, and listened attentively for a few seconds: then Alfred Bourdon stole off on tip-toe, leaving the object in dispute, which witness could not see distinctly, in his mother's hand. Mrs. Bourdon continued to listen, and presently Miss Armitage, opening the door of her mother's chamber, called her by name. She immediately placed what was in her hand on the marble top of a side-table standing in the corridor, and hastened to Miss Armitage. Witness left the room she had been in a few minutes afterwards, and, curious to know what Mrs. Bourdon and her son had been struggling for, went to the table to look at it. It was an oddly-shaped glass bottle, containing a good deal of a blackish-gray powder, which, as she held it up to the light, looked like black-lead!

"Would you be able to swear to the bottle if you saw it?"

"Certainly I should."

"By what mark or token?"

"The name of Valpy or Vulpy was cast into it—that is, the name was in the glass itself."

"Is this it?"

"It is: I swear most positively."

A letter was also read which had been taken from Bourdon's pocket. It was much creased, and was proved to be in the handwriting of Mrs. Armitage. It consisted of a severe rebuke at the young man's presumption in seeking to address himself to her daughter, which insolent ingratitude, the writer said, she should never, whilst she lived, either forget or forgive. This last sentence was strongly underlined in a different ink from that used by the writer of the letter.

The surgeon deposed to the cause of death. It had been brought on by the action of iodine, which, administered in certain quantities, produced symptoms as of rapid atrophy, such as had appeared in Mrs. Armitage. The glass bottle found in the recess contained iodine in a pulverized state.

I deposed that, on entering the library on the previous evening I overheard young Mr. Bourdon, addressing his mother, say, "Now that it is done past recall, I will not shrink from any consequences, be they what they may!"

This was the substance of the evidence adduced; and the magistrate at once committed Alfred Bourdon to Chelmsford jail, to take his trial at the next assize for "wilful murder." A coroner's inquisition a few days after also returned a verdict of "wilful murder" against him on the same evidence.

About an hour after his committal, and just previous to the arrival of the vehicle which was to convey him to the county prison, Alfred Bourdon requested an interview with me. I very reluctantly consented; but steeled as I was against him, I could not avoid feeling dreadfully shocked at the change which so brief an interval had wrought upon him. It had done the work of years. Despair—black, utter despair—was written in every lineament of his expressive countenance.

"I have requested to see you," said the unhappy culprit, "rather than Dr. Curteis, because he, I know, is bitterly prejudiced against me. But *you* will not refuse, I think, the solemn request of a dying man—for a dying man I feel myself to be—however long or short the interval which stands between me and the scaffold. It is not with a childish hope that any assertion of mine can avail before the tribunal of the law against the evidence adduced this day, that I, with all the solemnity befitting a man whose days are numbered, declare to you that I am wholly innocent of the crime laid to my charge. I have no such expectation; I seek only that you, in pity of my youth and untimely fate, should convey to her whom I have madly presumed to worship this message: 'Alfred Bourdon was mad, but not blood-guilty; and of the crime laid to his charge he is innocent as an unborn child.'"

"The pure and holy passion, young man," said I, somewhat startled by his impressive manner, "however presumptuous, as far as social considerations are concerned, it might be, by which you affect to be inspired, is utterly inconsistent with the cruel, dastardly crime of which such damning evidence has an hour since been given"—

"Say no more, sir," interrupted Bourdon, sinking back in his seat, and burying his face in his hands: "it were a bootless errand; she *could* not, in the face of that evidence, believe my unsupported assertion! It were as well perhaps she did not. And yet, sir, it is hard to be trampled into a felon's grave, loaded with the maledictions of those whom you would coin your heart to serve and bless! Ah, sir," he continued, whilst tears of agony streamed through his firmly-closed fingers, "you cannot conceive the unutterable bitterness of the pang which rends the heart of him who feels that he is not only despised, but loathed, hated, execrated, by her whom his soul idolizes! Mine was no boyish, transient passion: it has grown with my growth, and strengthened with my strength. My life has been but one long dream of her. All that my soul had drunk in of beauty in the visible earth and heavens—the light of setting suns—the radiance of the silver stars—the breath of summer flowers, together with all which we imagine of celestial purity and grace, seemed to me in her incarnated, concentrated, and combined! And now lost—lost—forever lost!" The violence of his emotions choked his utterance; and deeply and painfully affected, I hastened from his presence.

Time sped as ever onwards, surely, silently; and justice, with her feet of lead, but hands of iron, closed gradually upon her quarry. Alfred Bourdon was arraigned before a jury of his countrymen, to answer finally to the accusation of wilful murder preferred against him.

The evidence, as given before the committing magistrate, and the coroner's inquisition, was repeated with some addition of passionate expressions used by the prisoner indicative of a desire to be avenged on the deceased. The cross-examination by the counsel for the defense was able, but failed to shake the case for the prosecution. His own admission, that no one but himself had access to the recess where the poison was found, told fatally against him. When called upon to address the jury, he delivered himself of a speech rather than a defense; of an oratorical effusion, instead of a vigorous, and, if possible, damaging commentary upon the evidence arrayed against him. It was a labored, and in part eloquent, exposition of the necessary fallibility of human judgment, illustrated by numerous examples of erroneous verdicts. His peroration I jotted down at the time: "Thus, my lord and gentlemen of the jury, is it abundantly manifest, not only by these examples, but by the testimony which every man bears in his own breast, that God could not have willed, could not have commanded, his creatures to perform a pretended duty, which he vouchsafed them no power to perform righteously. Oh, be sure that if he had intended, if he had commanded you to pronounce irreversible decrees upon your fellow-man, quenching that life which is his highest gift, he would have endowed you with gifts to perform that duty rightly. Has he done so? Ask not alone the pages dripping with innocent blood which I have quoted, but your own hearts! Are you, according to the promise of the serpent-tempter, 'gods, knowing good from evil?' of such clear omniscience, that you can hurl an unprepared soul before the tribunal of its Maker, in the full assurance that you have rightly loosed the silver cord which he had measured, have justly broken the golden bowl which he had fashioned! Oh, my lord," he concluded, his dark eyes flashing with excitement, "it is possible that the first announcement of my innocence of this crime, to which you will give credence, may be proclaimed

from the awful tribunal of him who alone cannot err! How if he, whose eye is even now upon us, should then proclaim, 'I too, sat in judgment on the day when you presumed to doom your fellow-worm; and I saw that the murderer was not in the dock, but on the bench!' Oh, my lord, think well of what you do—pause ere you incur such fearful hazard; for be assured, that for all these things God will also bring *you* to judgment!"

He ceased, and sank back exhausted. His fervid declamation produced a considerable impression upon the auditory; but it soon disappeared before the calm, impressive charge of the judge, who re-assured the startled jury, by reminding them that their duty was to honestly execute the law, not to dispute about its justice. For himself, he said, sustained by a pure conscience, he was quite willing to incur the hazard hinted at by the prisoner. After a careful and luminous summing up, the jury, with very slight deliberation, returned a verdict of "Guilty."

As the word passed the lips of the foreman of the jury, a piercing shriek rang through the court. It proceeded from a tall figure in black, who, with closely-drawn veil, had sat motionless during the trial, just before the dock. It was the prisoner's mother. The next instant she rose, and throwing back her veil wildly exclaimed, "He is innocent—innocent, I tell ye! I alone"—

"Mother! mother! for the love of Heaven be silent!" shouted the prisoner with frantic vehemence, and stretching himself over the front of the dock, as if to grasp and restrain her.

"Innocent, I tell you!" continued the woman. "I—I alone am the guilty person! It was I alone that perpetrated the deed! He knew it not, suspected it not, till it was too late. Here," she added, drawing a sheet of paper from her bosom—"here is my confession, with each circumstance detailed!"

As she waved it over her head, it was snatched by her son, and, swift as lightning, torn to shreds. "She is mad! Heed her not—believe her not!" He at the same time shouted at the top of his powerful voice, "She is distracted—mad! Now, my lord, your sentence! Come!"

The tumult and excitement in the court no language which I can employ would convey an adequate impression of. As soon as calm was partially restored, Mrs. Bourdon was taken into custody: the prisoner was removed; and the court adjourned, of course without passing sentence.

It was even as his mother said! Subsequent investigation, aided by her confessions, amply proved that the fearful crime was conceived and perpetrated by her alone, in the frantic hope of securing for her idolized son the hand and fortune of Miss Armitage. She had often been present with him in his laboratory, and had thus become acquainted with the uses to which certain agents could be put. She had purloined the key of the recess; and he, unfortunately too late to prevent the perpetration of the crime, had by mere accident discovered the abstraction of the poison. His subsequent declarations had been made for the determined purpose of saving his mother's life by the sacrifice of his own!

The wretched woman was not reserved to fall before the justice of her country. The hand of God smote her ere the scaffold was prepared for her. She was smitten with frenzy, and died raving in the Metropolitan Lunatic Asylum. Alfred Bourdon,

after a lengthened imprisonment, was liberated. He called on me, by appointment, a few days previous to leaving this country forever; and I placed in his hands a small pocket-Bible, on the fly-leaf of which was written one word—"Ellen!" His dim eye lighted up with something of its old fire as he glanced at the characters; he then closed the book, placed it in his bosom, and waving me a mute farewell—I saw he durst not trust himself to speak—hastily departed. I never saw him more!

