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Defoe Abbot Melville Montaigne Cooper Emerson Hugo
Stoker Wilde Christie Maupassant Haggard Chesterton Molière Eliot Grimm
Garnett Engels Byron Schiller
Goethe Hawthorne Smith Kafka
Cotton Dostoyevsky Hall Willis
Baum Henry Kipling Doyle
Leslie Dumas Flaubert Nietzsche
Stockton Turgenev Balzac
Burroughs Vatsyayana Crane
Curtis Tocqueville Verne
Homer Tolstoy Gogol Busch
Darwin Thoreau Twain
Potter Zola Lawrence Plato Scott
Kant Freud Jowett Stevenson Dickens Harte
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Mona

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CHAPTER I.

A FASCINATING YOUNG WIDOW OPENS THE STORY.

"Appleton, don't look quite yet, but there's a woman just behind you whom I want you to see. I never before saw such a face and figure! They are simply perfection!"

The above remarks were made by a young man, perhaps thirty years of age, to his companion, who, evidently, was somewhat his senior.

The two gentlemen were seated at a private table in the dining-room of a large hotel in Chicago, Illinois, and were themselves both handsome and distinguished in appearance.

"There!" the speaker continued, as a slight commotion near them indicated that some one was rising from a table; "she is about to leave the room, and now is your chance."

The gentleman addressed turned to look as the lady passed; but the moment she was beyond the possibility of hearing he broke into a laugh of amusement.

"Oh, Cutler!" he exclaimed; "I never would have believed that you could rave so over a red-head—you who all your life have held such hair in detestation!"

"Well," returned Mr. Cutler, flushing guiltily, "I acknowledge that I have always had a peculiar aversion to red hair; but, truly, hers is an unusual shade—not a flaming, staring red, but deep and rich. I never saw anything just like it before. Anyhow, she is a magnificent specimen of womanhood. See! what a queenly carriage! what a figure!" and his glance followed the lady referred to, lingeringly, admiringly.

"Yes, she certainly is a fine-looking woman," his companion admitted; "and, if I am any judge, the diamonds she wears are worth a small fortune. Did you notice them?"

"No; I saw only herself," was the preoccupied response.

"Aha! I see you are clean gone," was the laughing rejoinder of Mr. Appleton.

The lady referred to was indeed a strangely attractive person. She was rather above the medium height, straight as an arrow, with a perfectly molded figure, although it was somewhat inclined to *embonpoint*, while her bearing was wonderfully easy and graceful. Her complexion was exquisitely fair, her features round, yet clearly cut and regular. She had lovely eyes of blue, with a fringe of decided, yet not unbecoming red upon their white lids, while her hair was also a rich but striking red, and was worn short, and curled about; her fair forehead and down around her alabaster neck in bewitching natural rings.

She was apparently about twenty-five or twenty-eight years of age, with all the strength and *verve* of perfect health in her movements. She was dressed wholly in black, which served but to enhance her fairness, while in her ears and at her throat she wore peculiar ornaments shaped like small crescents, studded with diamonds, remarkable for their purity and brilliancy.

For several days Mr. Cutler and Mr. Appleton sat at the same table, and were quietly observant of this lovely woman.

She came and went, apparently unconscious of their notice or admiration, was gently dignified in her bearing and modest in her deportment, and the two gentlemen became more and more interested in her.

Upon inquiring, they learned that she was a young widow—a Mrs. Bently, whose husband had recently died very suddenly. He was supposed to have been very wealthy, but, there being no children, there was some trouble about the settlement of the property, and she was boarding in the city until matters should be adjusted, when she contemplated going abroad.

She seemed to be an entire stranger to every one, and very much alone, save for the companionship of a maid, by whom she was always attended, except at meal-time. Mr. Appleton was called from the city about ten days after his attention was first called to her, but his friend, Mr. Cutler, was still a guest at the hotel, and before the expiration of another week he had managed to make the acquaintance of the fascinating widow.

The more he saw of her the more deeply interested he became, until he began to realize that his interest was fast merging into a sentiment of a more tender nature.

Mr. Cutler was an energetic young broker, and report said that he was rapidly amassing a fortune, and ere long would be rated rich among rich men. He was fine-looking, very genial and social in his nature, and so, of course, was a general favorite wherever he went.

His admiration for Mrs. Bently soon became the subject of remark among his acquaintances at the hotel, and they predicted that the fair and wealthy widow would soon capture the gallant and successful broker.

Six weeks spent in the attractive widow's society convinced Justin Cutler that she was as lovely in character as in person. She was remarkably sweet-tempered, very devout, and charitable beyond degree. She would never listen to or indulge in gossip of any kind; on the contrary, she always had something kind and pleasant to say to every one.

Upon several occasions, Mr. Cutler invited her to attend the theatre, lectures and concerts, and she honored him by graciously accepting his attentions; while, occasionally, he was permitted to accompany her to church.

That faultless face, her unvarying amiability, her culture and wit, were fast weaving a spell about him, and he had decided to ask her to share his fate and fortune, when he suddenly missed her from her accustomed seat at the table, and failed to meet her about the house as usual.

For three days he did not see anything of her, and he began to be deeply troubled and anxious about her. He could not endure the

suspense, and made inquiries for her. He was told that she was ill, and this, of course, did not relieve his anxiety.

On the fourth day, however, she made her appearance again at dinner, but looking so pale and sad, that his heart went out to her with deeper tenderness than ever.

He waited in one of the parlors until she came out from the dining-room. She made her appearance just as a lady, one of the hotel guests, was leaving the room. With eagerness he stepped forward to greet her, and then, with kind solicitude, inquired regarding her recent illness.

"Thank you, Mr. Cutler; I have not been really ill," she said, with a pathetic little quiver of her red lips, "but—I am in deep trouble; I have had bad news."

"I am very sorry," returned the young broker, in a tone of earnest sympathy. "Shall I be presuming if I inquire the nature of your ill-tidings?"

She smiled up at him gratefully.

"Oh, no, and you are very kind. It—it is only a business trouble," she said, a vivid flush dyeing her fair cheek; "but being a woman, perhaps I cannot meet it with quite the fortitude of a man."

"Can I help you in any way?" the gentleman asked, eagerly. "Come into the little reception-parlor yonder—there is no one there—and confide in me, if you will honor me so far."

The fair widow took the arm he offered her, and he led her within the room, and shut the door.

"Sit here," he said, placing a comfortable rocker for her, then he sat opposite her, and waited for her to open her heart to him.

"You know," she began, falteringly, "that I have lost my husband; he died several months ago, and there has been some trouble about the settlement of his estate.

"His relatives contested the will, but my lawyer has always assured me that he could at least secure a handsome amount for me, even if he could not win the whole. But the first of this week, I learned that I am to have almost nothing—that there was not nearly

as much as at first supposed, and Mr. Bently's relatives will get that: and so—I am penniless."

"Oh, not so badly off as that, I hope!" exclaimed Mr. Cutler, looking grave.

"It is true. My lawyer's charges will take every dollar that is coming to me, and—oh! it is humiliating to tell you of it—I owe a great deal of money here at this hotel, besides. I never dreamed," she went on, hurriedly, and flushing hotly again, "but that I could pay my bills. I thought that I should have a large fortune, and I—I am afraid that I have been very extravagant: but now—I do not know *what* I shall do."

Mr. Cutler saw that she was in a very perplexing situation, and she seemed so crushed by it that all his tenderest sympathies were enlisted.

"If you would allow me to lend you any amount," he began, when the widow showed him the first burst of temper that he had ever seen her exhibit.

"Sir, do you suppose I would *borrow* what I could never expect to pay?" she cried, with almost passionate scorn, and flushing to her temples.

"I beg your pardon," Justin Cutler returned, feeling almost as if he had been guilty of an inexcusable insult; "believe me, I would not wish to put you under any obligation that would be burdensome."

Then he asked himself if it would be safe for him to tell her of his love then and there, lay his fortune at her feet, and thus relieve her from her present trouble and all anxiety for the future.

But he feared she might resent the offer, coming at such a time—think it was prompted more by pity than affection, and reject it as scornfully as she had refused his offer of a loan.

She was very attractive as she sat there before him, her white hands folded on her lap, her eyes cast down in troubled thought, and a grieved expression about her beautiful mouth, and he longed, with all the earnestness of his generous nature, to help her in this emergency.

Suddenly his face lighted.

"Are you willing to confide in me the amount of your indebtedness, Mrs. Bently?" he gently asked.

She falteringly named a sum that staggered him, and told him that she had indeed been very extravagant.

"I—I have always had what I wanted. I have never had to count the cost of anything, for my husband was very generous and indulgent," she apologized, with evident embarrassment, as she met his grave look.

"May I make a practical suggestion without the fear of offending you?" the young man questioned, with some confusion.

"Oh, if you would!" cried his companion, eagerly, her face brightening, while she uttered a sigh of relief, as if she expected that his suggestion, whatever it might be, would lift the burden from her heart.

"You have some very costly jewels," Mr. Cutler remarked, the color deepening in his cheek as he glanced at the flashing stones in her ears; "perhaps you would be willing to dispose of them and thus relieve yourself from your present embarrassment."

"Oh, you mean sell my — my diamonds?" cried the lovely widow, with a little nervous sob, and instantly her two white hands went up to her ears, covering the blazing gems from his sight, while a painful flush leaped to her brow and lost itself beneath the soft rings of her burnished hair.

"Yes," pursued Mr. Cutler, wondering at her confusion. "If I am any judge, they are very valuable stones, and I suppose you might realize a handsome sum upon them."

He was secretly planning to redeem them and restore them to her later, if she should favorably regard his suit.

"But — but;" and her confusion became intensified a hundred-fold, "they aren't *real*. I'd be glad enough if they were, and would willingly sell them to cancel my indebtedness, but they are only *paste*, although an excellent imitation."

Her companion regarded her with astonishment.

"You surely do not mean that?" he exclaimed, "for if I ever saw pure white diamonds, those which you wear are certainly genuine."

"No, they are not," she returned, shaking her head with a positive air. "I am very fond of diamonds and I had some very nice ones once, but they were stolen from me just after my husband died. I could not afford to replace them, just then, and I had these made to wear until I could do so. They were made in Paris, where they are very clever at such work. I hoped when my husband's estate was settled, I could have some real stones again; but, of course, I cannot *now*," she regretfully concluded.

"Will you allow me to examine them, please?" Mr. Cutler asked, still sure that the stones were genuine.

Mrs. Bently unhesitatingly removed one of the crescent ornaments from her ear and laid it in his hand.

He examined it critically and was still confident that it was really composed of precious gems. He believed that if she had had them made to order to replace the stolen ones, either the jeweler had been guilty of a wretched blunder, or else some friend had interposed to replace the jewels which she so regretted.

"I am sure there is some mistake. I am confident that these are real diamonds and very valuable," he asserted, positively.

"Oh, no, they are *not*," she repeated, with grave assurance.

Then she naïvely added, and with a little ripple of laughter:

"I am glad to know that they are so good an imitation as to deceive you. There is some comfort in that, although it is not pleasant to have to acknowledge the sham."

Still her companion was not convinced. Surely no paste jewels ever emitted such a brilliant white light as those which lay upon his palm, catching and reflecting the various colors about them in such dazzling gleams.

"Would you be willing to go with me to some reliable jeweler and have them tested?" he asked.

The lovely woman flushed crimson.

"No, I couldn't do that; I should not like to—to have it known that I had been wearing such things," she said. "To be sure," she added, with a quick upward glance that made her companion thrill with secret joy, "I have confessed it to you, but you were so kind and sympathetic I—I trusted you involuntarily."

"Thank you," Justin Cutler returned, a brilliant smile lighting his face, and he longed to open his heart to her, but deemed it better to wait a while. "Then, if you would not like to go with me, will you trust the stones with me, and allow me to have them tested for you?"

"Of course I will, if you want to take that trouble; though," she added, with a little skeptical laugh, as she removed the crescent from her other ear and gave it to him, "I assure you the trust isn't such a responsible one as you imagine."

"We shall see," he smilingly responded, as he put the ornaments carefully in his purse and arose, "I shall submit them to some reliable dealer in diamonds, get him to set a value upon them, and will inform you of the verdict this evening."

"Thank you, Mr. Cutler—you are very kind to be so interested for me," the beautiful woman gratefully murmured.

"I would I might," the young man began, eagerly, then suddenly checked himself and added, "might assist you in some way regarding your other troubles."

Again he had been on the point of declaring himself, but told himself that the moment was not a propitious one.

"I am afraid it is too late for that," she responded, with a sigh; "the case is settled, and Mr. Bently's relatives have won. But, good-by—do not let me detain you longer."

"I will see you again this evening," he returned, adding, as he passed out of the room: "I will be very careful of your property, and hope to bring you a good report."

Mrs. Bently shrugged her graceful shoulders indifferently, as if she had no faith in his belief, and felt that it would be but a small loss if the jewels were never returned. Then, with a smile and a bow, she went up stairs to her own rooms.

CHAPTER II.

THE VICTIM OF A WOMAN'S WILES.

Justin Cutler, after leaving the hotel, went directly to one of the first jewelers of the city, a well-known diamond expert, and submitted Mrs. Bently's ornaments to his judgment.

"They are remarkably fine stones." Mr. Arnold remarked, after having carefully examined them through a microscope; "very pure and clear, most of them without a flaw. So far as I can see, there is not one of them that is in the least off-color."

"I thought so," was Mr. Cutler's inward and exultant comment; but he simply asked, as if he accepted the man's verdict as a matter of course: "What is your estimate of their value?"

"Well," said the jeweler, smiling, "if you wish to know their real value just for your own satisfaction, I can give it; but that might considerably exceed the amount I should be willing to name in case you might wish to dispose of them to me."

"I understand," Mr. Cutler returned; "but what would they be worth to you—what would you be willing to give for the stones?"

Mr. Arnold considered the matter a few moments, and then named a sum which Mr. Cutler deemed a fair price under the circumstances, and one which he felt sure Mrs. Bently would be only too glad to secure in her emergency.

"You make that offer for them, then—you will purchase them if the lady agrees to take the sum you have named?" he asked.

"Yes, and the offer shall be open for her acceptance or refusal for three days."

"Thank you; I will see you again before the time expires," Mr. Cutler replied; and, taking up the diamonds, which Mr. Arnold had

placed in a small box, he put them carefully away in an inside pocket and left the store.

When he returned to his hotel he sent his card up to Mrs. Bently, with a request that she would see him for a few moments in the reception-room. But he was greatly disappointed when the waiter returned and said that the lady was out.

He had an engagement for the evening, and thus he would not be able to see her until the next morning. He was somewhat troubled, for he did not like to retain her diamonds over night; but since he could not return them to her, he judged they would be safer about his person than anywhere else, and so did not remove them from his pocket.

The next morning he was early in his place at breakfast-time and anxiously awaiting the appearance of Mrs. Bently.

She soon came in, looking much brighter and fresher than she had been the day before, and he noticed that she was in her traveling-dress.

Could she be contemplating leaving the hotel? he asked himself, with a sudden sense of depression.

She smiled and bowed as she passed him, and he remarked, in a low tone, as he returned her salutation:

"I will wait for you in the reception-room."

She nodded assent, but a gleam of amusement shot into her expressive eyes, which he interpreted to mean that she believed he had failed in his errand and would be obliged to acknowledge the truth of what she had told him about her ornaments.

This thought greatly elated him, and he chuckled to himself as he imagined her astonishment when he should inform her of the offer of the diamond merchant.

He soon finished his breakfast and repaired to the reception-room, where he drew forth his morning paper to while away the time until Mrs. Bently should appear.

But she did not hurry, and he began to grow impatient. Evidently she had no faith in the genuineness of the stones, and had no intention of spoiling her breakfast just to be told what she already knew.

It was nearly half an hour before she came to him, but he could forgive her for making him wait, for her greeting was unusually cordial, and she seemed lovelier than ever in her pretty dress of dark gray trimmed with black. It was made very high at the throat, and fitted her perfect form like a glove. Her face was like a flawless pearl, and he had begun to think the soft ruddy rings that crowned her milk-white brow and made her look so youthful, the most beautiful hair in the world.

He sprang to his feet, his face all aglow, and went forward to take the hand she extended to him.

"I have such good news for you, Mrs. Bently," he said, as he drew the little box from his pocket. "Your gems are real after all," and he slipped them into her hand as he spoke.

She lifted a startled, incredulous look to his face.

"You cannot mean it — you are only jesting!" she cried.

"Indeed no; I would not jest and I do mean just what I have said," he persisted.

"Impossible! Why, Mr. Cutler, I gave less than ten dollars for the crescents."

The young man looked blank.

"Then some one has made an expensive blunder, and set real diamonds for you instead of paste. Where did you purchase them — or order them made?"

"Of Hardowin & Leroux, under the Palais Royal, Paris, less than a year ago," Mrs. Bently promptly responded.

"It does not seem possible that any one could have made such a costly mistake," Justin Cutler said, looking perplexed. "It is almost incredible."

"Yes, and I am just as astonished by your report," his companion said, lifting the cover of the box and gazing upon the blazing stones. "They do look wonderfully real," she added, "and yet I can hardly

believe, Mr. Cutler, that any one would be willing to purchase them and give me the value of diamonds."

"But the gentleman to whom I submitted them—a jeweler and an expert—made me an offer for them," and he named the sum.

"So much?" murmured the fair woman, flushing. "Ah, it would be such a help."

"This offer," Mr. Cutler resumed, "is to remain open to you for three days, and you can take them to him within that time if you see fit, and Mr. Arnold will give you the money."

Mrs. Bently made a sudden gesture of repulsion, her head drooped, a flush swept up to her brow, and tears rushed to her eyes.

"Poor little woman!" said Justin Cutler to himself, "it humiliates her to think of selling her jewels—of course it must."

Then he asked, after a moment of thought:

"Would you accept the amount that Mr. Arnold offered?"

"Why, yes, if—if you are sure that they are real, and think it would be right for me to do so," she answered, with a somewhat troubled expression on her fair face.

"Of course it will be perfectly right; the man knew what he was talking about, for, as I told you, he is a diamond expert, and he examined them with the utmost care."

"The amount would be very acceptable," said the fair widow, musingly, "and I shall be glad to sell them; but—"

"The thought of going personally to sell your jewels humiliates you," the generous-hearted young man added; "then let me do it for you, and relieve you of the disagreeable task."

"How kind you are; how you read my very thoughts; but I do not like to trouble you," murmured the beautiful woman, with a quiver of her red lips and a thrilling glance. "And yet," she continued, "I must have money at once. I was going to my lawyer this morning to beg him to try and raise something for me in some way, for I must settle my bill here to-day. I have dismissed my maid and engaged a room at No. 10 — — street, and am going there this afternoon. Oh! Mr. Cutler, it is very hard to be obliged to confess my poverty," and

she had to abruptly cease her remarks, in order to preserve her self-control, for she seemed upon the point of breaking down utterly.

"Mrs. Bently," said the young man, with sudden impulse, "let me relieve you from all unpleasantness; let me advance you the sum which Mr. Arnold named; then I can take the crescents to him and he will make it right with me."

A peculiar smile lingered about his lips as he concluded.

"That is exceedingly kind of you," Mrs. Bently said, gratefully, "but, truly, Mr. Cutler, I am almost afraid to take you at your word."

"Why?"

"Because I have always regarded the crescents as paste, and — and I cannot quite divest myself of the idea even now, in spite of your assurance," she answered, with a clouded brow.

Her companion laughed aloud.

"I will be responsible for their genuineness," he returned. "See!" he added, drawing a card from his pocket and writing rapidly upon it. "I will give you this to ease your conscience."

She took it and read:

"I, the undersigned, purchase of Mrs. Bently a pair of crescent ornaments which she affirms are paste, but which I am content to accept as genuine, for the sum agreed upon."

The price was carried out in figures, and his full name signed underneath.

She looked up at him with tears in her eyes.

"You are determined to befriend me, in spite of my scruples," she murmured, brokenly.

"I would gladly do a hundred-fold more for you," he replied, with tender earnestness. "Will you let me have the crescents now?"

"Yes, and thank you more than I can express," she answered, with drooping lids.

He drew forth a wallet filled with bills, and began to count out the sum he had named.

"Wait a moment," said Mrs. Bently, the color mounting to her temples; "I have a handsome case for the ornaments. I will go and get it for you."

She turned suddenly and vanished from his presence, before he could tell her he would rather take them in the little box.

"How sensitive the poor child is!" he murmured, with a tender smile; "she could not even bear to see me count out the money."

Mrs. Bently soon returned with a handsome morocco case in her hands.

"They look better in this," she remarked, as she lifted the lid, and revealed the crescents lying upon a rich black velvet bed; "and," with a nervous little laugh, "now that I know they are genuine, I really am very loath to part with them, in spite of my necessity."

She closed the case with a snap, and passed it to him, and he slipped a roll of crisp bank-bills into her hand.

"This arrangement will smooth all difficulties, I trust," he said, "and now," with a slight tremor in his voice, "I have a special favor to ask. May I come to see you at No. 10 — — street?"

"Certainly, you may, Mr. Cutler," she replied, lifting a bright, eager face to him, "and I assure you I shall have a warmer welcome for no one else. I cannot tell you how grateful I am —"

"Do not speak of that," he interposed. "I am amply repaid for anything I have done by seeing the look of trouble gone from your face. I must bid you good morning now, but I shall give myself the pleasure of calling upon you very soon."

He held out his hand to her, and she laid hers within it. He was surprised to find it icy cold and trembling, but he attributed it to emotion caused by the parting with him.

"Then I shall only say *au revoir*," she responded, smiling.

She looked so lovely that he longed to draw her within his arms and take a more tender leave of her, but again putting a curb upon himself, he simply bowed, and left her, when with a quick, elastic step, she swept up stairs to her own apartments.

Justin Cutler was very busy all the morning, and did not find time to go to the jeweler's until the afternoon.

He had no intention of disposing of the crescents—he simply wished to tell him that he had himself concluded to purchase them, and then ask the privilege of depositing them in Mr. Arnold's safe for a few days; for they were to be his gift to the woman he loved, if she received his suit with favor.

The gentleman was in, and his eyes lighted as his glance fell upon the case which Mr. Cutler laid upon the show-case, for he believed that, in purchasing the crescents, he was going to get an unusually good bargain.

"Ah," he remarked, "the lady has decided to dispose of the stones?"

"Yes; but—" Mr. Cutler began, when he suddenly stopped, and gazed, astonished, at the man.

He had taken the case, opened it, and started in dismay as he saw what were within, while a look of blank consternation overspread his face.

Then he turned sternly, almost fiercely, upon the young man.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded, in a threatening tone. "Did you imagine you could cheat me in this miserable way? You have got hold of the wrong customer if you did."

"What do you mean, sir?" inquired Mr. Cutler, amazed, but flushing angrily at being addressed so uncivilly.

"These are not the stones you brought to me yesterday," said Mr. Arnold, who was also very angry.

"Sir!" exclaimed Justin Cutler, aghast, but with haughty mien.

"They are nothing but paste," continued the jeweler, eyeing the beautiful crescents with disdain; "and," he added, menacingly, "I've a mind to have you arrested on the spot for attempting to obtain money under false pretenses."

Mr. Cutler grew pale at this with mingled anger and a sudden fear.

He reached across the counter and took the case from Mr. Arnold's hand.

He turned the stones to the light.

At the first glance they seemed to be all right—he could detect nothing wrong; for aught that he could see the crescents were the same which he had submitted to the merchant the day before. But as he studied them more closely the gleam of the gems was entirely different—the fire of the genuine diamond was lacking.

"Can it be possible that I have been duped, swindled?" he exclaimed, with white lips and a sinking heart.

"I should say, rather, that you were attempting to dupe and swindle some one else," sarcastically retorted the diamond dealer. "The stones are a remarkably fine imitation, I am free to confess, and would easily deceive a casual observer; but if you have ever tried and succeeded in this clever game before, you are certainly caught this time."

"Mr. Arnold, I assure you that I am blameless in this matter—that I honestly believed the jewels to be the same that I brought to you yesterday," the young man said, with an earnest directness which convinced the gentleman that he spoke the truth. "I see now," he continued, "that they are not; and"—a feeling of faintness almost overpowering him as he realized all that this experience would cost him, aside from his pecuniary loss—"I have been outrageously deceived and hoodwinked, for I have already advanced the sum you named to the woman who wished to dispose of the diamonds."

Mr. Arnold searched the manly face before him, and was forced to believe in the truth of his statements.

"If that is so, then you have indeed been wretchedly swindled," he said; "for these crescents are but duplicates in paste of those I examined yesterday. How did you happen to be so taken in?"

Mr. Cutler briefly related the circumstances, and when he concluded, Mr.

Arnold remarked: