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of that Saucy Jessie Bain, by Laura Jean Libbey**

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK KIDNAPPED AT THE ALTAR; OR, THE
ROMANCE OF THAT SAUCY JESSIE BAIN ***

E-text prepared by Annie McGuire

LAURA JEAN LIBBEY'S NEW \$10,000 STORY
KIDNAPPED AT THE ALTAR
OR
The Romance of that Saucy Jessie Bain
The Latest and Most Thrilling Story Fresh from the Pen of the
Peoples' Favorite Author,
MISS LAURA JEAN LIBBEY

THE ARTHUR WESTBROOK COMPANY

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Kidnapped at The Altar

OR

The Romance of that Saucy Jessie Bain

CHAPTER I.

SOME YOUNG GIRLS FIND LOVE SO SWEET; TO OTHERS IT PROVES A CURSE.

It was a magnificent evening, in balmy June, on the far-famed St. Lawrence.

The steamer "St. Lawrence" was making her nightly search-light excursion down the bay, laden to her utmost capacity.

The passengers were all summer tourists, light of heart and gay of speech; all save one, Hubert Varrick, a young and handsome man, dressed in the height of fashion, who held aloof from the rest, and who stood leaning carelessly against the taffrail.

The steamer was making its way in and out of the thousand green isles, the great light from the pilot-house suddenly throwing a broad, illuminating flash first on this and then on that.

As the light swept across land and water from point to point, Varrick lightly laughed aloud at the

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ludicrous incidents, such as the sudden flashing of the light's piercing rays on some lover's nook, where two souls indulging in but one thought were ruthlessly awakened from sweet seclusion to the most glaring publicity, and at many a novel sight, little dreaming that at every turn of the ponderous wheels he was nearing his destiny.

"Where are we now?" he inquired of a deck-hand.

"At Fisher's Landing, sir."

The words had scarcely left his lips ere a radiant flood of electric light swept over the jutting bit of mainland. In that instantaneous white glare Varrick saw a sight that was indelibly engraved upon his memory while life lasted.

The dock was deserted by all save one person—a young girl, waving her hand toward the steamer.

She wore a dress of some white, fleecy material, her golden hair flying in the wind, and flapping against her bare shoulders and half-bared white arms.

"Great heavens! who is that?" Varrick cried.

But as he strained his eyes eagerly toward the beautiful picture, the scene was suddenly wrapped in darkness, and the steamer glided on.

"Who was that, and what place was it?" he asked again.

"It was Fisher's Landing, I said," rejoined the other. "The girl is 'Saucy Jessie Bain,' as they call her hereabouts. She's Captain Carr's niece."

"Has she a lover?" suddenly asked Varrick.

"Lord bless you, sir!" he answered, "there's scarcely a single man for miles around that isn't in love with Jessie Bain; but she will have none of them." [Pg 7]

"There's a little story about Jessie Bain. I'll tell it to you, since you admire the girl."

But the story was not destined to become known to Varrick, for his companion was called away at that moment.

He could think of nothing else, see nothing but the face of the girl he had seen on the dock at Fisher's Landing.

This was particularly unfortunate, for at that moment Hubert Varrick was on his way to be married on the morrow to the beautiful heiress, Miss Northrup.

She was a famous beauty and belle, and Varrick had been madly in love with her. But since he had seen the face of Jessie Bain he felt a strange, half-defined regret that he was bound to another. He was not over-impatient to arrive at his destination, although he knew that Gerelda Northrup and a bevy of her girl friends would undoubtedly be at the dock to welcome him.

This proved to be the case, and a moment later he caught sight of the tall, stately beauty, who swept forward to meet him with outstretched jeweled hands and a glad welcome on her proud face.

"I am so delighted that you have come at last, Hubert," she murmured.

But she drew back abashed as he attempted to kiss her, and this action chilled him to the very heart's core.

He was quickly presented to Gerelda's girl friends, and then the party made their way up to the Crossmon Hotel, which was only a few yards distant, Varrick and Miss Northrup lagging a little behind the rest. [Pg 8]

"I hope you have been enjoying your outing this season, my darling," said Varrick.

"I have had the most delightful time of my life," she declared.

Varrick frowned. It was not so pleasant for him to hear that she could enjoy herself in his absence. Jealousy was deeply rooted in his nature.

"Is there any special one who has helped to make it so pleasant?" he asked.

"Yes. Captain Frazier is here."

"Have you been flirting with him, Gerelda?" he asked.

"Don't be jealous, Hubert."

"I am jealous!" he cried. "You know that is the curse of the Varricks."

By this time they had reached the hotel. Throngs of beautiful women crowded the broad piazzas, yet Varrick noticed with some pride that Gerelda was the most beautiful girl there.

"You must be very tired after your long journey," she murmured. "You should retire early, to be fully rested for to-morrow."

"Do you mean *you* wish to retire early?" asked Hubert, rather down-hearted that she wanted to dismiss him so soon. "If you think it best I will leave you."

Was it only his fancy, or did her eyes brighten perceptibly?

A few more turns up and down the veranda, a few impassioned words in a cozy nook, and then he said good-night to her, delivering her to the care of her chaperon. [Pg 9]

But even after he had reached his room, and thrown himself across his couch, Varrick could not sleep.

The sound of laughter floated up to him.

Though it was an hour since he had bidden Gerelda good-night, he fancied that it was her voice he heard in the porch below; and he fancied, too, that he knew the other deep rich voice that chimed in now and then with hers.

"That is certainly Frazier," he muttered.

Seizing his coat and hat, he donned them hurriedly, left his room, stepped out of the hotel by a rear entrance, made a tour of the thickly wooded grounds, until at last, from his hiding-place among the trees, he could gain an excellent view of the brilliantly lighted piazza, himself unseen.

His surmise had been but only too true.

Mad with jealous rage, Varrick turned on his heel.

He rushed down the path to the water's edge. A little boat was skimming over the water, heading for the very spot where he stood. Its occupant, a sturdy young fisherman, was just about to secure it to an iron ring, when Varrick approached him.

"I should like to hire your boat for an hour," he said, huskily.

Varrick wanted to get away, to be by himself to think.

The bargain was made with the man, and with a few strokes from his muscular arms the little skiff was soon whirling out into the deep waters of the bay. Then he rested on his oars and floated down with the tide. [Pg 10]

Suddenly a clear and yet shrill voice broke upon his ear.

"Halloo! Halloo there! Won't you come to my rescue, please?"

Varrick could hear the girlish voice plainly enough, but he could not imagine whence it came.

Again the shrill cry was repeated. Just then he observed a slight figure standing down near the water's edge of the island he was passing.

Varrick headed for the island at once, and as he drew so near that the face of the girl could be easily distinguished, he made a wonderful discovery—the girl was Jessie Bain.

"I am so glad for deliverance at last!" she cried.

"How in the world came you here?" exclaimed Varrick.

"I came out for a little row," she said, "and stopped at this island for some flowers that I had seen here yesterday. I suppose I could not have fastened my boat very securely, for when I came to look for it, it was gone; and, oh! my uncle would be so angry; he would beat me severely!"

Somehow one word brought on another, and quite unconsciously pretty little Jessie Bain found herself chatting to the stranger, who vowed himself as only too pleased to row out of his way to see her safely home.

"Your home does not seem to be a happy one," he said at length.

"It wouldn't be, if they could have their way. It used to be different when auntie was alive. Now my cousin beats me badly enough, and Uncle John believes all she tells him about me. But I always get even with her. [Pg 11]

"In the morning my cousin went to her work (she clerks in one of the village stores), but before she left the house she picked the biggest quarrel you ever heard of, with me—because I wouldn't lend her the only decent dress I have to wear. She expected her beau from a neighboring village to come to town.

"I would have lent it to her, but she's just the kind of a girl that wouldn't take care of anything, unless it was her own, and I knew it would be ruined in one day.

"It took me a whole year to save money enough to get it. I sold eggs to buy it, and, oh, golly! didn't I coax those chicks to lay, though!"

Varrick could not help but smile as he looked at her.

And she was so innocent, too. He wondered if she could be more than sixteen or seventeen years old.

"About four o'clock she sent a note to the house, and in it she said:

"Dear Cousin Jessie, I am going to bring company home, so for goodness' sake do get up a good dinner. I send a whole basket of good things with the boy who brings this note. Cook them all.'

"Well, I cooked the supper just as she wanted me to do. Oh! it was dreadfully tempting, and right here let me say, whenever there's a broken cup or saucer or plate in the house, or fork with only two prongs, or a broken-handled knife, it always falls to me. My cousin always says: 'It's good enough for Jessie Bain; let *her* have it.' [Pg 12]

"I prepared the dainty supper, ran and got every good knife and fork and plate and cup and saucer, and hid them under an old oak-tree fully half a mile away.

"I left out on the table only the broken things, to see how she'd like them.

"By and by she and her beau came. I ran out the back door as I heard them cross the front porch.

"Oh! but wasn't she mad! I watched her through the window, laughing so hard I almost split my sides, and she fairly flew at me. Then I went down and jumped into my little boat, and pushed away for dear life, to be out of her reach. I rowed down to this island, thinking to fetch her back some flowers to appease her mighty wrath; but I was so tired that I fell asleep. I was frightened nearly to death when I awoke and saw that it was dark night. I had a greater fright still when I discovered that my little boat was gone—had drifted away."

Varrick had almost forgotten his own turbulent thoughts in listening to the girl.

"Are you not afraid of punishment?" he asked, as they neared Fisher's Landing.

He could see a quick, frightened look sweep over the girl's face.

"I don't know what they will do with me," she said.

"If they attempt to abuse you come straight to me!" cried Varrick, quite forgetful in the eagerness of the moment what he was saying. [Pg 13]

By this time they had reached Fisher's Landing. He sprung from the skiff and helped her ashore.

"Good-night, and thank you ever so much," she said. And with a quick, childish, thoughtless motion, she bent her pretty head and kissed the strong white hand that clasped her own.

He had been so kind, so sympathetic to her, and that was something new for Jessie Bain.

He watched her in silence as she flitted up the path, until she was lost to sight in the darkness.

Then he re-entered his boat and made his way slowly back to the bay.

The spacious corridors of the grand Hotel Crossmon were wrapped in silence when he reached it.

He half expected to see the two whom he had left in that flower-embowered lovers' nook at the end of the piazza still sitting there.

Then he laughed to himself at the folly of the thought. [Pg 14]

CHAPTER II.

FATE IS AGAINST SOME PEOPLE, FROM THE CRADLE TO THE GRAVE.

Change is the law of wind and moon and lover—
And yet I think, lost Love, had you been true,
Some golden fruits had ripened for your plucking
You will not find in gardens that are new.

L. C. M.>

When Gerelda Northrup bid Captain Frazier good-night, and linked her arm within her mother's, and retired to their apartments, Mrs. Northrup could not help notice how carefully her daughter guarded the great crimson beauty rose she wore on her breast.

The mother also noticed that the handsome captain wore a bud of the same kind in the lapel of his coat.

"My dear," she said, "I think you are going a little too far with Captain Frazier. It will not do to flirt with him on the very eve of your marriage with Hubert Varrick."

"There isn't the least bit of harm in it, mamma," Gerelda answered. "Captain Frazier is a

delightful companion. Why shouldn't I enjoy his society?"

"Because it is playing with edged tools," declared Mrs. Northrup. "The captain is desperately in love with you."

"You should not blame him for lingering by my side to the very last moment."

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"Trouble will come of it, I fear," returned the other. "He is always at your side."

"Save your lecture until to-morrow. I am sure it will keep. Do please ring the bell for my maid; it is nearly eleven o'clock, and I must not lose my beauty-sleep."

Gerelda Northrup knew in her own mind that all her mother said was but too true; but the spirit of coquetry was so deeply imbedded in her nature that she would not resign her sceptre over her old lovers' hearts until the last moment.

Of course the captain understood thoroughly that all her love was given to Hubert Varrick, and that it was only a very mild flirtation with himself she was indulging in.

She would have trembled could she have read the thoughts of Captain Frazier at that very moment.

In his elegant apartment, at the further end of the corridor, the captain was pacing the floor, wild with his own thoughts.

"My God! can I live through it?" he muttered. "How can I live and endure it? How can I stand by and see the girl I love made another man's bride, without the mad desire to slay him overpowering me? If I would not have the crime of murder on my soul, I must leave this place to-night, and never look upon Gerelda's beautiful face again. One day more of this would drive me mad. Great Heaven! why did I linger by her side when I knew my danger? There are times when I could almost swear that Gerelda cares quite as much for me as she does for Hubert Varrick. If I had had a fair chance I think I could have won her from him. No, I will not see her again— I will leave here this very night."

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The captain rang the bell furiously, and called for a brandy and soda.

Soon after he left the hotel, saying that he would send for his luggage later.

But even after he had done all that, Captain Frazier stood motionless in the grounds watching the darkened windows of Gerelda's room.

The fire in his brain, produced by the potion he had taken, made sad havoc with his imagination. He thought of how the knights of old did when the girls they loved were about to wed rivals.

Was he less brave than they? And he thought, standing there under the night sky, how cleverly the gypsy had outwitted Blue-beard at the very altar to which he had led his blushing brides.

Great was Miss Northrup's consternation the next morning when she learned through a little note left for her that Captain Frazier had taken his departure from the Crossmon Hotel the preceding night. A sigh of relief fell from her red lips.

"Perhaps it is better so," she said.

A messenger who brought a great basket of orchids and white roses, entered.

Hidden among the flowers, Gerelda found a little note in Varrick's handwriting:

"I hope my darling rested well. Heaven has made the day beautiful because it is our marriage morn."

It was an odd notion of Gerelda's to steal away from their elegant city mansion and her dear five hundred friends, to have the ceremony performed quietly up at the Thousand Islands, with only a select few to witness it.

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Great preparations had been made in the hotel for the approaching marriage. The spacious private parlors to be used were perfect fairy bowers of roses and green leaves.

Up to this very morning Miss Northrup's imported wedding-gown had not arrived. Mrs. Northrup and Hubert Varrick were wild with anxiety and impatience over the affair. Gerelda alone took the matter calmly.

"It will be here some time to-day," she averred. "The wedding will be delayed but a few hours, after all, and I don't know but that I prefer an evening wedding to a morning one, anyhow."

It was almost dark ere the long-looked-for bridal *trousseau* arrived. Varrick drew a great breath of relief.

He welcomed the shadows of night with the greatest joy. He never afterward remembered how he lived until the hour of eight rolled round.

He had not long to wait in the little anteroom where she was to join him. The few invited guests who were so fortunate as to receive invitations were all present.

A low murmur of admiration ran around that little group as the heavy silken *portières* that separated the anteroom from the reception parlor were drawn aside, and Hubert Varrick entered

with the beautiful heiress leaning on his arm.

In her gloved right hand she carried a prayer-book of pearl and gold. A messenger had brought it, handing it to her just as she was about to enter the anteroom.

"It is from an unknown friend," whispered the boy, so low that even Varrick did not catch the words. "A simple wish accompanies it," the boy went on, "and that is, when the ceremony is but just begun, you will raise the little book to your lips for the sake of the unknown friend who sends it to you."

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Gerelda smiled and promised, thoughtlessly enough, that she would comply.

"Are you ready, my darling?" said Hubert.

His thoughts were so confused at the time, that he had paid little heed to the messenger or noticed what he had brought to Gerelda, or what their conversation was about, or that the boy fled like a dark-winged shadow down the corridor after he had executed his errand.

She took her place by his side. Ah! how proud he was of her superb beauty, of her queenly carriage, and her haughty demeanor! Surely she was a bride worth winning—a queen among girls!

Slowly and solemnly the marriage ceremony began. Varrick answered promptly and clearly the questions put to him. Then the minister turned to the slender, statuesque figure by his side.

"Will you take this man to be your lawful, wedded husband, to love, honor, and obey him till death do you part?" he asked.

At that moment all assembled thought they heard a low, muffled whistle.

Before making answer, Gerelda raised the beautiful pearl and gold prayer-book and kissed it.

She tried to speak the words: "I will," but all in an instant her lips grew stiff and refused to utter them.

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No sound save a low gasp broke the terrible stillness.

She had kissed the little prayer-book as she had so laughingly and thoughtlessly promised to do, ere she uttered the words that would make her Hubert Varrick's wife. And what had happened to her? She was gasping for breath—dying!

The little book fell unheeded at her feet, and her head drooped backward.

With a great cry, Hubert Varrick caught her.

"It is only a momentary dizziness," said Varrick, half leading, half carrying her into the anteroom and up to the window, and throwing open the sash.

"Rest here, my darling, while I fetch you a glass of water," he said, as he placed her in a chair and rushed from the room.

The event just narrated had happened so suddenly that Mrs. Northrup and those in the outer apartment were for the time being fairly dazed, unable to move or stir.

And by the time they had recovered their senses Hubert had reappeared with a glass of water in his hand.

Mrs. Northrup was too excited to leave her seat; but the rest followed quickly on Hubert's heels to the anteroom.

One instant more and a wild, hoarse cry in Varrick's voice echoed through the place.

The room was empty! Where was Gerelda? There was no means of exit from that room save the door by which he had entered. Perhaps she had leaned from the window and fallen out. He rushed quickly to it and glanced down, with a wild prayer to Heaven to give him strength to bear what he might see lying on the ground below. But instead of a white, upturned face, and a shimmering heap of satin and lace, he beheld a ladder, which was placed close against the window; and half-way down upon it, caught firmly upon one of the rounds, he beheld a torn fragment of lace, which he instantly recognized as part of Gerelda's wedding veil.

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He could neither move nor speak. The sight held him spell-bound. By this time Mrs. Northrup reached his side.

"Oh! I might have known it, I might have guessed it!" she wildly cried, clutching at Varrick's arm. "She must have eloped with—with Captain Frazier," she whispered.

"Hush!" cried Varrick. "I know it, I believe it, but no one must know. I see it all. She repented of marrying me at the eleventh hour, and ere it was too late she fled with the lover who must have awaited her, in an agony of suspense, outside."

All the guests had gathered about them.

"Where is Miss Gerelda?" they all cried in a breath.

"She must have fallen from the window," they echoed; and immediately there was a stampede out

toward the grounds.

In the excitement of the moment no one noticed that Hubert Varrick and Mrs. Northrup were left behind.

"Help me to bear this dreadful burden, Hubert!" she sobbed, hoarsely. "I think I am going mad. I thank God that Gerelda's father did not live to see this hour!"

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Great as her grief was, the anguish on the face which Hubert Varrick raised to hers was pitiful to behold.

She was terrified. She saw that he needed comfort quite as much as herself.

The minister, who had entered the room unobserved, had heard all. He quitted the apartment as quickly as he had entered it, and hurried through the corridor to his friend Doctor Roberts.

"The greatest blessing you could do, doctor, would be to come to him quickly, and give him a potion that will make him dead to his trouble for a little while."

CHAPTER III.

"WHEN THOSE WE LOVE DRIFT AWAY FROM US THEY ARE NEVER THE SAME AGAIN— THEY NEVER COME BACK."

"Only a heart that's broken,
That is, if hearts can break;
Only a man adrift for life,
All for a woman's sake.
Your love was a jest—I now see it—
Now, though it's rather late;
Yes, too late to turn my life
And seek another fate."

Although search was instantly instituted for the missing bride-elect, not the slightest trace of her could be discovered.

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Was she Hubert Varrick's bride or not? There was great diversity of opinion about that. Many contended that she *was not*, because the words from the minister: "Now I pronounce you man and wife," *had not yet been uttered*.

No wonder the beauty had found it difficult to choose between handsome Hubert Varrick and the dashing captain.

Varrick was a millionaire, and Captain Frazier could easily write out his check for an equal amount.

The matter was hushed up quickly, and kept so quiet that even the simple village folk at Alexandria Bay never knew of the thrilling event that had taken place in their very midst at the Crossmon Hotel. If the simple fisher-folk had but known of it, a tragedy might have been averted.

Mrs. Northrup was the first to recover from the shock; grief gave place to the most intense anger, and as she paced the floor excitedly to and fro, she vowed to herself that she would never forgive Gerelda for bringing this disgrace upon her.

With Varrick the blow had been too severe, too terrible, to be so easily gotten over. When morning broke, he still lay, face downward, on the couch upon which he had thrown himself. The effects of the sleeping potion they had so mercifully administered to him had worn off, and he was face to face once more with the great sorrow of his life.

They brought him a tempting breakfast, but he sent it away untasted. He sent at once for one of the call-boys.

"Buy me a ticket for the first steamer that goes out," he said. "I do not care where it goes or what its destination is; all I want is to get away."

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Still the boy lingered.

"Well," said Varrick, "why do you wait?"

"I had something to tell you sir."

"Go on," said Varrick.

"There is a young girl down in the corridor who insists upon seeing you, sir. I told her it was quite useless, you would not see her; and then she fell into passionate weeping, sobbing out that you *must*, if but for a moment, and that she would not go until she had spoken with you, if she had to remain there all day."

"Where is she?"

"In the corridor without, sir."

Varrick crossed the room and stepped out into the corridor. He saw a little figure standing in the dim, shaded light.

She saw him at the same moment, and ran toward him with a little cry, flinging herself with a great sob at his feet.

"Oh, Mr. Varrick!" she cried.

"Why, it's little Jessie Bain!" he exclaimed in wonder, forgetting for the time being his own misery.

"It's just as you said it would be, sir—they have turned me out of the house. And you said, Mr. Varrick, if they ever did that, to be sure and come straight to you—and here I am!"

Varrick's amazement knew no bounds.

What should he do with this girl who was thrust so unceremoniously on his hands.

"If it had not been for you and your kind words, I should have flung myself in the St. Lawrence," continued the girl, "for I was so desperate. How kind Heaven was to send you to me to help me in my hour of greatest need, Mr. Varrick."

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"Come into the parlor and let us talk this matter over," said Varrick. "Yes, I will surely help you. I will go and see your uncle this very day."

"I would not go to him," cried the girl. "I swear to you I would not! When I tell you this, you will not wonder that I refuse. In his rage, because I came home so late last night, he shot at me. The ball passed within a hair's-breadth of my heart, for which it was intended, and the powder burned my arm—see!"

Hubert Varrick was horror-stricken. The little arm was all blackened with smoke, and burned with the powder. There was need for a doctor here at once.

"If I went back to him he would kill me," the girl sobbed. "Oh! do not send me back, Mr. Varrick. Let me stay here where you are."

"You are the only being in the whole wide world who has ever spoken kindly to me. I can do quite as much for you as I did for my uncle. I can mend your clothes, see about your meals, and read the papers to you, and—"

"Hush, child!" said Varrick. "Don't say any more. It is plain to me that you can not be sent back to your uncle. I will see what can be done for you. You shall be my *protégée* for the present."

"How young and sweet and fair and innocent the girl is!" he told himself.

Placing the girl in the housekeeper's charge, he had a long consultation with Doctor Roberts.

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"If you will allow me to make a suggestion," returned the doctor, "I would say, send Jessie Bain to school for a year, if you are inclined to be philanthropic. She is a wild, beautiful, thoughtless child, and it has often occurred to me that her education must be very limited."

"That will be the very thing," returned Varrick. "I wonder that this solution did not occur to me before. I am going away to-day," he added, "and wonder if I could get you to attend to the matter for me, doctor?"

"I will do so with pleasure," returned Doctor Roberts. "In fact, I know the very institution that would be most suitable. It's a private boarding-school for young ladies, patronized by the *élite*, and I feel assured that Professor Graham will take the greatest possible pains with this pretty, neglected girl, who will be heir only to the education she gets there, and her youth and strength with which to face the battle of life."

When the result of this conference was told to Jessie Bain, she sobbed as if her heart would break.

"I don't want to leave you, Mr. Varrick!" she cried, "indeed I don't. Let me go home with you. I am sure your mother will like me. I will be so good to her."

It was explained to her that this could not be. They could scarcely pacify her. It touched Hubert Varrick deeply to see how she clung to him.

He parted with her in the doctor's home, whence she had been taken, leaving his address with her, with the admonition that she should write to him every week, and tell him how she was progressing with her studies; and if she wanted anything she was to be sure to let him know.

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He went back to the hotel to bid good-bye to Mrs. Northrup; but somehow he could not bring himself to say one word to her about Jessie Bain.

As he boarded the evening boat for Clayton there was not a more miserable man in all the whole wide world than Hubert Varrick. He paced the deck moodily. The thousands of little green islands upon which the search-light flashed so continuously, had little charm for him. Suddenly as the light turned its full glare upon a small island midway up the stream, rendering each object upon it as clearly visible as though it were noonday, under the strong light Hubert Varrick's eyes fell upon a sight that fairly rooted him to the spot with horror.

In that instantaneous glance this is what he saw: A young and lovely girl crouching on her knees, in the long deep grass under the trees, her arms outstretched in wild supplication, and bending over her was the dark figure of a man. One hand clutched her white throat, and the other hand held a revolver pressed to her white brow. The slouch hat he wore concealed his features. The girl's face, framed in that mass of curling dark hair, the white arms—great God! how strangely like Gerelda's!

Was he going mad? He strained his eyes to see, and a terrible cry of agony broke from his lips.

"Captain!" he shrieked, "somebody, anybody, get me a life-boat, quick, for the love of Heaven! Half my fortune for a life-boat—quick!"

As he cried aloud, the island was buried in darkness again.

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CHAPTER IV.

"THE GIRL WHO PLAYS AT FLIRTATION MAY FIND SHE HAS GRASPED A TWO-EDGED SWORD," SAID THE HANDSOME YOUNG CAPTAIN, LOOKING FULL IN GERELDA'S BEWITCHING, HAUGHTY FACE.

The captain who was passing, stopped short and looked at Hubert Varrick in amazement as he cried out, wildly:

"Get me a life-boat, somebody—anybody! Half my fortune for a life-boat!"

"What is the matter?" asked the captain, sharply. "Has some one fallen overboard?"

When Varrick answered in the affirmative, the captain gave orders that a life-boat be at once lowered by the crew, calling upon Varrick to point out, as near as he could, where the drowning man was.

"I will go, too," Varrick answered, springing into the boat; and an instant later the boat was flying over the waves in the direction which Varrick indicated.

"Which way, sir?" asked the man at the oars.

"Straight toward that little island yonder," was the hoarse reply. "Make for it quickly! Here, take this bank-note, and, in Heaven's name, row sharp! No one is drowning, but there is a young and lovely girl at the mercy of some fiend on that island yonder!"

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The man dropped his oars.

"If you had told our captain that, he would never have sent out a life-boat," declared the man. "He thought it was some one drowning near at hand, for the story of Wau-Winet Island is no news to the people hereabouts."

"What do you mean?" cried Varrick.

"I can tell you the story in a very few words, sir," returned the man; "and surely there's no one more competent to relate it than myself. I can relate it while we are rowing over to Wau-Winet Island:

"Some six months ago a stranger suddenly appeared in our midst. He purchased Wau-Winet Island, and a few days later a score or more of workmen appeared one night at Alexandria Bay, and boarded a tug that was to take them out to the island.

"These workmen were all strangers to the inhabitants around Alexandria Bay, and they spoke in a different language.

"They lived upon the island for a month or more, never once coming in contact with the people hereabouts.

"All their food was brought to them. Soon their mysterious manners became the talk of all the

country round.

"In a month's time they had erected a grand stone house—almost a castle—hidden from any one who might chance to pass the island, by a net-work of trees.

"At length the gray-stone house was completed, and the strange, uncanny workmen took their departure as silently as they had come. [Pg 29]

"The people were warned to keep away from the place, for the workmen had left behind them a large, ferocious dog who menaced the life of any one who attempted to land on Wau-Winet Island.

"Only last night an event happened which I shall never forget if I live to be the age of Methuselah. I was standing near the dock, when suddenly some one laid a heavy hand on my shoulder.

"Glancing up with a little start, I saw the man who had so lately bought Wau-Winet Island standing before me. By his side, leaning heavily upon his arm, yet swaying strangely to and fro, as though she were scarcely able to keep her feet, was a woman in a long black cloak, and her face covered by a thick veil.

"Before I had a chance to speak, the gentleman bent down and whispered hoarsely in my ear:

"I want you to row us as quickly as possible, to Wau-Winet Island. You can name your own price."

"I wish to God I had refused him. I started to help the lady into the boat, but he thrust me aside and helped her in himself, lifting her by main strength.

"For an instant she swayed to and fro, like a leaf in a strong wind; but he steadied her by holding her down on her seat, both of her hands caught in his.

"I had scarcely pushed out into midstream ere I fancied I heard a low, choking cry. The woman had wrenched one of her hands free, and like a flash she had torn off her thick veil, and then I saw a sight that made the blood run cold in my veins, for over her mouth a thick scarf was wound, which she was trying to tear off with her disengaged hand. [Pg 30]

"Her companion caught her hand with a fierce imprecation on his lips, and the struggle that ensued between them made the boat rock like a cradle. In an instant he had forced her back into her seat, and drawn the veil down over her face again.

"But in that brief instant, by the bright light of the moon, I had caught a glimpse of a face so wondrous in its loveliness and its haughtiness that I was fairly dazed. I did not know what to do or say, I was so bewildered.

"You must make quicker time!" cried the gentleman, turning to me.

"At last we reached the island, and despite her struggles, he lifted her out of the boat. Then he thrust a bill into my hand, saying grimly, 'You can return now.'

"But while he was speaking, never for an instant did his hold relax upon the girl's arm, though she writhed under his grasp.

"I hesitated a moment, and he turned to me with the look of a fiend on his dark, handsome face.

"I said you might *go*," he repeated.

"I will double that sum if you know how to keep your tongue still," the man said, thrusting another bill into my hand.

"As I pushed out into midstream the girl grew frantic. With an almost superhuman effort she succeeded in removing the woolen scarf which had been wound so tightly about her mouth, then with a cry which I shall never forget while life lasts, she shrieked out piteously, as she threw out her white arms wildly toward me: [Pg 31]

"Help! help! Oh! help, for the love of Heaven! Don't desert me! Come back! oh, come back and save me!"

"The blood fairly stood still in my veins. Her companion hurled her back so quickly that she completely lost her balance, and fell fainting in his arms.

"Go!" he cried, angrily, 'and not one word of what you have seen or heard!'

"I can not desert a lady in distress, sir," I answered.

"With a fury such as I have never seen equaled, he turned and faced me in the moonlight.

"I will give you just one moment to go!" he cried, his right hand creeping toward his hip-pocket—'another moment to get out of sight!'

"I knew that it was as much as my life was worth to remain where I was; so, despite the girl's pitiful entreaties, I rowed back slowly into midstream and down the river.

"I fairly made my boat fly over the water. I headed straight for Clayton—the nearest village—and there I told my startling story to the people. In less time than it takes to tell it, a half dozen of us started back for Wau-Winet Island. Arriving, we crept silently up the steep path that led to the

house. My loud ringing brought the gentleman himself to the door. I shall never forget the fire that leaped into his eyes as he saw me; but nothing daunted, I said to him determinedly:

"I have come here with these men to aid the young girl who appealed to me for help a little while ago." [Pg 32]

"My companions pressed close behind me, until they filled the wide entrance hall and closed in around him.

"You are certainly mad!" he cried. "There is no young lady on Wau-Winet Island, nor has any woman ever put foot upon it at least since it has been my property," he added.

"Do you mean to say that I did not row you and a young lady over to this island within this hour, and that she did not appeal to me for help?" I asked.

"Certainly not!" he declared promptly.

"You must be either mad or dreaming to even think of such a thing," he continued, haughtily. "However," turning to my companions, "seeing that you have had the trouble of coming here—brought by this lunatic—you are welcome to look through the house and satisfy yourselves. In fact, I beg that you will do so."

"Much to his surprise, we took him at his word." [Pg 33]

CHAPTER V.

THE MYSTERIOUS HOUSE ON LONELY WAU-WINET ISLAND.

"We searched the stone house from cellar to garret in hopes of finding a trace of the beautiful girl I felt sure was imprisoned within its grim walls, the owner following, with a look of defiance on his dark, handsome face.

"She *must* be on this island," I declared, vehemently. "I rowed you and her over here."

"It is quite true that you rowed *me* over here, my good fellow, but no fair lady accompanied me, unless it might have been some mermaid. I hope you are satisfied," said he, turning to my companions, "that the man who has brought you here has played you a trick."

"And now stranger, you ask me to take you to Wau-Winet Island on just such a mission, and I answer you that it would be as much as our lives are worth."

"It is evident," returned Hubert Varrick, excitedly, "that there is some fearful mystery, and it is our duty to try to fathom it if it is within our power."

"As you say, sir," replied the man.

At this moment the skiff grated sharply upon the sand, and the two men sprung out.

They had scarcely proceeded half the distance to the house when they were suddenly confronted by a man. [Pg 34]

"Who are you, and what do you want here?" he asked.

"I must see the master of Wau-Winet Island," returned Varrick, sternly. "Are you he?"

"No," returned the man, rather uneasily. "He left the island scarcely five minutes ago in his boat. I am only the man working about the place."

"Tell me," cried Varrick, earnestly, "was there a lady with him? I will pay you well to answer me."

The man's gaze shifted uneasily.

"There was no lady with him. I suppose that you have heard the strange story about this island, and have come to investigate the matter. Let me tell you, it is more than annoying to my master. Had he heard it he never would have bought the place. As it is he has left it for good and all tonight, and is going to advertise the place for sale. If they had told my master, when he came here to buy, the story that a young and beautiful woman was supposed to have been murdered here many years ago, and that at nights her spirit haunts the place, he never would have bought it. Other people imagine that they seen it; but we, who live here, never have."

The man told this with such apparent earnestness and truth, that Varrick was mystified. Had his eyes deceived him? They evidently had. And then again he told himself that, thinking so much of Gerelda, he had imagined that the face he had seen for a moment in the flash-light bore a striking resemblance to hers. And he persuaded himself to believe that the fisherman's story was a myth.

He well knew that, of all people in the world, fishermen loved to spin the most exaggerated yarns, and be the heroes of the greatest adventures. [Pg 35]

He got out of the matter as gracefully as only Varrick could, apologizing for his intrusion, and expressing himself as only too pleased to know that his imagination had simply been at fault.

"Will you come in?" asked the man, turning to him. "My master has always given orders that we are to be very hospitable to strangers."

"You are very kind, and I thank you for your courtesy," returned Varrick, "but I think not. We will try to cut across the bay and catch the steamer further down."

So saying, he motioned his companion to enter the boat.

The little boat containing the two men was scarcely out of sight, ere the door of the mysterious stone house opened quickly, and a man came cautiously down the path.

"What did they want?"

"They wanted to see you, Captain Frazier," answered the servant.

"What about?" asked the other hoarsely.

"They saw you and—and the young lady when you were out in the grounds, a little while since, as the search-light went down, and they came to—to rescue the young lady. I—I succeeded in convincing them that their eyes had deceived them, and told them that you were so annoyed at that senseless tale that you had gone away from the island; that you did not intend to come back, your aim being to sell the place."

"Bravo, bravo, McDonald!" exclaimed Captain Frazier—for it was he. "Upon my soul, you did well! You are reducing lying down to a fine art." [Pg 36]

"I made quite a startling discovery, sir," said McDonald. "It was the same man who made you all the trouble last night, bringing those people here."

Captain Frazier frowned darkly.

"But that is not all, sir," added McDonald. "Mr. Varrick was with him."

The name fell like a thunder-bolt on Captain Frazier's ears. He started back as though he had been shot.

"Has he succeeded in hunting me down so quickly?" he cried.

"So I thought when I first saw him, sir. But, to my great amazement, I soon discovered that he was totally ignorant of who lived on the island—that it was yourself. The fisherman had been telling him the story about the young lady, and he had come to investigate it. I soon convinced him that there was nothing in the story, and that he was only another one added to the list that the same fisherman had played that practical joke on. He was angry enough when he took his departure."

"Are you sure of this, McDonald?" asked Captain Frazier.

"Quite sure."

Captain Frazier gave a sigh of relief. He had fancied himself so secure here. Even the servants did not know him by his own name.

"If I thought for a moment that he suspected my presence here, I would lose no time in getting away from Wau-Winet Island, and taking *her* with me."

"You need have no fear, sir," returned the man. [Pg 37]

For an hour or more Captain Frazier paced slowly up and down under the trees, smoking cigar after cigar in rapid succession.

"It is a terrible thing," he muttered, "when love for a woman drives a man to the verge of madness. I swore that Gerelda should never marry Hubert Varrick, if I had to kill her. But I have done better. He will never look upon her face again."

At length he walked slowly to the house. He was met on the porch by a little French maid who seemed to be looking for him.

"Well, Marie?" said Captain Frazier.

"I have been looking for you, sir," returned the girl quickly. "I can do nothing with mademoiselle. She will not speak; she will not eat. She lies there hour after hour with her beautiful face turned toward the wall and her white hands clasped together. She might be a dead woman for all the interest she evinces in anything. I very much fear, sir, that she will keep her vow—*never to speak again—never in this world.*"

"You must keep close watch that she does not attempt to make away with herself, Marie," he continued, earnestly. "Heaven only knows how she obtained that revolver I took away from her out in the grounds to-night. She was kneeling down in the long grass, and had it already pressed to her temple, when I appeared in the very nick of time and wrenched it from her little white

hand. She would do anything save drown herself to escape from here. Her father lost his life that way, and she would never attempt *that* means of escape, even from *this* place."

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"She even refuses to have her bridal-dress removed," said the maid; "and I do not know what to do about it. She has uttered no word since first she crossed your threshold; she will not speak."

Captain Frazier looked troubled, distressed.

Would Gerelda keep her vow? She had said when she recovered consciousness and found herself on the island, and the boatman gone:

"I will never utter another word from this hour until I am set free again. You are beneath contempt, Captain Frazier, to kidnap a young girl at the altar."

He never forgot how she looked at him in the clear moonlight as he turned to her, crying out passionately:

"It is your own fault, Gerelda. Why did you draw me on to love you so? You encouraged me up to the last moment, and then it was too late for me to give you up."

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CHAPTER VI.

THE SWEET AND TENDER LETTERS THAT SUDDENLY CEASED TO COME.

Gerelda Northrup neither spoke nor stirred.

"You drew me on—ay, up to the very last moment—or this would never have happened. I come of a desperate race, Gerelda," he went on, huskily, "and when you showed me so plainly that you still liked my society, even after you had plighted your troth to another, I clung to the mad idea that there was yet hope for me, if we were far away from those who might come between us. On this lone island we will be all the world to each other—the world forgetting, by the world forgot.' Marry me, Gerelda, and I will be your veritable slave!"

He never forgot the look she turned upon him.

"When your anger has had time to cool, you will forgive me, my darling," he pleaded, "and then I am sure you will not say me nay when I beg for your heart and hand. I shall not force you into a marriage. I will wait patiently until you come to me and say: 'Robert, I am willing to marry you!'"

He remembered how she had turned from him in bitter anger and scorn too terrible for any words. He had given her over into the hands of Marie, the little French maid.

She offered no resistance as the girl took her hand and led her into the house; but there was a look on her face that boded no good, while the words she had uttered rang in his ears: "I shall never speak again until you set me free!"

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Twice she had made the attempt, during the forty-eight hours which followed, to take her own life, and both times he had prevented her. Even in those thrilling moments she had never uttered a word. She kept her vow, and Captain Frazier was beside himself at the turn affairs had taken.

But what else could he have done, under the circumstances? He could not stand by and see her made the bride of another.

Only that day, by the merest chance, Frazier had found out about Hubert Varrick practically adopting the village beauty—saucy little Jessie Bain—and that he had secretly sent her to a private school, to be educated at his own expense, and he lost no time in communicating this startling news to Gerelda, and giving her proof positive of the truth of this statement.

He saw her face turn deathly white, and he knew that the arrow of bitter jealousy had struck home; but even then she uttered no word. But when darkness gathered she stole out into the grounds, and tried to end it all then and there, and she would have succeeded but for his timely happening upon the scene at the very moment that the flash-light had shone so suddenly upon her.

Yes, the story concerning Jessie Bain had come like a thunder-bolt to Gerelda Northrup. She had fallen on her face in the long green grass, and was carried into the house in a dead faint.

Only heaven knew what she suffered when consciousness came to her. She was almost mad with terror at finding herself snatched from the arms of her lover at the very altar—kidnapped in this most outrageous manner.

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She pictured her bridegroom's wild agony when he returned with the glass of wine which he had

hurried after, and found her missing.

But the knowledge that he had consoled himself so quickly by taking an interest in some other girl almost took her breath away. Then she sent a note to Captain Frazier. It contained but a few words, but they were enough to send him into the seventh heaven of delight. They read as follows:

"Prove to me, beyond all shadow of a doubt, that Hubert Varrick is really in love with the rustic little village maid you speak of to such an extent that he has secretly undertaken the care of her future, and, madly as I love him, I will give him up and marry you within six months from this time. But, in the meantime, you must return me at once to my home and friends. This much I promise you: I shall not see Hubert Varrick until this matter has been cleared up."

To this note Frazier sent back hurried word that she should have all the proof of Hubert Varrick's perfidy that she might ask.

There was but one thing which it was impossible to do, and that was to set her free during the six months' probation.

This was impossible. He could not do it; he loved her too madly. He would go away, if she liked, and leave her to reign "queen of the isle." She should have everything which heart desired—everything save permission to leave the place.

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To this Gerelda was forced to submit.

"If I were convinced that Hubert Varrick loved another, life would be all over for me," she moaned again and again.

Meanwhile, as days and weeks rolled by, and no tidings reached Hubert Varrick of the bride who, he supposed, had deserted him at the very altar, his heart grew bitter against Gerelda.

He plunged into his practice of law, with the wild hope that he might forget her.

The only diversity that entered his life was the letters which he received from little Jessie Bain.

Girl-like, she wrote to him every day.

"I do wish you would adopt me, guardy," she wrote one day, "and bring me home; I am so tired of this place. The principal always calls upon me to look after all the little young fry in his school. Morning and night I have to hear their prayers and hunt the shoes and stockings that they throw at one another across the dormitory. Each one denies the throwing, and I slap every one of them right and left, to be sure to get the right one. I'm sick and tired of books. I wish I could come to you."

Suddenly the letters ceased, and, to Varrick's consternation, a week passed without his hearing one word from little Jessie Bain, and he never knew until then, how deep a hold the girl had on the threads that were woven into his daily life.

In his loneliness he turned to the letters, and read and reread them. It was like balm to his sore heart to find in them such outpourings of love and devotion.

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Was she ill? Perhaps some lover had crossed her path.

The thought worried him. He was just on the point of telegraphing, when suddenly there was a rustling sound at the open French window, a swish of skirts behind him, and the next instant a pair of arms were thrown about his neck.

"Now don't scold me, guardy—please don't! I am going to own up to the truth right here and now. I ran away. I couldn't help it, I got so tired of hooking young ones' dresses and hearing their prayers."

With an assumption of dignity, Hubert Varrick unwound the girl's arms from about his neck. But somehow they had sent a strange thrill through his whole being, just such a thrill as he had experienced during the hour in which he had asked Gerelda to be his wife, and she had answered in the affirmative.

He tried to hold her off at arm's-length, but she only clung to him the more, giving him a rapturous kiss of greeting.

The story of little Jessie Bain had been the only one which Hubert Varrick had kept from his mother.

It seemed amusing, he had told himself repeatedly, for a young man of five-and-twenty to be guardian, as it were, to a young girl of sixteen—that sweet, subtle, dangerous age "where childhood and womanhood meet."

"Aren't you glad to see me, Mr. Varrick?" cried Jessie.

"Glad?" Hubert Varrick's face lighted up, and before he was aware of the action, he had drawn her into his encircling arms, bent his dark, handsome head, and kissed the rosy mouth so dangerously near his own. There was a sound as of a groan, from the door-way, followed by a muffled shriek, and raising his eyes in startled horror, Hubert Varrick saw his lady-mother standing on the threshold, her jeweled hands parting the satin *portières*.

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"Who is this girl, and what does this amazing scene mean, Hubert?" cried Mrs. Varrick.

Jessie Bain looked at the angry lady in puzzled wonder. She nestled up closer to the handsome, broad-shouldered fellow, murmuring audibly:

"Why don't you tell her that I am Jessie Bain, and that you are my best friend on earth?"

The lady had heard enough to condemn the girl in her eyes.

She advanced toward her, livid with rage, and flung the girl's little white hands back from her son's arm.

"Go!" she cried, quivering with rage; "leave this house instantly, or I will call the servants to put you into the street? It's such girls as you that ruin young men!"

"Mother," interrupted Hubert, "Jessie Bain must not be sent from this house. If she leaves, I shall go with her!"

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CHAPTER VII.

EVERY YOUNG GIRL WOULD LIKE A LOVER. AND WHY NOT? FOR LOVE IS THE GRANDEST GIFT THE GODS CAN GIVE.

A thunder-bolt falling from a clear sky could not have startled the proud Mrs. Varrick more than those crushing words that fell from the lips of her handsome son—"Mother, if you turn Jessie Bain from your door, I go with her!"

Mrs. Varrick drew herself up to her full height and advanced into the room like an angry queen.

"Hubert," she cried, in a tone that he had never heard from his mother's lips before, "I can make all due allowance for the follies of a young man, but I say this to you: you should never have permitted this girl to cross your mother's threshold."

"Give me a chance to speak a few words, mother," he interrupted. "Let me set matters straight. The whole fault is mine, because I have not explained this affair to you before. I put it off from day to day."

In a few brief words he explained.

In her own mind, quick as a flash, a sudden thought came to her that there was more behind this than had been told to her.

She had wondered why Gerelda Northrup, the beauty and the heiress, fled from her handsome son at the very altar. Now she began to think that she might have had a reason for it other than that which the world knew.

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She was diplomatic; she was too worldly wise to seek to separate them then and there. She said to herself it must be done by strategy.

"This puts the matter in quite a different light, Hubert," she said; "and while I am slightly incensed at your not telling me about this affair, I can readily understand the kindly impulse which prompted you to protect this young girl. But I can not allow *you* to outdo me; Jessie must consider *me* quite as much her friend as you. She shall find a home here with us, and it will be pleasant, after all, to see a bright, girlish face in these dull old rooms, and hear the sound of merry laughter."

This remark threw Hubert off his guard.

"That is spoken like my noble-hearted mother!" he cried, enthusiastically. "I knew you could not be angry with me when you understood it."

The girl stepped hesitatingly forward. From the first instant that she beheld her standing on the threshold, she had conceived a great dislike and fear of Hubert's haughty lady-mother. Even the conversation and explanation which she had just listened to did not change her first impression.

Thus it happened that Jessie Bain took up her abode in the magnificent home of the Varricks.

But Hubert's mother made it the one object of her life to see that her son and this attractive girl were never left alone together for a moment.

He had seemed heart-broken over the loss of Gerelda Northrup up to the time that Jessie had entered the house; now there was a perceptible change in him.

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He no longer brooded for hours over his cigars, pacing up and down under the trees; now he

would enter the library of an evening, or linger in the drawing-room, especially if Jessie was there.

Had it not been for her son, and the terror from day to day in her heart that Hubert was learning to care for the girl, proud Mrs. Varrick would have liked Jessie Bain, she was so bright, so merry, so artless.

She lost no opportunity in impressing upon Jessie's mind, when she was alone with the girl, that Hubert would never marry, eagerly noticing what effect these words would have upon the girl.

"Wouldn't that be a pity, Mrs. Varrick?" she had answered once. "It would be so cruel for him to stay single always."

"Not at all," returned Mrs. Varrick, sharply. "If a man does not get the one that is intended for him, he should never marry any one else."

"And you think that he was intended for Miss Northrup?" questioned Jessie.

"Decidedly; and for no one else."

"Then I wonder Heaven did not give her to him," said Jessie.

Mrs. Varrick looked at her keenly.

"A man never has but one love in a life-time," she said, impressively.

A fortnight had barely passed since Jessie had been under that roof, and yet every one of the household noticed the difference in handsome Hubert Varrick, and spoke about it. He was growing gayer and more debonair than in the old days, when he was paying court to the beautiful Gerelda Northrup. Of all subjects, the only one which he would not discuss with his mother was the future of Jessie Bain. [Pg 48]

She had on one occasion asked him, with seeming carelessness, how long he intended to care for this girl who was an utter stranger to him, and suggested that, since she would not go to school, his responsibility ought to cease.

"I have bound myself to look after her until she is eighteen," he answered.

"I want to have a little talk with you, Hubert, on that subject," she said. "Will you listen to me a few moments?"

"As many as you like, mother," he answered.

"I want to ask you if you have ever thought over what a wrong step you are taking in giving this girl a taste of a life she can never expect to continue after she leaves here?"

"You should be glad that she has a little sunshine, mother."

"It is wrong to place a girl in a brilliant sunshine for a few brief days, and then plunge her into gloom for the rest of her life."

"She has not been plunged into gloom yet, mother."

"If she could marry well while she is with us, it would be a great thing for her," went on Mrs. Varrick.

"Don't you think she is rather young yet? What is your opinion about that, mother?"

"It is best for a poor girl to marry as soon as a good offer presents itself, I believe. I have been thinking deeply upon this subject, for I have noticed that there is a young man who seems to be quite smitten with the charms of Jessie Bain." [Pg 49]

Her handsome son flushed to the roots of his dark-brown hair, and he laughed confusedly as he said:

"Why, how very sharp you are, mother! I did not know that you noticed it."

"Of course he is not rich," continued Mrs. Varrick, "but still, even a struggling young architect would be a good match for her. She might do worse."

"Why, what in the world do you mean, mother?" cried Hubert Varrick. "What are you talking about?"

"Why, my dear son, have you been blind to what has been going on for the last fortnight?" she returned, with seeming carelessness. "Haven't you noticed that the young architect who is drawing the plans for the new western wing of our house is in love with your *protégée*?"

She never forgot the expression of her son's face; it was livid and white as death. This betrayed his secret. He loved Jessie Bain himself! [Pg 50]

CHAPTER VIII.

A MOTHER'S DESPERATE SCHEME.

"What makes you think the young architect is in love with Jessie Bain, mother? I think it is an absurd idea."

"Why do you call it absurd?" returned Mrs. Varrick. "It is perfectly natural."

Hubert turned on her in a rage so great that it fairly appalled her.

"Why did you permit this sort of thing to go on, mother?" he cried. "It is all your fault. You are accountable for it, I say."

Mrs. Varrick rose from her seat and looked haughtily at her son, her heart beating with great, stifling throbs. In all the years of their lives they had never before exchanged one cross word with each other, and in that moment she hated, with all the strength of her soul, the girl who had sown discord between them, and she wished that Heaven had stricken the girl dead ere her son had looked upon her face.

"I am sure it is nothing to you or to me whom Jessie Bain chooses to fall in love with," she answered, coldly. "You forget yourself in reproaching *me* with it, my son," and with these words she swept from the room.

The door had barely closed after her ere Hubert threw himself down into the nearest chair, covering his face with his hands. [Pg 51]

He had loved Gerelda Northrup as few men love in a life-time, but with the belief that she had eloped with another, growing up in his heart, he had been able to stifle that love, root it from his heart, blossom and branch, with an iron will, until at last he knew if he came face to face with Gerelda she would never again have the power to thrill his heart with the same passion.

And, sitting there, he was face to face with the truth—that his heart, in all its loneliness, had gone out to Jessie Bain in the rebound, and he knew that life would never be the same to him if she were to prefer another to himself.

He rang the bell sharply, and in response to the summons one of the servants soon appeared.

"Send the architect—the young man whom you will find in the new western wing of the house—to me at once. Tell him to bring his drawings with him."

Hubert Varrick paced nervously up and down the library until the young man entered the room.

"You sent for me, Mr. Varrick," he said, with a smile on his frank, handsome face, "and I made haste to come to you."

"I wish to inspect your drawings," he said, tersely, as he waved the young man to a seat.

Frank Moray laid them down upon the table. There was something in Varrick's manner that startled him, for he had always been courteous and pleasant to him before. [Pg 52]

Varrick ran his eyes critically over the pieces of card-board, the frown on his face deepening.

"I hope the plans meet your approval, sir," said the young man, very respectfully. "I showed them from day to day, as I progressed, to Miss Jessie Bain, and she seemed very much interested in them."

Those words were fatal to the young man's cause. With an angry gesture, Varrick threw the drawings down upon the table.

"Your plans do not please me at all," he returned. "Stop right where you are. Return to your firm at once and tell them to send me another man, an older man, one with more experience—one who can spend more time at his business and less time in chattering. Your sketches are miserably drawn!"

Frank Moray had risen to his feet, his face white as death.

"Mr. Varrick," he cried hoarsely, "let me beg of you to reconsider your words. Only try me again. Let me make a new set of drawings to submit to you. It would ruin my reputation if you were to send this message to the firm, for they have hitherto placed much confidence in my work."

"You will leave the house at once," he said, "and send a much older man, I repeat, to continue the work."

The poor fellow fairly staggered from the drawing-room. He could not imagine why, in one short hour, he had dropped from heaven to the very depths of Hades, as it were.

Varrick breathed freely when he saw him leave the house and walk slowly down the lilac-bordered path and out through the arched gate-way. [Pg 53]

A little later Jessie came flying into the library. Varrick was still seated at the table, poring over

his books.

"Where is Mr. Moray—do you know?" she asked, quickly—"I want to return him a paper he loaned me this morning. I have been looking everywhere for him, but can not find him. There is something in the paper that you would like to hear about too."

"Sit down on this hassock, Jessie, and read it to me," he said.

"Oh, no! You want to make fun of me," she pouted, "and see me get puzzled over all the big words. Please read it yourself, Mr. Varrick."

"Suppose you tell me the substance of it, and that will save me reading it," he said.

"Oh, I can do that. There isn't so much to tell. It's about a fire last night on one of the little islands in the St. Lawrence. No doubt you have heard of the place—Wau-Winet Island. The mysterious stone house that was on it has been burned to the ground. The owner was away at the time. It is supposed that everyone else on the island perished in the flames."

Hubert Varrick listened with interest, but he never dreamed how vitally, in the near future, this catastrophe would concern him.

He thought of his strange visit to that place, and that no doubt the owner was none too sorry to see it laid to ashes, as he had acknowledged that it had caused him much annoyance owing to the uncanny rumors floating about that the place was haunted by a young and beautiful woman whose spirit would not be laid.

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Then, in talking to Jessie during the next half hour he entirely forgot the fire that had occurred on that far-away island in the St. Lawrence.

He broached the subject that the architect had gone for good, narrowly watching Jessie's pretty face as he told her.

"Oh! I am so sorry," she declared, disappointedly, "for he was such a nice young man; and in his spare moments he had promised to teach me to sketch;" and her lovely face clouded.

"Would not I do as well?" asked Hubert Varrick, gently, as his hand closed over the little white one so near his own.

The girl trembled beneath his touch. In that one moment her heart went from her, and she experienced the sweet elysium of a young life just awakening to love's bewildering dream.

"Would I not make as good a teacher?" repeated Varrick, softly; and he bent his dark, handsome head, looking earnestly into the girl's flushed face.

"Perhaps," she answered, evasively; and she was very much relieved to hear some one calling her at that moment.

Mrs. Varrick heard of the proposed sketching lessons with great displeasure. Despite all that she had done and said, she saw these two young people falling more and more in love with each other with every passing day.

"How can I stop it? What shall I do?" she asked herself night after night, as she paced the floor of her *boudoir*.

She fairly cursed the hour that brought lovely, innocent little Jessie Bain beneath that roof, and she wished she knew of some way in which to get rid of the girl for good and all.

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She paced the floor until the day dawned. A terrible scheme against the life and happiness of poor Jessie Bain had entered her brain—a scheme so dark and horrible that even she grew frightened as she contemplated it.

Then she set her lips together, muttering hoarsely:

"I would do anything to part my son and Jessie Bain!"

CHAPTER IX.

GERELDA'S ESCAPE FROM WAU-WINET ISLAND.

The fire at Wau-Winet Island, as the papers had explained, had taken place during the owner's absence. No one knew how it had happened; there seemed to be no one left to tell the tale.

When Captain Frazier returned that evening and found the place in ruins, he was almost wild with grief. In his own mind he felt that he knew how it had come about.

In her desperation to get away, Gerelda had fired the house. But, for all that, she had not succeeded in making her escape, as the flames must have overtaken her.

Those who watched Captain Frazier had great difficulty in preventing him from flinging himself headlong into the bay, he seemed so distracted over the loss of Gerelda, the girl whom he loved so sincerely. [Pg 56]

The truth of the matter was, Gerelda had not fired the place. It had been caused by a spark from an open fire-place; and in the confusion and the darkness of the night she had succeeded in making her way out of the house and down to the shore.

With trembling hands she had untied one of the little boats which lay there rocking to and fro, had sprung into it, and ere the flames burst through the arched windows of the stone house she was far across the bay, and was soon lost to sight in the darkness. She had taken the precaution to seize a long cloak and veil belonging to the maid, and these she proceeded to don while in the boat.

By daylight she found herself drifting slowly toward a little village, and as the lights became clear enough to discern objects distinctly, she saw that the place was Kingston.

At this Gerelda was overjoyed, for she remembered her old nurse, whom she had not seen since early childhood, lived here. The sun was shining bright and clear when Gerelda Northrup stepped from the boat and wended her way up the grass-grown streets of the quaint little Canadian town.

By dint of inquiry here and there, she at length found the nurse's home—a little cottage, almost covered with morning-glory vines, setting back from the main road.

Although the nurse had not seen Gerelda since she was a little child, she knew her the moment her eyes rested upon her face, and with a cry of amazement she drew back. [Pg 57]

"Gerelda Northrup!" she gasped. "Is it you, Miss Gerelda, or do my eyes deceive me?"

She had heard of the great marriage that was to take place at the Crossmon Hotel, at Alexandria Bay, and heard, too, the whispered rumor of the bride-elect's flight; and to see her standing there before her almost took Nurse Henderson's breath away.

She looked past Gerelda, expecting to see some tall and handsome gentleman, with a grand carriage drawn up at the road-side, waiting for her. The girl seemed to interpret her thoughts.

"I have come alone," she said, briefly. "Won't you bid me enter?"

"That I will, Miss Gerelda!" cried Nurse Henderson, laughing and crying over her.

But when she drew her into the house, and took off the long cloak she wore, she was startled beyond expression to see that she wore a bridal-dress all ruined and torn.

Nurse Henderson held up her hands in wild alarm.

"Oh, Miss Gerelda!" she cried; "what does it mean? I am terrified!"

"Do not ask me any questions, I pray; I am not able to answer them just yet. Some day I may tell you all, but not now."

The old nurse placed her on a sofa, begging her to rest herself, as she looked so pale and worn, saying that she might tell her anything she wished, a little later, when she was stronger.

It was a fortnight before Gerelda had strength to leave her old nurse's home, and during that time she had made a *confidante* of old Nurse Henderson, pledging her beforehand never to reveal the story she had told her. Nurse Henderson listened, horror-struck, to the story. [Pg 58]

"I am going to see for myself, Henderson," she added, in conclusion, "just how much truth there is in this affair. If I find that Hubert Varrick has been so false to me, it will surely kill me. I am going there to see for myself."

"You do not seem to realize, my dear," said Nurse Henderson, "that the people say you eloped with his rival, and that he believes them."

"He should have had more confidence in me, no matter what the world says!" cried Gerelda, with flashing eyes. "He should have searched for me. I have often thought since, that Heaven intended just what has occurred to test his love for me. I firmly believe this. I intend to disguise myself, and go boldly to his home and see for myself whether the report is false or true. Of course, a rival would not stoop to make up any falsehood against him and pour it into my ears. You will help me to disguise myself, Henderson?"

"I have thought it all out," continued the heiress, "while I have been under this roof, and I have been trying to gain strength for the ordeal. Let me tell it to you, Henderson, and you will marvel at my clever plan. You know that from a child I could always do exquisite fancy-work. Well, I mean to make use of that talent. Mrs. Varrick—Hubert's mother—has always said she would give anything to find a person willing to come to her home who could do just such fancy-work, and decorate her *boudoir*. Now, I mean to go there in disguise, show her a sample of my work, and say that I gave many lessons to Gerelda Northrup, and she will be only too glad to have me come to her home at any price. Then I can see for myself just how much my lover is grieving over my loss. He may be pining away—ay, be at the very gates of death, probably. In that case I shall [Pg 59]

reveal my identity at once.

"Oh, Miss Gerelda, you could never go through all that! *You* toil, even for a day, for any one? Oh! pray abandon such a mad idea. Believe me, my dear, such an idea is not practicable."

But all her persuasion could not influence the girl to abandon her plan.

A few days later a tall, slender woman robed in the severest black, with a cap on her head and blue glasses covering her eyes, walked slowly up the broad, graveled path that led to the Varrick mansion.

Mrs. Varrick was seated on the porch. She looked highly displeased when the servant approached her, announcing that this person—indicating Gerelda—desired particularly to speak with her a few moments.

"If you are a peddler or in search of work, you should go round to the servants' door," she said, brusquely.

Gerelda never knew until then what a very cross mother-in-law she had escaped.

"Step around there, and I will see you later," said Mrs. Varrick.

This Gerelda was forced to do. She waited in the servants' hall an hour or more before Mrs. Varrick remembered her and came to see what she wanted. When she saw the samples of fancy-work her eyes lighted up. [Pg 60]

"They are very beautiful," she said, "but I am not in need of anything of the kind just now. If you call round here a few months later, I might find use for your services."

Gerelda had been so confident of getting an opportunity to stay beneath that roof, that the shock of these words nearly made her cry out and betray herself.

"Is there no young lady in the house to whom I could teach this art?" she asked.

As she spoke these words she heard a light foot-fall on the marble floor, and the soft *frou frou* of rustling skirts behind her, and she turned her head quickly.

There, standing in the door-way, she beheld Jessie Bain.

CHAPTER X.

LIFE WITHOUT LOVE IS LIKE A ROSE WITHOUT PERFUME.

For an instant these two young girls who were to be such bitter rivals for one man's love looked at each other.

"Oh, what exquisite embroidery!" cried Jessie. "Are you going to buy some, Mrs. Varrick?" [Pg 61]

"I am thinking of engaging this young person to come to the house and make some for me, under my supervision," she returned.

"I would give so much to know how to make it!" exclaimed Jessie.

"If this young woman will give you instructions, you can take them," said Mrs. Varrick.

At that moment Hubert Varrick entered.

"What is all this discussion about, ladies?" he asked.

Gerelda uttered a quick gasp as he crossed the threshold. Her heart was in her eyes behind those blue glasses. She had pictured him as being worn and haggard with grieving for her. Did her eyes deceive her? Hubert Varrick looked brighter and happier than she had ever seen him look before, and, like a flash, Captain Frazier's words occurred to her—he had soon found consolation in a new love.

"This woman is an adept at embroidering," said Jessie, "and she is to teach me how to do it. When I have thoroughly learned it, the very first thing I shall make will be a lovely smoking-jacket for you."

"Oh, thank you!" exclaimed Hubert. "Believe that it will be a precious souvenir. I shall want to keep it so nice, that I will hardly dare wear it, lest I may soil it."

The girl laughed a little merry laugh. It was well for her that she did not turn and look at the stranger just then. Mrs. Varrick was making arrangements with her, but she was so intently listening to that whispered conversation about the jacket, that she scarcely heard a word she

said. She was only conscious that Mrs. Varrick had touched the bell for one of the servants to come and show her the apartment she was to occupy. [Pg 62]

"May I ask the name, please?" Mrs. Varrick said.

"Miss Duncan," was the reply.

From the moment Miss Duncan—as she called herself—entered that household her torture began. It was bad enough to be told by Captain Frazier of her would-be lover's lack of constancy; but to witness it with her own eyes—ah, that was maddening!

"Would that I had never entered this household!" she cried out.

She was unable to do justice to her work. Her whole life merged into one desire—to watch Hubert Varrick and Jessie Bain.

She employed herself in embroidering a light silken scarf. This she could take out under the trees, and see the two playing lawn-tennis on the greensward just beyond the lilac hedge.

There was not a movement that escaped her watchful eyes during the whole live-long day. And during the evenings, too. Would she ever forget them?

Yes, Captain Frazier was right— Hubert Varrick had forgotten her.

She could see that Mrs. Varrick had no love for the girl. Indeed, her dislike was most pronounced; and she felt that Hubert must have done considerable coaxing to gain his mother's consent to bring the girl beneath that roof.

When she learned from the housekeeper that Hubert Varrick was her guardian, her rage knew no bounds. [Pg 63]

It was at this critical state of affairs that Hubert Varrick received a telegram which called him to New York for a fortnight.

Mrs. Varrick heard this announcement with a little start, while Jessie Bain heard it with dismay.

To her it meant two long, dreary weeks that must drag slowly by before he should return again.

No one knew what Miss Duncan thought when she heard the housekeeper remarking that Mr. Hubert had gone to New York.

Late that afternoon she was startled by a soft little tap at her door, and in response to her "Come in," Jessie Bain entered.

"I hope I have not interrupted you," said Jessie; "but I thought I would like to come and sit with you, and watch you while you worked, if you don't mind."

"Not in the least," answered Miss Duncan.

For a few moments there was a rigid silence between them, which Miss Duncan longed to break by asking her when and where she first met Hubert Varrick.

But while she was thinking how she might best broach the subject, Jessie turned to her and said, "I don't see how you can work with those blue glasses on; it must be such a strain on your eyes;" adding, earnestly: "But I suppose you are obliged to do it, and that makes considerable difference."

"You suppose wrong," returned Miss Duncan, with asperity. "I do it because it is a pleasure to me."

"Oh!" said Jessie.

"It distracts my mind," continued Miss Duncan. "There are so many sad things that occur in life, that one would give anything in this world to be able to forget them." [Pg 64]

"Have you had a great sorrow?" asked Jessie.

"So great that it has almost caused me to hate every woman," returned Miss Duncan; adding: "It was love that caused it all. You will do well, Miss Bain, if you never fall in love; for, at best, men are treacherous."

The girl flushed, wondering if the stranger had penetrated her secret.

But she had been so careful to hide from every one that she had fallen in love with handsome Hubert Varrick, it was almost impossible to guess it.

As Jessie Bain did not reply to the remark which she had just made, Miss Duncan went on hurriedly, "There is not one man in a thousand who proves true to the woman to whom he has plighted his troth. The next pretty face he sees turns his head. I should never want to marry a man, or even to be engaged to one if I knew that he had ever had another love.

"By the way," she asked, suddenly lowering her voice, "I am surprised to see Mr. Varrick looking so cheerful after the experience he has had with his love affair."

"He was too good for that proud heiress," Jessie declared, indignantly. "I think Heaven intended

that he should be spared from such a marriage. I— I fairly detest her name. Please do not let us talk about her, Miss Duncan. I like to speak well of people, but I can think of nothing save what is bad to say of her."

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With this she rose hastily, excused herself, and hurried from the room, leaving her companion smarting from the stinging words that had fallen from her lips.

"The impudent creature!" fairly gasped the heiress, flinging aside her embroidery and pacing up and down the floor like a caged animal. "I shall take a bitter revenge on her for this, or my name is not Gerelda Northrup!"

The more she thought of it, the deeper her anger took root. They brought her a tempting little repast; but she pushed the tea-tray from her, leaving its contents untasted. She felt that food would have choked her.

The sun went down, and the moon rose clear and bright over the distant hills. One by one the lights in the Varrick mansion went out, and the clock in the adjacent steeple struck the hours until midnight. Still Gerelda Northrup paced up and down the narrow room, intent upon her own dark thoughts.

One o'clock chimed from the steeple, and another hour rolled slowly by; then suddenly she stopped short, and crossed the room to where her satchel lay on the wide window-sill. Opening it, she drew from it a small vial containing white, glistening crystals, and hid it nervously in her bosom; then, with trembling feet, she recrossed the room, opened her door, and peered breathlessly out into the dimly lighted corridor. No sound broke the awful stillness.

Closing the door gently after her, the great heiress tiptoed her way down the wide hall like a thief in the night, her footfalls making no sound on the velvet carpet. Jessie's was the last door at the end of the corridor. Miss Duncan knew this well. But before she had gained it she saw Mrs. Varrick leave her room and step to Jessie's.

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She remembered Mrs. Varrick did not like the girl. A score of conjectures flashed through her mind as to the object of that surreptitious visit; but she put them all from her as being highly impracticable and not to be thought of.

The morrow would tell the story. She must wait patiently until then, and find out for herself.

How thankful she was that she had not been three minutes earlier. In that case Mrs Varrick would have discovered her. And then, too, a tragedy had been averted.

She took the vial from her bosom, and with trembling hands shook its contents from the window down into the grounds below, and threw the tiny bottle out among the rose bushes, murmuring:

"If it is ever done at all, it must not be done that way."

Then she threw herself on the couch just as the day was breaking, and dropped into an uneasy sleep, from which she was startled by a terrific rap on the door.

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CHAPTER XI.

GERELDA COULD HAVE SAVED HER.

Hastily opening the door, Gerelda saw one of the maids.

"My mistress wishes to see you in the morning-room," she said. "I have brought you some breakfast. You are to partake of this first; but my mistress hopes you will not be long."

Gerelda swallowed a roll and drank the tea and hastened to the morning-room. Here Gerelda found not only Mrs. Varrick, but every man and woman who lived beneath the roof of the Varrick mansion.

For a moment Gerelda hesitated.

Had some one discovered that she was in disguise, and informed Mrs. Varrick? She trembled violently from head to foot.

Mrs. Varrick broke in upon her confused thoughts.

"Pardon my somewhat abrupt summons, Miss Duncan," she said, motioning her to a chair, "but something has occurred which renders it imperative that I should speak collectively to every member of this household.

"Most of you remember, no doubt, that I wore my diamond bracelet to the opera last night. When

I returned home I unclasped it from my arm, myself, and laid it carefully away in my jewel-box. This morning it is missing. My maid and I made a careful examination of the room where I am in the habit of keeping my jewels. We found that the room had not been entered from the outside, that all the windows and doors were securely bolted on the inside. I am therefore forced to accept the theory that my room was visited by some one from the inside of the house."

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"Wasn't it amazing!" cried Jessie, turning to Miss Duncan. "A thief walking through the house in the dead of night, while we were all sleeping! I am sure I should have been frightened into hysterics had I known it."

A cold, calm look from Mrs. Varrick's steel-gray eyes seemed to arrest the words on the girl's lips, and that strange, uncanny gaze sent a thrill creeping down to the very depths of Jessie Bain's soul.

All in a flash, as Miss Duncan listened, she realized what was coming.

"Let no one interrupt me unless I invite them to speak," said Mrs. Varrick, continuing: "I will go on to say that the butler informs me that he found no door or window open in any part of the house, when he opened up the place this morning.

"Have you missed anything, Miss Duncan?"

"No," said Gerelda, quietly.

"And you, Miss Bain?"

"No. I have nothing that any thief would care to take," returned the girl; "only this gold chain and this battered old locket which contains my dead mother's picture, and I always wear this about my neck day and night."

Mrs. Varrick asked the same question of every one present—"if they had lost anything during the night"—and each one answered in a positive negative.

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"Then it seems that the thief was content with taking my diamond bracelet," she said, sharply.

Suddenly the housekeeper, who had been in Mrs. Varrick's service since she had come there a bride, spoke out:

"I am sure nobody would object, ma'am, if the trunks and boxes of every one in the house were to be examined."

Mrs. Varrick turned to the housekeeper.

"I should not like to say that I suspect any one," she answered. "I have sent for one of the most experienced detectives in the city, and am expecting him to arrive at any moment. In the meantime, I desire that you will all remain in this room."

Miss Duncan had maintained throughout an attitude of polite indifference. Now she realized what that visit to Jessie Bain's room, in the dead of the night, meant.

Then there commenced the greatest battle between Good and Evil that ever was fought in a human heart. Should she save her rival, the girl whom Hubert Varrick loved, or by her silence doom her to life-long misery? While she was battling, Jessie smiled, murmuring in a low voice: "Isn't it too bad, Miss Duncan, that Hubert—Mr. Varrick, I mean—should be away from home just at this critical time?"

Miss Duncan's face hardened, and all the kindness in her nature suddenly died out.

The arrival, a little later, of the detective was a relief to every one.

Mrs. Varrick hastily explained to him what had occurred, and her reason for supposing that the theft of the diamond bracelet had been accomplished by some one in the house.

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"Such a suspicion is, of course, very painful to me," she said; "but under the circumstances I think it is better for the satisfaction of all concerned that I should accept the offer made by my servants, and request you to search their apartments. Miss Duncan, and Miss Jessie Bain, my son's ward, will, just for form's sake, undergo the same unpleasant ordeal."

"Must I have my room searched, too?" asked Jessie Bain.

"Is there any reason why you should object?" asked Mrs. Varrick.

"No," answered Jessie, lifting her beautiful, innocent blue eyes to the face of Hubert's mother; "there is no reason, only—only—"

Here she stopped short, the color coming and going on her lovely face, and a frightened look creeping about her quivering mouth.

"I have no objection," she repeated, "to having everything in my room searched; but, oh! it seems so terrible to have to do it!"

"Do your duty, sir," said Mrs. Varrick, turning to the detective.

She and the detective left the morning-room together, and they were all startled at the sound of the key turning in the lock as the door closed after them. Half an hour, an hour, and at length a

second hour dragged slowly by.

Suddenly in the silence that had fallen upon the inmates of the morning-room they caught the distant sound of the detective's deep voice and the rustle of Mrs. Varrick's silk dress coming down the corridor.

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Mrs. Varrick and the detective advanced to the center of the room, then she stopped suddenly.

"As you see," she commenced, in a high, shrill voice "the bracelet has been unearthed and the thief discovered. I shall not prolong this painful scene a moment longer than is absolutely necessary. Suffice it to say, the girl I have befriended has robbed me.

"The bracelet was found by the detective in the little hair trunk of Jessie Bain. You will all please leave the room, all save Miss Bain."

They all rose from their seats, and there was a great babble of voices. As in a dream, Jessie saw them all file slowly out of the room, each one casting that backward look of horror upon her as they went. The door closed slowly after Miss Duncan; then she was alone with the detective and Mrs Varrick, Hubert's mother.

"There are no words that I can find to express to you, Jessie Bain, my amazement and sorrow," she began, "at this, the evidence of your guilt."

"Oh, Mrs. Varrick!" gasped Jessie, finding breath at last, though her head seemed to reel with the horror of the situation, "by all that I hold dear in this world, believe me, I am not guilty. I swear to you I did not take your bracelet; I know as little of the theft as an unborn babe!"

Mrs. Varrick drew herself up haughtily.

"The detective wishes me to give you up to the law, to cast you into prison, but I can not quite make up my mind to do it. Now listen. Because of my son's interest in you, I will spare you on one condition, and that is, that you leave this place within the hour, and go far away—so far that you will never again see any one who might know you; least of all, my son. His anger against you would be terrible."

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All in vain Jessie threw herself at her feet, protesting over and over again her innocence, and calling upon God and the angels to bear witness to the truth of what she said.

The detective had been pacing up and down the room, an expression of the deepest concern on his face.

He noted that instead of being glad to get off so easily from a terrible affair that would cost her many a year behind grim prison walls, this girl's agonizing cry was that she should remain there and prove her innocence to Hubert Varrick.

Surely, he thought, there must be some way of doing so. But Mrs. Varrick was inexorable.

The girl's lovely head was bowed to the very earth.

"Have pity on me," moaned Jessie Bain, "and show me mercy!"

"I will give you ten minutes to decide your future," was Mrs. Varrick's heartless reply.

When the ten minutes had elapsed, Mrs. Varrick rose majestically to her feet.

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CHAPTER XII.

OUT IN THE COLD, BLEAK WORLD!

"No doubt you have decided ere this what course you intend to pursue," said Mrs. Varrick sternly.

"I— I will do whatever you wish," sobbed the girl; "but oh! let me plead with you to let me stay here until Mr. Varrick returns!"

Mrs. Varrick's face grew livid in spots with anger, but by a splendid effort she managed to control herself before the detective. She turned to him.

"Will you kindly step into an inner room, and there await the conclusion of this conference?" she asked.

He bowed courteously and complied with her request. When Mrs. Varrick found herself alone with the girl, she made little effort to conceal her hatred.

"Why do you wish to see my son?" she asked, harshly. "To try to get him to condone the atrocious

wrong of which you have been guilty? Your audacity amazes me!"

"I have said that I am innocent!" said the girl, and she rose slowly to her feet.

"Never, with my consent, will he ever speak to you again! Do you hear me? I would curse him if he did.

"And it would not stop at that," went on Mrs. Varrick. "I would cut him off without a dollar, and turn him into the streets a beggar! That would soon bring him to his senses. Ay, I would do all that and more, if he were even to speak to you again. So you can see for yourself the position you would place him in by holding the least conversation with him."

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"He shall not suffer because of me!" sobbed Jessie Bain. "I will go away and never look upon his face again. I only wanted to tell him to believe me. I am going, Mrs. Varrick, out into the cold and bitter world from which he took me. Try to think of me as kindly as you can!"

With this, she turned and walked slowly from the room. On the threshold she paused and turned back.

"Will you say to him—to your son, I mean—that I am very grateful for all that he has done for me," she asked, "and that if the time ever comes when I can repay it, I will do so? Tell him I would give my life, if I could only serve him!"

"One moment," said the lady, as she was about to close the door: "I do not wish to send you away empty-handed."

As she spoke she drew a purse from her pocket, saying:

"You will find this well filled. There is only one condition I make in giving it to you, and that is, that you sign a written agreement that you will never seek or hold any communication with my son hereafter."

"I am very poor indeed, madame," Jessie said, "but I— I could not take one penny from—from the person who believes me guilty of theft. But I will sign the agreement, because—because you ask me to do so."

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"Then step this way," said Mrs. Varrick, going to the table, where, pushing a folded paper aside, Jessie saw a closely written document lying beneath it. On the further end of the table a gold pen was resting on a bronze ink-tray.

Mrs. Varrick dipped the pen in the ink, and handed it to the girl.

"Sign there," she said, indicating, with a very shaking finger, a line at the bottom.

Perfectly innocent of the dastardly trap that had been set for her, Jessie took the pen from the hand of Hubert's mother, and fearlessly wrote her name—signing away all hopes of happiness for all time to come, and putting a brand on her innocent brow more terrible than the brand of Cain.

Without waiting for the ink to dry upon it, Mrs. Varrick eagerly snatched the paper and thrust it into her bosom.

Jessie slowly left the room, and a few moments later, carrying the same little bundle that she had brought with her, she passed slowly up the walk and through the arched gate-way, Mrs. Varrick watching after her from behind the lace-draped window.

She watched her out of sight, praying that she might never see her face again.

"I have separated my son from her," she muttered, sinking down upon a cushioned chair. "Any means was justifiable. He would have married her—it was drifting toward that, and rapidly. I could see it. Heaven only knows how I have plotted and planned, first to find some business by which my son could be called from the city, and during his absence get rid of that girl—so effectually get rid of her that she would never cross his path again. And I have succeeded!"

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As she spoke she drew from her bosom the paper which Jessie Bain had signed, and ran her eyes over it.

Heaven pity any girl who signs a document the contents of which she is ignorant!

This document was a statement acknowledging that she, Jessie, had taken Mrs. Varrick's diamond bracelet, and had hidden it in the bottom of her trunk, intending to slip out the following day and dispose of it, thinking she would have plenty of time to do so ere its loss was discovered; but that in this she had miscalculated, as Mrs. Varrick soon became aware of the theft; that search was made for it, and that a detective, who had been secured for the purpose of tracing it, discovered it in its hiding-place in her trunk; and that, knowing the consequences, she in her terror had made a full confession, acknowledged her guilt and threw herself completely upon Mrs. Varrick's mercy, who had promised not to prosecute her providing she left the country, which she was only too willing to do.

And to this terrible document Jessie Bain signed her name clearly and plainly.

With hurried step Mrs. Varrick crossed the room and locked the precious document in a secret drawer of her *escritoire*; then she remembered that the detective was awaiting her. She summoned him quickly.

"The matter has been adjusted, and we have rid the house of the girl's presence," she said, coldly. "I thank you for your sagacity in tracing my diamond bracelet," she said, thinking it best to throw in a dash of covert flattery, "and I shall be pleased to settle your bill whenever you wish to present it."

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The detective bowed himself out of her presence, and left the house, musing on the mysterious robbery, and saying to himself: "I would be far more apt to suspect the lady of the house than that young girl."

He sighed and went on his way; but all day long, while immersed in the business which usually was of such an exciting nature that he had no time for any other thought, the lovely face of Jessie Bain rose up before him.

He threw down his pen at last in despair.

"I must be bewitched," he muttered. "If I were a younger man I would certainly say that I had fallen in love. I must find out where that girl has gone, and have a little talk with her. I can not bring myself to believe that she stole that bracelet."

He put on his hat and reached for his cane.

"I can not say how long it will be before I shall return," he said to his fellow detective in charge of the office.

In the meantime, in her lonely mansion, Mrs. Varrick was writing a long letter to her son. In it she expressed the hope that he was having a pleasant time, and that he must not hurry home, but stay and attend to business thoroughly, even though it took him a little longer. But not one word did she mention of Jessie Bain. So preoccupied was she with her own thoughts that she did not know Hubert had entered the room until she heard his voice.

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"I will save you the trouble of posting your letter, mother. I see it is addressed to me. You can read me the contents in person."

CHAPTER XIII.

"I LOVE JESSIE BAIN WITH ALL MY HEART AND SOUL!"

Mrs. Varrick started back with a low cry.

"Is it you, Hubert?"

"Yes; but upon my honor, mother, you don't seem overglad to see me."

"I thought you were to have been gone a fortnight."

"I succeeded in getting the business attended to much more speedily than you thought it could be done. I did not make any visits, as I was anxious to get home. But, mother, how white and ill you look!" he added.

"I am quite well, but I have been suffering from a nervous headache, Hubert," she answered.

"By the way," he said suddenly, "I did not forget to bring a few little souvenirs home with me," and as he spoke he drew two small velvet cases from his pocket, one of which he handed his mother, retaining the other in his hand.

Opening it, Mrs. Varrick found that it contained a magnificent diamond bracelet.

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"That is to match, as near as possible, the beautiful bracelet you already have, mother," he said, carelessly.

She reeled back as though he had struck her a sudden blow, and looked at him with terror in her eyes.

"What is there in that other little velvet case?" she asked, as he made no move to hand it to her.

"It is not for you, mother," he responded. "It is for Jessie."

He pressed the little spring and the lid of the purple velvet box flew back, and there, lying on its shimmering satin bed, she beheld a beautiful little turquoise ring set with tiny diamonds.

"Jessie has never had a ring in all her life," he declared, "and it will please me to be the one to present her with the first one that will ever grace her little hand. Girl-like, she is fond of such trinkets. The sparkle of the tiny diamonds will delight her as nothing else has done in her whole life."

A discordant laugh broke from Mrs. Varrick's lips.

"Ay, the glitter of diamonds pleases her. How well you know the girl!" she cried shrilly. "But for glittering diamonds she might have lived a happy enough life of it. Will people ever learn the lesson that they can not pick up girls from the depths of poverty and obscurity and transplant them into elegant surroundings and expect good to come of it?"

"This present is very inexpensive," declared Hubert. "Won't you please ring for Jessie to come to us? I am anxious to see if it is the right size. It will be fun to see her big blue eyes open and hear her exclaim in dismay: 'Oh, Mr. Varrick, is it really for me?' Girls at her age are enthusiastic, and their joy is genuine upon receiving any little token of esteem."

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Again Mrs. Varrick laughed that harsh, discordant laugh.

"The ring is very pretty, Hubert," she said ironically, "but Jessie Bain would never thank you for so inexpensive a gift. That diamond bracelet is much more to her fancy."

"Girls of her age might fancy diamond bracelets, but they would never care to possess them, because they could not wear them, as they would be entirely out of place."

For the third time that harsh, shrill laugh from Mrs. Varrick's lips filled the room.

"I repeat, this bracelet would be more to her fancy," she added, grimly.

"If you will not ring for Jessie, I will do it myself," said Hubert, good-humoredly; adding: "You are just a little bit jealous, mother, and wish to keep me all to yourself, I imagine."

But ere he could reach the bell-rope she had swiftly followed him and laid a detaining hand on his arm.

She had put off the telling of her story from moment to moment, but it had to be told now.

"You need not take the trouble to ring that bell," she said, "for it would be useless—quite useless."

"Why, what do you mean?" he asked, in unfeigned astonishment, thinking that perhaps she meant to forbid him giving the girl the little ring; and he grew nettled at that thought.

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He said to himself that he was over one-and-twenty, and was entitled to do as he pleased in such matters.

"Listen, Hubert; I have something to tell you, and you must hear me out. Come and sit on this sofa beside me. I can tell you better then."

"What is the meaning of all this secrecy, mother?" he cried.

"To begin with," slowly began Mrs. Varrick, "Jessie Bain is no longer under this roof."

He looked at her as though he did not fully take in the meaning of her words.

"I will tell you the whole story, my son," she said; "but promise me first that you will not interrupt me, no matter how much you may be inclined to do so, and that you will hear without comment all that I have to say."

"Do I understand you to say that Jessie Bain is not here?" he cried.

"Promise not to interrupt me and I will tell you all."

He bowed his head in acknowledgment, though he did not gratify her by saying as much in so many words.

Slowly, in a clear, shrill voice, Mrs. Varrick began the story she had so carefully rehearsed over and over again; but as the words fell from her lips she could not trust herself to meet the clear, eagle glance her son bent upon her.

In horror which no pen could fully describe, Hubert Varrick listened to the story from his mother's lips. In all her life Mrs. Varrick never saw such a face as her son turned upon her. It was fairly distorted, with great patches of red here and there upon it.

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He set his teeth so hard together that they cut through his lip; then he raised his clinched hand and shook it in the air, crying in a voice of bitter rage:

"If an angel from heaven cried out trumpet-tongued that little Jessie Bain was guilty, I should not believe her—I would say that it was false. It is some plan, some deep-laid scheme to blight the life of Jessie Bain and ruin my happiness—ay, ruin my happiness, I say—for I love that girl with all my heart and soul! How dare they, fiends incarnate, attack her in my absence? And so you, my fine lady-mother, have turned her out into the street," he went on, in a rage that nothing could subdue. "Now listen to what I have to say, and heed it well: The day that has seen her turned from this roof shall witness my leaving it. You should have trusted and shielded her, no matter how dark appearances were against her. I am going to find Jessie Bain, and when I do I shall ask her to marry me!"

There was a wild shriek from Mrs. Varrick's lips at this, but Hubert did not heed it.

"I can not live without her! If ill has befallen my darling I will shoot myself through the heart, and

CHAPTER XIV.

"DO NOT LEAVE ME, FOR YOU ARE THE DELIGHT AND SUNSHINE OF MY LONELY LIFE!"

The scene was one of such terror for Mrs. Varrick that she never forgot it.

"I shall leave this house!" he cried again. "I will not remain another hour beneath this roof. I will find Jessie Bain, though I have to travel this wide earth over to do it!"

Suddenly he stopped short and looked at his mother; then he cried out excitedly: "Where is the woman who came here with that embroidery-work? More likely it was she who took the bracelet."

But Mrs. Varrick shook her head.

"You forget that the bracelet was found in Jessie's trunk," she said, huskily, "and that she owned up to taking it in a written confession. As for the strange embroidery woman, Miss Duncan, I paid her off and let her go. She knows next to nothing of what took place in regard to the bracelet. You must remember, too, that the girl was glad to get off so easily."

"Even though I *knew* she was guilty, I could find forgiveness in my heart for her, mother," he cried, huskily, "for I love her— I *love* her as man can love but once in his life-time. You arrayed yourself as her enemy, mother, and as such, you must be mine, until I can find little Jessie and bring her back to you."

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"Oh, no, no, Hubert, darling!" cried Mrs. Varrick, striving to throw her arms about him, but almost before she was aware of his intention, he had quitted the room, strode down the corridor, and was half-way down the walk that led to the great entrance gate.

Varrick had walked a considerable distance from the house before his mind settled down to anything like rational thoughts. Suddenly it occurred to him that the quickest way to trace her would be to secure the aid of an experienced detective. It was the merest chance that led him to the office of Henry Byrne, the great detective—the very one whose services his mother had enlisted to recover her valuable bracelet.

It took but little conversation for the detective to learn that the young man was desperately in love with the pretty little girl. This gave the experienced man of the world food for thought.

He did not tell young Varrick how interested he himself was in learning the whereabouts of that pretty young girl.

After an hour or more of earnest conversation, they parted, Byrne agreeing to report what success he met at the hotel at which Hubert Varrick said he intended stopping.

Up to midnight, when they again met, Byrne could give him no definite information; he did not even tell him that he thought he had a slight clew which he intended to follow.

Thus three days passed, and not even the slightest trace of Jessie Bain could be discovered, and Hubert was beside himself with grief.

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In the midst of his trouble a strange event happened.

As he was passing through the lobby of the hotel one evening, he met Harry Maillard, Gerelda Northrup's cousin.

Varrick turned quickly in an opposite direction, to avoid speaking to him, when suddenly Maillard came forward and held out his hand to him.

"I am glad to see you, old boy," he said, "and have been wondering where you kept yourself of late."

"I have been attending to business pretty closely," returned Varrick.

"Take a cigar," said Maillard, extending a weed. "Let's sit down. I have something to tell you."

Varrick followed his friend, and soon they were seated together before one of the open windows.

"I have such wonderful news for you," said Maillard. "I learned from Captain Frazier's valet, whom I met on the street, that his master had been dead some time, having been killed in a railway accident.

"Shortly after your unfortunate experience a great fire occurred in one of the islands in the St.

Lawrence, and Captain Frazier was there alone, and had been alone, the man informed me. There was no lady about—of this the valet was positive, and his last message to this man, who was with him to the end, was to search for Gerelda Northrup, and tell her that with his last breath he was murmuring her name, and that he wanted to be buried on the spot where they had first met.

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"That is proof positive that Gerelda was not with Captain Frazier, and that he, poor fellow, was entirely innocent of her whereabouts."

Hubert Varrick was greatly amazed at this intelligence; but before he could make any remark Maillard went on quickly:

"We received a long letter from an old nurse who used to be in Gerelda's family years ago. It was written at my cousin's dictation. She had been very ill, the letter says; and in it she goes on to tell the wonderful story of what caused her disappearance.

"She says that during your momentary absence for a glass of wine, she was abducted by a daring robber, who wished to secure the diamonds she wore, and hold her as well for a heavy ransom; that, all in an instant, while she awaited your return, she was chloroformed, a black cloak thrown over her, and the last thing she was conscious of was being borne with lightning-like rapidity down a ladder, a strong pair of burly arms encircling her.

"The night wind blowing on her face soon revived her; then she became conscious that she was in a hack, and being rapidly driven along a country road.

"'We are far enough away now,' she heard a voice say; and at that moment the vehicle came to a sudden stop. She was lifted out, the stifling folds of the cloak were withdrawn from about her, the jewels she wore were torn from her ears and breast, and from the coils of her hair the diamond arrows, which fastened her bridal-veil, and the next instant her inhuman abductor, having secured the jewels, flung her into the deep, dark, rushing river, then drove rapidly away, all heedless of her wild cries for help.

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"A Canadian fisherman, happening along in his boat just when she was giving up the struggle for life rescued her. He took her to his humble cot and to his aged mother, and under that roof she lay, racked with brain-fever, for many weeks.

"With the return of consciousness, she realized all that had transpired.

"Fearing the shock to you both, she had these people take her to an old nurse who happened to live in that vicinity, and this woman soon brought her back to something like health and strength. Then Gerelda had the woman write a long letter to me, telling me all, and bidding me break the news gently to her mother and you. The letter ends by saying:

"'By the time it was received she would be at home, and bid me hasten to you with the wonderful intelligence, and bid you come to her quickly, for her heart was breaking for a sight of you—her betrothed; that she was counting the moments until she was restored to you, and once more resting safely in your dear arms.'

"I have been searching for you for some time, Hubert, to tell you our darling Gerelda is home once more. It was only by the merest chance that some one saw you enter this hotel and told me. I will be back in one minute, depend upon it," said Maillard, seizing his hat and flying out of the door without waiting for a reply. In fact, Varrick could not have made him any had his life depended on it.

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In the midst of Hubert's conflicting thoughts, Maillard returned.

"This way, Varrick," he called cheerily from the door-way; and a moment later Varrick was hurried into the coupé, which had just drawn up to the curbstone, and, with Maillard seated beside him, was soon whirling in the direction of the Northrup mansion to which a servant admitted them.

Maillard thrust aside the heavy satin *portières* of the drawing-room, gently pushed his friend forward, and Hubert felt the heavy silken draperies close in after him. Through the half gloom he saw a slender figure flying toward him, and he heard a voice, the sound of which had been dear to him in the old days that were past and gone, crying out: "Oh, Hubert! Hubert!" and in that instant Gerelda was in his arms.

Insensibly his arms closed around her; but there was no warmth in the embrace. She held up her lovely face to be kissed, and he bent his handsome head and gave her the caress she coveted; but for him was gone all the old rapture that a kiss from those flower-like lips would have brought. By Hubert Varrick, at this moment, it was given only from a sense of duty, as love for Gerelda had died.

"Oh, Hubert, Hubert! my darling!" she cried, "is it not like heaven to be united again?"

She would not notice his coldness; for Gerelda Northrup had laid the most amazing plan that had ever entered a woman's head.

Immediately upon her dismissal from the Varrick mansion she had stolen back to the little hamlet where her old nurse lived, and had got the woman to write a letter for her as she dictated it.

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She had said to herself that Hubert Varrick should be hers again, at whatever cost, and that she

might as well force him by any means that lay in her power into a betrothal with herself again, as long as he was not married to another.

He should never know that she knew of his change of heart. She would meet him and greet him as her betrothed lover, whom she was soon to marry, and he would have to be a much smarter man than she took him to be if he could find any way out of it.

She had caused the nurse to write a similar letter to her mother; and when her mother read it, and realized that her daughter had not eloped, she received her back joyfully and with open arms. If an angel from heaven had told her that her daughter had stolen back to the city in disguise, and had been residing under the Varrick roof, she would have declared that it was false—a mad prevarication.

Mrs. Northrup was overjoyed to have the sunshine of her home, her darling daughter, back again.

With almost her first breath, after she had kissed her rapturously, she told her that she had seen very little of Hubert Varrick, and that he had never crossed the threshold since that fatal night on which he believed that his bride to be had eloped from him.

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CHAPTER XV.

"HUBERT CARES FOR ME NO LONGER," SOBBED THE GIRL.

It seemed to Hubert Varrick, as he clasped his arms around Gerelda, that he must be some other person than the man who had once loved this girl to idolatry. Now the clasp of her hand or the touch of her lips did not afford him an extra pulse-glow.

"Tell me, Hubert," she cried, "that you are as glad to see me as I am to see you."

"It is a great surprise to me, Gerelda," he answered, huskily, "so great that I am not quite myself just now. It will take me some little time to collect my scattered senses."

He led her to the nearest seat.

"My cousin has told you all that has happened to me from the hour that we parted until now, darling," she whispered. "Now tell me, Hubert, about yourself. Your heart must have almost broken, dear. I was fearful lest you might have pined away and died because of my untimely loss."

"Oh, Gerelda!" he cried, starting up distressedly, tears choking his voice, "do not say any more; you are unmanning me with every word you utter. I— I can not bear it!"

"Forgive me, my darling!" she muttered. "You are right. It is best not to probe fresh wounds. But, oh! Hubert, I am so thankful that the workings of fate have joined our hearts together at last!"

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He could not find it in his heart to tell her the truth when she loved him so; and yet he felt that he owed it to Gerelda to tell her all; but it is hard, terribly hard to own up to being faithless; and he said to himself that he could not tell her now, in the flush of her joy at meeting him, but would break it to her later on.

"This almost seems like getting acquainted with you and falling in love with you over again," laughed Gerelda, as she talked to him in the same gay, witty manner that had once so enthralled him in the old days. "I wonder, Hubert," she said at length, "that you have not asked me to sing or play for you. You used to be so delighted to hear me sing. While lying on my sick-bed I heard my old nurse sing a song that you desired me to learn. I have learned it now for you, Hubert. Listen to it, dear."

As Gerelda spoke she picked up a mandolin, and after striking a few softly vibrating notes, commenced to sing in a low strain the tender words of his favorite song, which she knew would be sure to find an echo in his heart, if anything in this world would.

Ah! what a wondrous voice she had, so full of pathetic music and the tenderness of wonderful love!

He listened, and something very like the old love stirred his heart.

The song had moved him, as she knew it would—ay, as nothing else in this world could ever have done.

He bowed his head, and Gerelda, looking at him keenly from under her long lashes, saw that his strong hand was shaking like an oak leaf in the wind.

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He leaned over and brushed back the curls caressingly from her forehead, as a brother might have done.

"You are very good to have learned that for my sake; Gerelda," he murmured. "I thank you for it."

"We must learn to sing it together," she declared.

"My voice is not what it used to be," he said, apologetically.

He lingered until the clock on the mantel struck ten; then he rose and took his departure.

To Gerelda's great chagrin, he made no offer to kiss her good-night at parting.

It was plainly evident that he wished her to understand that they were on a different footing from what they were on that memorable night when they were parted so strangely from each other.

When his footsteps had died away, Gerelda flung herself face downward on the divan, sobbing as if her heart would break; and in this position, a few minutes later, her mother surprised her.

"Why, Gerelda!" she cried. "I am shocked! What can this mean? It can not be that you and your lover have had a quarrel the very hour in which you have been restored to each other! Surely, there is no lingering doubt in his heart now, that you eloped!"

Gerelda eagerly seized upon this idea.

"There seems to be, mother," she sobbed.

Mrs. Northrup drew a cushioned chair close beside her daughter, and drew the dark, curly head into her arms.

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"You must make a confidante of me, my darling, and tell me all he said," she declared. "I was quite amazed to hear the servants say that he had gone so early. I expected to be summoned every moment, to learn that your impatient lover had sent out for a minister to perform the delayed ceremony."

Gerelda raised her tear-stained face and looked at her mother.

"No; he did not even mention marriage, mother," she sobbed.

"What!" shrieked Mrs. Northrup, in dismay. "Do I understand aright—he made no mention of marriage?"

The girl sobbed. Mrs. Northrup sprang to her feet and paced up and down the floor.

"I— I do not understand it," she cried. "Tell me what he had to say; repeat the conversation that passed between you."

"It did not amount to anything," returned her daughter bitterly. "To be quite plain with you, mamma, he was very distant and cold toward me. In fact, it was almost like getting acquainted with him over again; and to add insult to injury, as he took my hand for an instant at parting, he said, 'Good-night, Miss Northrup.' Oh! what shall I do, mamma—advise me! Ought I to give him up?"

"No," said Mrs. Northrup, sternly, "that would never do. That marriage must take place!"

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CHAPTER XVI.

WHAT OUGHT A GIRL DO IF THE MAN SHE LOVES CARES FOR ANOTHER?

"Do you hear me, Gerelda?" repeated Mrs. Northrup. "This marriage must go on! It would be the talk of the whole country if Hubert Varrick jilted you. But let me understand this matter thoroughly; did he give you any sort of a hint that he wished to break off with you? You must tell me all very plainly, and keep nothing back. I am older than you are Gerelda, and know more concerning worldly affairs. I now say this much: there must be a rival in the background. When a man has been in love with one girl, and suddenly cools off, there is a reason for it, depend on it."

"Even if there was a rival in the way, tell me what I could do, mamma, to—to win him back!"

"When a man once ceases to love you, you might as well attempt to move a mountain as to rekindle the old flame in his heart. I understand this point thoroughly. You will have to make up your mind to marry him without love."

"It takes two to make a contract to marry," sobbed Gerelda. "I am willing, but he does not seem

to be."

"It is plainly evident that I shall have to take the matter in hand," said Mrs. Northrup. "When is he coming again?"

"He didn't say," returned Gerelda, faintly. "But perhaps he may be here to-morrow evening with some music I asked him to bring me." [Pg 95]

"Now, when he comes," said Mrs. Northrup, "I want you to make some excuse to leave the room, for say, ten or fifteen minutes, and during that time I will soon have this matter settled with Hubert Varrick."

"It would not look well for you to mention the matter," cried Gerelda.

"Somebody must do it," returned her mother, severely, "and the longer it is put off the worse it will be; the marriage can not take place too soon. Come, my dear," she added, "you must dry your tears. Never permit any living man to have the power to give you a heartache."

"You talk as if I was a machine, mother, and could cease loving at will!" cried the beauty.

"It is much as a woman makes up her mind. If you worry yourself into the grave over a man, before the grass has time to grow over you he will have consoled himself with another sweetheart. So dry your eyes, and don't shed a tear over him."

Gerelda walked slowly from the room. It was not so easy to take her mother's advice, for she loved Hubert Varrick with all her heart; and the very thought of him loving another was worse to her than a poisoned arrow in her breast.

She knew why he did not care for her.

"I have only one hope," she murmured, leaning her tear-stained face against the marble mantel, "and that is that Hubert may soon get over his mad infatuation for that girl Jessie Bain."

Gerelda sought her couch, but not to sleep; and it was not until daylight stole through the room, heralding the approach of another day, that slumber came to her. [Pg 96]

Hubert Varrick, in his room at the hotel, was quite as restless. He had paced the floor, smoking cigar after cigar, trying to look the matter calmly in the face, until he was fairly exhausted.

He was glad to know that Gerelda had not been false to him; and yet, so conflicting were his thoughts, that he almost wished to Heaven that she had been, that he could have had some excuse to give her up.

He made up his mind that he could not marry Gerelda while his heart was so entirely another's, but he must break away from her gently.

As he was passing a music store the next afternoon, he saw a piece of music in the window which Gerelda had asked him to bring to her. He went and purchased it, and was about sending it to her by a messenger boy, when he thought it would look much better to take it himself; besides, he had business to attend to in that locality.

As he stepped upon the street car, he purchased a daily paper to pass away the time.

Upon opening it, an article met his view that nearly took his breath away.

The caption read:

"A Romance in Real Life.—The Prettiest Girl in the City and a Well-known Young Millionaire the Hero and Heroine of the Episode."

Following this was an account of Gerelda's abduction, as she had related it. In conclusion there was a statement by Mrs. Northrup to the effect that Gerelda's lover, Mr. Varrick, was anxious to have the ceremony consummated at once, and, in accordance with his earnest wish, the marriage would take place shortly. [Pg 97]

Varrick stared hard at the paper.

"The whole matter seems to have been fully arranged and settled without the formality of consulting me," he muttered, grimly.

After that he could see no way out of it. This had gone broadcast throughout the city, he told himself, and now what could he do but marry Gerelda; otherwise it would subject her to the severest criticism, and himself to scorn.

A woman's good name was at stake. Was he not in honor bound to shield her? He would have been startled had he but known that this newspaper article was the work of Mrs. Northrup.

"I might as well accept the inevitable as my fate," he murmured, with a sigh. "I might have been happy with Gerelda if I had never known Jessie Bain."

When he arrived at the Northrup mansion, Gerelda's mother came down to welcome him.

Like her daughter, she did not appear to notice his constraint, and greeted him effusively, as in

the old days.

"Have you seen the morning paper, Hubert?" she asked, with a little rippling laugh on her lips. "It is amusing to me how these newspaper men get hold of things so quickly. I was down to one of the stores this afternoon ordering the wedding-cards. I knew you would be anxious to get them, and I wanted to relieve your mind and Gerelda's as well. I was telling the designer the whole story—you know he is the same person who got up the last cards for you—when a man who stood near us, he must have been a reporter—took in every word I said. A few hours later, a young man representing the paper came up to interview me on the subject, remarking that I might as well tell the public the whole story, as the main part of the affair was already in print. He gave me a *résumé* of what was about to appear, and I had to acknowledge that he had the story correct in most of its details."

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She was shrewd enough to note that Hubert Varrick grew very pale while she was speaking, and she could not help but observe the hopelessness that settled over his face.

His heart was touched, in spite of himself, to see how gladly Gerelda greeted him, and to note how she seemed to hang on every word that he uttered, accepting his love as a matter of course.

Of what use to make any demur now that the fiat had gone forth? There was nothing for him to do but to accept the bride fate had intended for him, and shut out from his heart all thoughts of that other love.

It would be a terrible burden to go through life with, acting the part of a dutiful husband to a young wife whom he pitied but did not love.

Other men had gone through such ordeals. Surely he could be as brave as they.

And so the preparations for the wedding, for a second time, were begun. Again the guests were bidden, and the event was to take place in exactly six weeks from that day.

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CHAPTER XVII.

LOVE IS BITTER AND THE WHOLE WORLD GOES WRONG WHEN TWO LOVERS PART IN ANGER FOREVER.

We must return to our beautiful heroine, little Jessie Bain.

When she turned her face from the Varrick mansion toward the cold and desolate world, the girl's very heart seemed to stop still in her bosom.

Jessie Bain knew little of traveling—she had not the least idea how to get to her uncle's, although she had made that trip once before. She walked one street after the other in the vain hope of finding the depot. At last, fairly exhausted, she found herself just outside the entrance to Central Park.

Jessie entered the park, and sunk down on the nearest seat.

Among those sauntering past in the crowd was a tall, broad-shouldered young man, who stopped abruptly as his bold black eyes fell upon the lovely young face.

"Heavens! what a beauty!" he muttered, stopping short, under the pretense of lighting a cigarette, and watching her covertly from under his dark brows.

Seating himself unconcernedly on the further end of the bench, the stranger continued to watch Jessie, who had not even the slightest intimation of his presence.

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He waited until the crowd thinned out, until only an occasional straggler passed by; then he edged nearer the pretty little creature.

"Ahem!" he began, with a slight cough. After several ineffectual attempts to attract her attention in this way, the stranger spoke to her.

"A lovely day, isn't it?" he remarked.

"Are you speaking to me, sir?" asked Jessie Bain, in great displeasure.

"I am indeed so bold," he answered. "May I hope that you are not offended with me for so doing, for I have a fancy to know such a pretty young girl as yourself."

"I am offended!" cried Jessie Bain, indignantly. "I always supposed before this that people could sit down in a public park without being molested; but it seems not; so I shall move on!"

"So young, so beautiful, but so unkind," murmured the stranger, in a melo-dramatic voice.

"I can not think that we are strangers. I must have seen you somewhere, believe me," he went on, rising suddenly and walking close by her side as she started down the path.

Jessie was now thoroughly frightened. She uttered a little, shrill cry.

"What are you doing that for?" hissed the man, clutching her arm. "You will have the police after us. Walk along quietly beside me, you little fool; I have something to say to you."

Terrified, Jessie only cried the louder and shriller, wrenching her arm free from the stranger's grasp. [Pg 101]

At that instant a young man, who had happened along, and who had heard the cry, sprang with alacrity to the young girl's rescue.

"What is the matter?" he cried. "Is this fellow annoying you?"

Jessie knew the voice at once, and sprang forward. She had recognized the voice of the young architect.

"Oh, save me—save me!" she cried.

Even before she had time to utter a word the young man had recognized Jessie Bain; and that very instant the man who had dared thus annoy her was measuring his full length on the grass, sent there by the young architect's vigorous arm.

"I will have your life for this!" yelled the fellow, as he picked himself up, but taking good care to keep well out of the reach of the young girl's defender.

"What in the world are you doing in the park, and so far away from home, Miss Jessie?" Moray, the young architect, asked.

Her lips quivered and her eyes filled with sudden tears.

"Varrick Place isn't home to me any longer, Mr. Moray," she sobbed. "I have just left it to-day—left it forever. I wish I had never seen the place. It has caused me no end of sorrow."

"I do not wish to pry into any of your affairs," he said, gently, as he took her hand and walked slowly down the path with her; "but if you will confide in me and tell me why you left, I might be able to help you." [Pg 102]

Little by little he drew from the girl the whole terrible story, until she had told him all.

Frank Moray's indignation knew no bounds. He could hardly restrain himself from ejaculations of anger.

"Of course, if you have friends, it would ill become me to persuade you not to go to them; but if you ask my advice, I would say: remain here for a little while and look about you. Come home with me. I have a dear old mother who will receive you with open arms. My cousin Annabel, too, will be glad to welcome you. Come home and talk to mother and let her advise you what to do. Will you come with me, Miss Jessie?"

The girl was only too glad to assent.

When Jessie had finished her story, the impulse was strong within the young architect's breast to ask the girl to marry him, then and there.

He had never ceased caring for her from the first moment he had seen her pretty face. But he told himself that it would seem too much like taking an unfair advantage to say anything of love or marriage to her now.

Mrs. Moray received the stranger with motherly kindness.

"I have heard my son speak of you so often that I feel as though I were well acquainted with you," she said, untying the girl's bonnet and removing her mantle.

"Come here, Annabel, my dear," she said, turning to a young girl who sat in a little low rocker by the sewing machine, "and welcome Miss Bain."

A slim, slight girl, in a jaunty blue cloth dress edged with white, rose and came curiously forward, extending a little brown hand to Jessie. [Pg 103]

"I am very glad to see you, Miss Bain," she said; "for Frank has talked of you so much."

"Won't you please call me Jessie?" returned the other. "No one has ever called me Miss Bain before."

"Nothing would please me better," returned Annabel.

They spent a very pleasant evening, and then Annabel took Jessie off to her room with her for the night.

Long after the two girls had retired Mrs. Moray and her son sat talking the matter over, and it was not long before Mrs. Moray discovered that her boy was deeply in love with pretty Jessie Bain.

Of course, like himself, she felt perfectly sure that the girl was entirely innocent of what she had been accused of by Mrs. Varrick.

But the very idea of the theft sent a thrill of horror through her heart. She must discourage her son's love for the girl, for she would rather see him dead and buried than wedded to one upon whose fair name ever so slight a stain rested. She said to herself that the girl's stay beneath their cottage roof must be cut as short as possible.

It was decided that Jessie Bain should remain at the cottage of the Morays until she had ample time to write to her uncle and receive his reply.

Jessie mailed her letter before she went to sleep that night. Annabel easily dropped off to slumber, but it was not so with Jessie; for had not this been the most eventful day of her life?

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How she wished Mrs. Varrick had not exacted a promise from her that she would never again hold any communication with her son Hubert! Would he believe her guilty when he returned home and his mother told him all that had transpired?

She could imagine the horror on his face as he listened; and this thought was so bitter to Jessie that she cried herself to sleep over it.

The third day of her stay a letter from her uncle came to her. Her cousin was married and gone away, he wrote, and he would be only too glad to forget and forgive by-gones.

Two days later, Frank Moray saw her safely on the train which would take her as far as Clayton, where her uncle promised to meet her.

"If I write to you sometimes, will you answer my letters, little Jessie?" asked Frank Moray, as he found her a seat in a well-crowded car, and bent over her for the last glance into the girl's beautiful, wistful face.

"Yes," she answered, absently.

For a moment his hand closed over hers; he looked at her with his whole soul in his honest eyes, then he turned and quickly left her.

He stood on the platform and watched her sweet face at the window until the train was out of sight, then he moved slowly away.

Jessie stared hard through the window, but she never saw any of the scenes through which she was whirling so rapidly. Her thoughts were with Hubert Varrick.

It was dusk when she reached her destination, and according to his promise her uncle was at the depot to meet her.

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It was with genuine joy that he hurried forward to greet the girl, though they had parted but a few short months ago in such bitter anger.

"I am glad to get you back again, little Jessie," he declared, eagerly; "and, as I wrote to you, we will let by-gones be by-gones, little girl, and forget the past unpleasantness between us by wiping it out of our minds as though it had never been. I missed you awfully, little one, and I've had a lonesome time of it since your cousin went away. Home isn't home to a man without a neat little woman about to tidy things up a bit and make it cheerful."

How good it seemed to Jessie to have some one speak so kindly to her! He was plain and homely, and coarse of speech, but he was the only being in the whole wide world who really cared for her and offered her a shelter in this her hour of need. But how desolate the place was, with its little old-fashioned, low-ceiling kitchen, the huge fire-place on one side, the cupboard on the other, whose chintz curtains were drawn back, revealing the rows of cups and saucers and pile of plates of blue china, more cracked and nicked than ever, and the pine table, with its oil-cloth cover, and the old rag mat in the center of the floor!

The girl's heart sank as she looked around.

Could she make this place her home again? Its very atmosphere, redolent with tobacco smoke and the strong odor of vegetables, took her breath away.

Ah! it was very hard for this girl, whose only fortune was a dower of poverty, and who had had a slight taste of wealth and refinement, to come back to the old life again and fall into the drudgery of other days.

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She could not refuse her uncle when he pleaded to know where she went and where she had been since the night he had driven her, in his mad frenzy, out into the world.

He listened in wonder. The girl's story almost seemed like a fairy tale to him. But as he listened to the ending of it—surely the saddest story that ever was told by girlish lips—of how she had left the Varrick mansion, and of what Mrs. Varrick had accused her of doing, his rage knew no bounds.

"You might have known how it would all turn out!" he cried. "A poor little field wren has no business in the gilded nest of the golden eagle! You are at home again, little one. Think no more of those people!"

How little he realized that this was easier said than done. Where one's heart is, there one's thoughts are also.

The neighbors flocked in to see her. Every one was glad to have pretty, saucy Jessie Bain back once more. But there was much mystery and silent speculation as to where she had been.

The girls of the neighborhood seemed to act shy of her. Even her old companions nodded very stiffly when they met her, and walked on the other side of the street when they saw her coming.

The antagonism of the village girls was never so apparent until the usual festivities of the autumn evenings approached.

It was the custom of the village maidens of Alexandria Bay to inaugurate the winter sports by giving a Halloween party, and every one looked forward to this with the wildest anticipation. [Pg 107]

Jessie Bain had always been the moving spirit at these affairs, despite the fact that they were generally held in the homes of some of the wealthier girls, their houses being larger and more commodious.

The party, which was to be on a fine scale this year, was now the talk of the little town.

But much to the sorrow and the amazement of Jessie Bain, day by day rolled by without bringing her the usual invitation.

It wanted but two days now to the all-important party. Jessie had gotten her dress ready for the occasion, thinking that at the last moment some of the girls would come in person and invite her. Not that she cared so much for the fun, after all, but her uncle was anxious that she should go more among the young folks, as she used to do. It was simply to please him that she would mingle among the crowd of youths and maidens.

At last the day of the Halloween party rolled round.

"Well," said her uncle, as he sat down to the breakfast table and waited for her to set on the morning meal, "I suppose you're getting all your fixings ready to have a big time with the young folks to-night?"

Before she could answer, there was the postman's whistle at the door. He handed in a large, thick letter, and it was addressed to Jessie Bain.

Jessie turned the letter over and over, looking in wonder at the superscription. The envelope contained something else besides the letter—a newspaper clipping. This Jessie put on the table to look over after she had finished the letter. It was a bright, newsy epistle, brimming over with kindly wishes for her happiness, and ending with a hope that the writer might see her soon. [Pg 108]

"Who is it from?" asked her uncle.

The girl dutifully read it out for him.

"He seems to be a right nice young man, and quite taken up with you, little Jess," he said, laughingly.

He saw by the distressed look on her face that this idea did not please her.

"He would have to be a mighty nice fellow to get my consent to marry you, my lass."

"Do not fear, uncle," she said; "you will never be called upon to give your consent to that. He is very nice indeed, but not such a one as I could give my heart to, I assure you."

"Then let me give you a word of advice; don't encourage him by writing letters to him. But isn't there another part of the letter on the table yonder you haven't read yet?"

"I had almost forgotten it," returned Jessie.

One glance as she spread it out at full length, then her face grew white as death.

"Bless me! I shall be late!" declared her uncle, putting on his hat and hurrying from the room.

She never remembered what he said as he passed out of the room. Her heart, ay, her very soul, was engrossed in the printed lines before her.

In startling headlines she read the words:

"A NOTABLE MARRIAGE IN HIGH LIFE—MR. HUBERT VARRICK AND MISS NORTHRUP WEDDED AT LAST." [Pg 109]

Then followed an account of the grand ceremony; of a mansion decorated with roses; a description of the marriage; the elaborate wedding-breakfast served in a perfect bower of orchids and ferns; and then the names of the guests, who numbered nearly a thousand.

Jessie Bain never finished the article. With a bitter cry she fell face downward on the floor in a deep swoon.

It was an hour or more ere she returned to consciousness. With trembling hands the girl tore the newspaper clipping into a thousand shreds, lest her eyes should ever fall on it again.

"He is married—married!" she murmured; and the words seemed to fall like ice upon her heart.

How strange it seemed! She remembered but too well the last time she had looked upon his face.

Captain Carr did not come home for supper, and one of the neighboring women dropped in to tell Jessie that he might not get home until far into the night, for there had been a terrible accident on the river the evening before, and his services were needed there.

Night came on, darkness settled down over the world; then one by one the stars came out, and a full moon rose clear and bright in the heavens.

The sound of far-off strains of music and the echo of girlish laughter suddenly fell upon her ears. Then it occurred to her that it must be near midnight, that her companions of other days were in the midst of their Halloween games in the big house on the hill.

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Only the little brook at the rear of her uncle's garden separated the grounds. Some subtle instinct which she could not follow drew Jessie's steps to the brook.

The moon for a moment was hidden behind a cloud, but suddenly it burst forth clear and bright in all its glory. For one brief instant the heart in her bosom seemed to stand still.

Was she mad, or did she dream? Was it the figure of a man picking his way over the smooth white rocks that served as stepping-stones across the shallow stream, and coming directly toward her?

Midway he paused, and looked toward the cottage and the light which she always placed in the window. Then the moon shone full upon his face, and Jessie Bain looked at him with eyes that fairly bulged from their sockets. His features were now clearly visible in the bright moonlight. It was Hubert Varrick in the flesh, surely, or his wraith!

In that first rapid glance she seemed to live an age; then, for the second time that day, a merciful unconsciousness seized her.

It was gray dawn when she regained her senses and crept back, terror-stricken, to the house.

Was it the idle fancy of her own vivid imagination, or did she really see the image of Hubert Varrick confronting her by the brook as the midnight bells of All-Halloween rang out slowly and solemnly on the crisp, chilly night air?

"I must be going mad—my brain must be turning," thought the girl, shivering in every limb as she walked slowly back to the house.

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The sun was up high in the heavens ere her uncle returned.

"Such a time as we've had, lass!" he cried, throwing down his cap. "A steamer was wrecked the night before last, and all day yesterday and all last night we were busy doing our utmost for the poor creatures who barely escaped with their lives. We saved a good many who were in the water for many hours, holding on to planks or life-preservers, and there are many lost. It was the steamer 'St. Lawrence,' heavily laden, that was to have connected with the boat for Montreal, for which most of the passengers were bound. There is one woman whom they are bringing here. I came on ahead to have you prepare a bed for her. Every house has been called upon to give shelter to some one. It will make you a little more work, lass, but it will only be for a little while."

"I shall be glad of the work, for it will occupy my time and attention," declared Jessie.

She had scarcely uttered the words ere the men were seen approaching with their burden. They brought the woman in and placed her on Jessie's little cot.

"Oh, how beautiful she is!" murmured Jessie, little dreaming who it was that she was sheltering beneath that roof.

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CHAPTER XVIII.

WEDDING BELLS OUT OF TUNE.

Let us return to Hubert Varrick, and the marriage which was the all-absorbing topic in fashionable circles.

Mrs. Varrick had sent a note to her son at his hotel, begging for a reconciliation, and stating that she would be at the wedding without fail; but never a word did she say about Jessie Bain.

It seemed like a dream to Hubert—his ride in a cab through the cool crisp air to Gerelda's home on that eventful morning.

He noticed one thing—that the sun did not shine that day; and he said to himself that it boded ill

for his wedding.

The bride-elect and her mother welcomed him effusively. Bitter anger filled the girl's heart to see how cold and stern he looked. She noticed that he had no word, no smile for her. If she had not loved him so madly, her pride would have rebelled, and she would have let him go his way even then.

She almost shrunk under the cold glance that rested upon her. She trembled, even in that moment, as she thought how he would hate her if he but knew how she had plotted to win him. Before she had a chance to exchange a word with him, her maid of honor came fluttering down the corridor, chattering in high spirits with Harry Maillard, who was to be best man. [Pg 113]

She was quite as dazed as Varrick himself, until she found herself standing beside him at the altar.

It was over at last! The words had been spoken which made her Hubert Varrick's wedded wife, through weal or through woe, till death did them part.

Then followed the sumptuous wedding-breakfast. While the merriment was at its height, Varrick touched her lightly on the arm.

"It wants but an hour and twenty minutes until train time. Would it not be best to slip away now and arrange your traveling toilet?"

"Yes," said Gerelda.

No one noticed their exit, and at last they were alone together, away from the throng of guests; but, much to the bride's disappointment, her newly made husband did not seem to realize this fact, and Gerelda's face flushed with disappointment.

He escorted her as far as the door of her *boudoir*, and there he left her, saying that he would return in half an hour, hoping that would be sufficient time to exchange her bridal robes for her traveling-dress. She smiled and nodded, declaring that he should find her ready before that time.

Hubert walked slowly on until he found himself at the door of the conservatory.

"It wouldn't be a bad idea to get a cigar and return here for a quiet smoke," he thought.

He immediately suited the action to the thought. Was it fate that led him there? He had scarcely seated himself in one of the rustic arm-chairs ere he heard the sound of approaching voices.

He felt slightly annoyed that the retreat he had chosen was to be invaded at that particular moment. [Pg 114]

He drew back among the large-leaved plants, which would effectually screen him from the intruders, and hoped that their stay would be short.

"I tell you it will be impossible for you to see her," said a voice, which he recognized as belonging to Gerelda's maid.

"But I must," retorted another voice which sounded strangely familiar. "Give her the note I just gave you, and I will wager you something handsome that she will see me. My good girl, let this plead for me with you!"

A jingle of silver accompanied the words, and Varrick could not help but smile at the magical effect the little bribe had.

"Of course, I'll take your note to her, sir," said the girl; "but that isn't promising she'll see you."

Somehow the idea formed itself in Varrick's mind that it was Mrs. Northrup for whom the man asked. Had he thought for one moment that it was Gerelda whom the man had asked for, he would have stepped forth and inquired of him what he wanted.

In a very few moments he heard the *frou-frou* of a woman's garments and the patter of hurrying feet.

"Gerelda has come instead of her mother to see what this person wants," he thought; adding impatiently: "This will never do; we shall be late for the train, sure. I will have to take the man off her hands."

At that instant, Gerelda, panting with excitement sprung across the threshold of the conservatory. [Pg 115]

From his leafy seat Varrick could hear and see all that took place, while no one could see him.

He had risen, and was just about to step forward, when he caught sight of Gerelda's face. The color of it held him spell-bound. It was as pale as death, and her eyes flashed fire. She was fairly frothing at the mouth, and the look of venomous rage that distorted her features appalled him.

"You!" cried Gerelda. "Have you risen from the grave to confront me?"

"I am Captain Frazier—at your service, madame," returned her companion, with a low bow. "As for my returning from the unknown shore, why, you flatter me in imagining that I have so much power, though I have been known to do some miraculous things before now. I am sorry that so

many of my friends believe the ridiculous story that was set afloat regarding my supposed death. I am—"

"Why are you here? What do you want?" cried Gerelda.

"You are inclined to be brusque, my dear," he replied, tauntingly. "If you had asked me that question half an hour ago, I should have answered, 'I am here to stop your marriage with Hubert Varrick at whatever cost. I have traveled by night and by day, foot-sore and hungry, to get here in time to prevent it.' I— I thought you had perished in the fire on the island, until I read the article in the paper announcing your marriage."

"If this is all you have to say to me, permit me to say good-morning," she returned icily, turning to leave the place.

"You shall listen to me!" he cried. "I vowed in days gone by that you should never be happy with Hubert Varrick. You promised that you would marry me, and those words changed my whole life." [Pg 116]

"Well, now that I am another's bride, what can you do about it?" sneered Gerelda.

"I mean to see Varrick and have a little talk with him," he answered. "I will tell him how, on the very night before the marriage was to have taken place at the Crossmon Hotel, at Alexandria Bay, I threw myself on my knees at your feet, and cried out to you to spare me; that you had played with my heart too long, and urged you to fly with me, and that you said, while I knelt before you, that if you decided to fly with me you would let me know by sunrise the following morning, but that you must have all night to think it over."

"Do you dare face me and deny that?" continued Captain Frazier, seizing her white wrist and holding it in an iron grip.

"No, I do not deny it," she answered. "But what of it? What do you expect to make of it?"

"This!" he cried, furiously. "I intend to be even with you. I will have a glorious revenge! I will see Hubert Varrick before he leaves this house, and say to him: 'I hope you may be happy with your bride,' and I will laugh in his face, crying out: 'She eloped with me not so very long ago, and we went to my island home, where we kept in hiding until the sensation should blow over. We remained there, as I can prove by all my servants, and I was a very slave to her sweet caprices.'"

"You would not say that!" cried Gerelda. "I would tell him my side of the story—that you kidnapped me, and held me by force on the island." [Pg 117]

"Varrick is a man of the world," he returned, tauntingly. "Your side of the story is too flimsy for him or any one else to believe."

"Stop! You must not—you shall not!" cried Gerelda, wildly. "I— I will make terms with you. I see you are shabbily dressed and in want of money. I will give you a check, here and now, for a thousand dollars, if you will go away, never again to return, and have nothing to say—nothing. Your story would ruin me, false though it is."

The captain arched his eyebrows.

"I think I could bring satisfactory proof as to where you passed your time."

Hubert Varrick, standing behind the foliage, was fairly stricken dumb by what he heard and saw.

He did not love his bride, but he believed in her implicitly. All the old doubt which had filled his heart and killed his love for Gerelda came surging back like a raging torrent, sweeping over his very soul.

In that instant the thought of Jessie Bain came to him—sweet little Jessie, whose love for him he had read in her every glance, and to whom he had given all his heart with a deeper, stronger love than he had ever given to Gerelda, even in those old days. How he longed to break from the terrible nightmare which seemed to fetter him!

"Your offer of a thousand dollars is a very fair one; but it will take double that sum to purchase my silence. You are quite right in your surmise. I am in need of money. With one fell swoop I have lost every dollar of my fortune, and now that all romance and sentiment are over between us, I have no compunction in showing you the mercenary side of my nature. Make it two thousand, and I will consent to hold my peace, seeing that I can not mend matters by undoing the marriage." [Pg 118]

"Come with me. We will settle this now and forever. I have but five minutes to devote to you. Step this way," said Gerelda.

The next instant they had disappeared, and Hubert Varrick was left standing there alone.

How long he stood there he never knew. His valet came in search of him. He found him at the end of the conservatory, standing motionless as a statue among the shrubbery.

"Master," he said, "your bride bids me say to you that you have barely time to get into your traveling clothes."

He was shocked at the horrible laugh that broke from Varrick's lips.

Had his master gone mad? he wondered.

He followed the man without a word, and five minutes later, with a firm step, he was walking down the corridor toward his bride's apartments.

But ere he could knock upon the door, it was opened by Gerelda. He offered his arm to Gerelda, and walked slowly by her side through the throng of friends to the carriage in waiting; and, amid showers of rice, peals of joyous laughter, and a world of good wishes, they were whirled away.

During the entire ride Varrick spoke no word. Gerelda watched him narrowly out of the corner of her eye, wondering why he looked so unusually angry. [Pg 119]

They were barely in time to catch the train, and it was not until they were seated in their own compartment that Varrick ventured a remark to the beautiful girl he had just made his wife, and who was looking up into his face with such puzzled wonder in her great dark eyes.

"I should like your attention for a few moments, Mrs. Varrick," he said, turning to her with a haughty sternness that was new to him.

"You are my wife," he went on; "the ceremony is barely over which made you that, yet I would recall it if I could."

"What do you mean, Hubert?" she cried, piteously.

"We will not have any theatricals, if you please," he said, waving her back. "A guilty conscience should need no accuser. It is best to speak plainly to you, and to the point. Suffice it to say I was in the conservatory at the time you entered. I heard all that passed between Captain Frazier and yourself. Now, here is what I propose to do: We were to take a wedding-trip to Montreal. We will go there, but when we reach our destination, you and I will part forever. I shall institute proceedings for a divorce at once, and I shall never know another happy moment until the divorce is granted. You shall be wife of mine but in name until we reach Montreal; then we part forever."

"Oh, Hubert, Hubert, you will not do this!" she sobbed, wildly. "It would ruin my life—kill me!"

"You did not stop to think that marriage with you would ruin my life," he interposed, bitterly. [Pg 120]
"What have you to say for yourself? Was Captain Frazier's story false or true? Remember, I heard him say that he could furnish proof of all he charged."

"It is useless to hide the truth from you," she whispered, hoarsely. "I see that you know all. Give me a chance to think—only to think of some way out of it. It would kill me, Hubert, to part from you. Better death than that. You are my world, the sunshine of my life. I would pine away and die without you. Oh, Hubert, you must not leave me!"

"The words are easily said," he replied, "but they do not sound sincere. I may as well make a clean breast of the whole matter," he went on, "and tell you the truth, Gerelda. I do not love you. I— I—love another, though that love has never been confessed to the one I love. I— I—married you because I felt in honor bound to do so, and in doing so I crushed all the love that was budding in my heart. But was it worth the sacrifice of two lives? You can not answer me. I shall not intrude upon you again until we reach Montreal. You can send for your mother; it would be best for me to leave you in her charge. Telegraph back to her from the next station we arrive at. The moment we reach Montreal we part forever!"

But at that instant a strange event happened. [Pg 121]

CHAPTER XIX.

THE COLLISION—THE PILOT AT THE WHEEL.

Gerelda had been looking intently out of the window. Suddenly she sprang back with a wild cry that fairly froze the blood in Varrick's veins.

"What has frightened you, Gerelda?" he asked, gravely; and the look she turned on him he never forgot, there was something so terrible in the gaze of those dark eyes. She did not attempt to repel him from drawing near her, or from clasping her hands; but ever and anon she would laugh that horrible laugh that froze the blood in his veins.

"Let us talk the matter over calmly, Gerelda," he said at length, "and arrive at an understanding."

"There is no need," she returned. "As long as I understand, that is quite sufficient."

There was something in the tone of her voice that frightened him. He looked into her face. A grayish pallor overspread it. To Varrick's infinite surprise, Gerelda commenced to laugh

immoderately; and these spells of laughter so increased as the moments flew by, that he became greatly alarmed.

He wondered what he could do or say to comfort her. She grew so alarmingly hysterical as he watched her, that it occurred to him he must find medical aid for her. Fortune favored him; he found a doctor seated in the compartment next to him. The gentleman was only too glad to be able to render him every assistance in his power.

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One glance at the beautiful bride, and an expression of the gravest apprehension swept over the doctor's face.

"My dear sir," he said, turning to Varrick, "I have something to tell you which you must summon all your fortitude to hear. Your young wife has lost her reason; she is dangerously insane."

Varrick started back as though the man had struck him a sudden blow.

"You are bound for Montreal, I believe," continued the doctor. "You will see the need of conveying her to an asylum, with the least possible delay, as soon as you arrive there. If there is anything which I can do to assist you during this journey, do not hesitate to call upon me. Consider me entirely at your service."

That was a day in Hubert Varrick's life that he never looked back to without shuddering. How he passed the long hours he never knew. Gerelda grew steadily more violent, and twice Varrick's life would have paid the forfeit had it not been for his watchfulness.

With great difficulty he succeeded, with the doctor's assistance, in making the change from the train to the boat.

That was how his wedding journey began.

As night came on, the doctor touched him again on the arm.

"You have not left your young bride's side for an instant during all these long hours," he said. "You are wearing yourself out. Let me beg of you to go out on deck and take a few turns up and down; the cool air will revive you. Nay, you must not refuse; I insist upon it, or I shall have you for a patient before your journey is ended."

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To this proposition, after some little coaxing, Varrick consented.

The doctor was quite right; the cool air did revive him amazingly. He felt feverish, and paced up and down the deck, a prey to the bitterest thoughts that ever tortured a man's soul.

One by one the stars came out in the great blue arch overhead, and mirrored themselves in the bluer waters.

Varrick watched them in silence, his heart in a whirl. All at once it occurred to him that he knew the pilot of the boat—that, as he was from Montreal, it wouldn't be a bad idea to interview him as to the location of some private asylum to which he might take Gerelda.

He acted upon this thought at once, and making his way to the upper deck, he recognized the man at the wheel, in the dim light, although his back was turned to him.

"How are you, John?" he exclaimed, tapping him on the shoulder. "Don't let me frighten you; it is your old friend Varrick."

Much to his surprise, the pilot neither stirred nor spoke. Varrick stepped around, and faced him with some little laughing remark on his lips. But the words died away in his throat in a gasp. The dim light was falling full upon the pilot's features. What was there in that ashy face and those staring eyes that sent the cold blood back to his heart?

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"John!" he cried, bending nearer the man and catching hold of his arm roughly as it rested upon the wheel. But his own dropped heavily to his side.

The terrible truth burst upon him with startling force—the pilot was dead at the wheel!

But even in the same instant that he made his horrible discovery, a still greater one dawned upon him. Another steamer came puffing and panting down the river, signaling the "St. Lawrence."

Each turn of the ponderous wheels swept her nearer and nearer, and the "St. Lawrence" was drifting directly across her bow. It was a moment so feigned with horror it almost turned Varrick's brain. Five hundred souls, or more, all unconscious of their deadly peril, were laughing and chattering down below, and the pilot was dead at the wheel!

Ere he could give the alarm, a terrible catastrophe would occur. He realized this, and made the supreme effort of his life to avert it. But fate was against him. In his mad haste to leap down the stair-way to give warning, his foot slipped, and he fell headlong to the floor of the lower deck, his temple, coming in contact with the railing, rendering him unconscious. Heaven was merciful to him that he did not realize what took place at that instant.

There was a sudden shock, a terrible crash, and half a thousand souls, with terrified shrieks on their lips, found themselves struggling in the dark waters!

It was a reign of terror that those who participated in it, never forgot.

When Hubert Varrick returned to consciousness he found himself lying full length upon the greensward, and his face upturned to the moonlight, with the dead and dying around him, and the groans of the wounded ringing in his ears.

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For an instant he was bewildered; then, with a rush, Memory mounted its throne in his whirling brain, and he recollected what had happened—the pilot dead at the wheel, another steamer sweeping down upon them; how he had rushed below to inform the passengers of their peril; how his foot had slipped, and he knew no more.

He realized that there must have been a horrible disaster.

How came he there? Who had saved him? Then, like a flash, he thought of Gerelda. Where was she? What had become of her? He struggled to his feet, weak and dazed.

He made the most diligent search for her, but she was nowhere to be found. Some one at length came hurriedly up to him. In the clear bright moonlight Varrick saw that it was the doctor in whose care he had left his young bride when he had gone on deck for fresh air.

"You are looking for *her*, sir?" he asked, huskily.

"Yes," cried Varrick, tremulously.

"Are you brave enough to hear the truth?" said the other, slowly.

"Yes," answered Varrick.

"Your wife was lost in the disaster. I was by her side when the steamer was struck. We had both concluded to go on deck to join you. With the first terrible lurch we were both thrown headlong into the water. I did my utmost to save her, but it was not to be. A floating spar struck her, and she went down before my eyes."

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For an instant Varrick neither moved nor spoke.

"She is dead?" he interrogated.

"Yes," returned the doctor.

Varrick sank down upon a fallen log, and buried his face in his hands. For a moment he could scarcely realize Gerelda's untimely fate. He had not loved her, it was true; still, he would have given his life to have had her reason restored to her.

For an hour or more Hubert Varrick forgot his own sorrow in alleviating the terrible distress of others.

When there was no more assistance that he could render he thought it would be best for him to get away from the place as quickly as possible.

Scarcely heeding whither he went, he took the first path that presented itself. How far he walked he had not the least idea. In the distance he saw lights gleaming, and he knew that he was approaching some little village. He said to himself that it would be best to stop there for a few hours—until daylight, at least, and to recover Gerelda's body if possible.

He followed the path until it brought him to the edge of a little brook. The white, shining stones that rose above the eddying little wavelets seemed to invite him to cross to the other side. Midway over the brook he paused.

Was it only his fancy, or did he hear the sound of music and revelry?

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He stood quite still and looked around him; the scene seemed familiar.

For an instant Hubert Varrick was startled; but as he gazed he recognized the place. He must be at Fisher's Landing. Up there through the trees, lay the home of Captain Carr, the uncle of little Jessie Bain.

As he stood gazing at it, the clock in some adjacent steeple slowly struck the midnight hour. He wondered if Jessie was there. How he felt like telling some one his troubles!

CHAPTER XX.

LOVE IS A POISONED ARROW IN SOME HEARTS.

Early the next morning Varrick was at the scene of the disaster, though he was scarcely fit to leave his bed at the village hostelry. Most of the bodies had been recovered or accounted for, save that of Gerelda.

Varrick was just about to offer a large reward to any one who would recover it, when two fishermen were seen making their way in a little skiff toward the scene of the wreck.

There was some object covered over with a dark cloak in the bottom of their boat. They were making for the shore upon which the wreck was strewn.

Varrick sprung forward.

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"Is it the body of a woman you have there?" he cried.

They lifted it out tenderly and uncovered the face. It was mutilated beyond recognition, and the clothing was so torn and soiled by the action of the waves that scarcely enough of it remained intact, to disclose its color or texture.

There was great consternation when Hubert Varrick returned home with the body of his bride, and more than one whispered: "Fate seems to have been against that marriage from the very first! 'What is to be, will be.' These two proposed to marry, but a Higher Power decreed that they were not for each other."

The same thought had come to Hubert Varrick as he paced wearily up and down his own room.

It was a nine-days' subject for pity and comment, and then the public ceased to think about it, and Gerelda's fate was at last forgotten.

Hubert Varrick then arranged his business for a trip abroad, and when he said good-bye to his mother and Mrs. Northrup, he added that he might be gone years, perhaps forever.

In the very moment that he uttered those words, how strange it was that the thought came over him that he might never see Jessie Bain again.

But this thought, at such a time, he put from him as unworthy to linger in his breast. And when the "City of Paris" sailed away, among her passengers was Hubert Varrick.

He watched the line of shore until it disappeared from his sight, and a heavy sigh throbbed on his lips as his thoughts dwelt sadly on Gerelda, his fair young bride, who lay sleeping on the hill-side just where the setting sun glinted the marble shaft over her grave with a touch of pale gold.

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Let us return to the cottage home of Jessie Bain, and see what is taking place there on this memorable day.

For a week after the unfortunate young girl was brought under that roof, carried there from the wreck, her life hung as by a single thread. The waves had been merciful to her, for they had balked death by washing her ashore.

A handkerchief marked with the name "Margaret Moore" had been found floating near her, and this, they supposed, belonged to her.

How strange it is that such a little incident can change the whole current of a human being's life.

The daily papers far and wide duly chronicled the rescue of Margaret Moore. No one recognized the name, no friends came to claim her. They had made a pitiful discovery, however, in the interim—the poor young creature had become hopelessly insane, whether through fright, or by being struck upon the head by a piece of the wreck, they could not as yet determine.

Jessie Bain's pity for her knew no bounds. She pleaded with her uncle with all the eloquence she was capable of to allow the stranger to remain beneath that roof and in the end her pleading prevailed, and Margaret Moore was installed as a fixture in the Carr homestead.

Jessie Bain would sit and watch her by the hour, noting how soft and white her hands were, and how ladylike her manners. She said to herself that she must be a perfect lady, and to the manner born.

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There was something so pathetic about her—(she was by no means violent)—that Jessie could not help but love her. And the words were ever upon her lips, that she was to be parted from her lover as soon as her journey ended; that he had discovered all, and now he had ceased to love her; that twice she had nearly won him, but that fate had stepped in-between them.

Of course, Jessie knew that her words were but the outgrowth of a deranged mind, and that there had been no lover on the steamer "St. Lawrence" with Margaret Moore. All day long the girl would wring her hands and call for her lover, until it made Jessie's heart bleed to hear her.

But there was no tangible sense to any remarks that she made. She seemed so grateful to Jessie, who in turn grew very fond of her grateful charge. Jessie Bain was not a reader of the newspapers. She never knew that Hubert Varrick had been on the ill-fated "St. Lawrence" on that memorable night, and that he had lost his bride.

Frank Moray, who had been only too glad to send Jessie the item announcing Hubert Varrick's marriage to another, took good care not to let her know that Varrick was free again. So the girl dreamed of him as being off in Europe somewhere, happy with his beautiful bride. Of course, he had forgotten her long since—that was to be expected; in fact, she would not have it otherwise.

Two months had gone by since that Hallowe'en night. It had made little change in the Carr household. The captain still plied his trade up and down the river, Jessie divided her time

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between taking care of her uncle's humble cottage and watching over poor Margaret Moore.

There were times when the girl really seemed to understand just how much Jessie was doing for her, and certainly it was gratitude that looked out of the dark, wistful eyes.

There were times too when Jessie was quite sure that Memory was struggling back to its vacant throne.

"Who are you?" she would whisper, earnestly, gazing into Jessie's face. "And what is your name? It seems as if I had heard it and known it in some other world."

Jessie would laugh amusedly at this. Once, much to Jessie's surprise, when she questioned her as to why she was sitting in the sunshine, thinking so deeply upon some subject, Margaret Moore answered simply:

"I was thinking about love!"

There were times when Margaret Moore seemed rational enough; but her past life was a blank to her. She always insisted that Jessie Bain's face was the first she had ever seen in this world.

It was the first one which she had beheld when consciousness came to her as she lay on her sick-bed; and to say that she fairly idolized Jessie was but expressing it very mildly.

The day came when she proved that devotion with a heroism that people never forgot. It happened in this way:

One cold, frosty morning early in January, in tidying up Petie's cage, the door was accidentally left open, and the little canary, who was Jessie's especial pride, slipped from his cage and flew out at the open door-way, into the bitter cold of the winter morn. [Pg 132]

With a cry of terror, Jessie Bain sprung after her pet. Down the village street he flew, making straight toward the river, Jessie following as fast as her feet could carry her, wringing her hands and calling to him. Margaret Moore followed in the rear. On the river's brink Jessie paused, and, with tears in her eyes, watched her pet in his mad flight. By this time Margaret Moore had caught up to her.

At that instant Jessie saw the bird whirl in mid-air, spread his yellow wings, then fall headlong upon the ice that covered the river, and Jessie sprang forward, and was soon making her way to where the canary lay. But the ice was not strong enough to bear her. There was a crash, a cry, and in an instant Jessie Bain had disappeared. The ice had given way beneath her weight, and the dark waters had swallowed her.

For an instant Margaret Moore stood dazed; then, with a shriek of terror, she flew over the ice and was kneeling at the spot where Jessie had disappeared, watching for her to come to the surface.

Once, twice, the golden hair showed for an instant; but each time it eluded the grasp of the girl who made such agonizing attempts to catch it. The third and last time it appeared. Would she be able to save her?

Margaret Moore turned her white face up to Heaven, and her lips moved; then she reached forward, plunged her right arm desperately down into the ice-cold water, grasped at the sinking form, and caught it; but she could not draw the body up. [Pg 133]

"Jessie Bain! Jessie Bain!" she cried; "you will slip away from me! I can not hold you!"

"Help! help!" she shrieked, in terror. But there was no help at hand.

All in vain were her pitiful cries. Margaret's hands were torn and bleeding, and slowly but surely freezing. They must soon relax their hold, and poor Jessie Bain would slip down, down into a watery grave.

Ten, twenty minutes passed. Surely it was by a superhuman effort that that slender arm retained its burden; but it could not hold out much longer.

So intense was her terror, Margaret Moore did not realize her own great physical pain. By an almost superhuman effort she attempted to cry out again.

This time she was successful. Her voice rose shrill and clear over the barren waste of frozen ice, over the waving trees, and down the road beyond. It reached the ears of a man who was hurrying rapidly through the snow-drifts. [Pg 134]

CHAPTER XXI.

IT IS SO HARD FOR A YOUNG GIRL TO FACE THE WORLD ALONE.

"Help! help!" the words echoed sharp and clear again through the frosty morning air, and this time the man walking hurriedly along the road heard it distinctly, paused, and turned a very startled face toward the river.

It required but a glance to take in the terrible situation; the young girl stretched at full length on the ice, holding by main strength, something above the aperture in the ice; it was certainly a woman's head.

"Courage, courage!" he cried in a voice like a bugle blast. "Help is at hand! Hold on!" And in less time than it takes to tell it, he had reached the girl's side.

"Save her, save her!" gasped Margaret Moore. "My hands are frozen; I can not hold on any longer;" and with this she sunk back unconscious, and the burden she held would have slipped from her cramped fingers back into the dark, cold waves had not the stranger caught it in time. It required all his strength, however, to draw the body, slim though it was, from the water.

One glance at the marble-white face, and he uttered a little cry:

"Great Heaven! if it isn't Jessie Bain!"

Laying his dripping burden on the bank, the man lost no time in dragging Margaret Moore back from her perilous position; then the stranger, who was a fisherman, summoned assistance, and the two young girls were quickly carried back to the cottage, and a neighbor called in. [Pg 135]

Jessie was the first to recover consciousness. She had suffered a terrible shock, a severe chill, but the blood of youth bounded quickly in her veins. Save a little fever, which was the natural result of the counter-action, she was none the worse for her thrilling experience.

With Margaret Moore it was different. The doctor who had been called in shook his head gravely over her condition.

"It may be a very serious matter," he said, slowly; "it may result in both hands having to be amputated, leaving her a cripple for life. Deranged and a cripple!" he added, pityingly, under his breath. "It would be better far if the poor thing were to die than to drag out the existence marked out for her."

"You will do all that you possibly can to save her hands?" said Captain Carr, anxiously.

"Yes, certainly," returned the doctor, "all that it is possible to do."

Jessie Bain's gratitude knew no bounds when she learned how near she had come to losing her life, and that she owed her rescue to the heroism of faithful Margaret Moore. She wept as she had never wept before when she discovered how dearly it might cost poor Margaret.

Alas! how true it is that trouble never comes singly! At this crisis of affairs, Captain Carr suddenly succumbed to a malady that had been troubling him for years, and Jessie Bain found herself thrown homeless, penniless upon the world. She was thankful that poor Margaret Moore did not realize the calamity that had overtaken her. That humble cottage roof which had sheltered her so long would cover her head no more. [Pg 136]

"There is only one thing to be done, and that is to place the girl in an asylum," the neighbors advised.

This Jessie Bain stoutly declared she never would do as long as she had two hands to work for the unfortunate girl.

"I shall turn all my little possessions into money," she declared, "and go immediately to New York City and find something to do. She shall go with me and share my fortunes; my last crust of bread I will divide with her."

Every one thanked Heaven that by almost a miracle Margaret Moore's hands were saved to her.

A few days later Jessie Bain bid adieu forever to Fisher's Landing, accompanied by the girl who followed her so patiently out into the world.

How strange it is that New York City is generally the objective point for the poor and friendless in search of employment.

The journey to the great metropolis was a long one. They reached there just as the sun was sinking.

The first thing to be thought of was shelter. Inquiring in the drug store opposite the depot, she found that there was a small boarding-house down the first cross-street.

Jessie soon found the street and number to which she had been directed. A pleasant-faced maid opened the door. She was immediately shown into the parlor, and a brisk, bustling little woman soon put in an appearance. [Pg 137]

She looked curiously at the two pretty young girls when she learned their errand.

"This is a theatrical boarding-place," she said, "and all of our rooms are full save two, and they are to be occupied on the twentieth. You might have them up to that time, I suppose," she added,

unwilling to let the chance of making a few extra dollars go by her. "Or perhaps you and your sister could make the smaller one do for both."

"We could indeed!" eagerly assented Jessie.

She had noticed that the woman had called Margaret Moore her sister, and she said to herself that perhaps it would be as well to let it go at that, as it would certainly save much explanation.

And then again, if the landlady knew that her companion had lost her reason, she would never allow them to stay there over night, no matter how harmless she might be.

Jessie started out bright and early the next morning to search for employment, cautioning Margaret over and over again not to quit the room, and to answer no questions that might be put to her. After the first day's experience, she returned, heartsick and discouraged, to the boarding-house.

"Didn't find anything to do, eh?" remarked the landlady, sympathetically, as she met her at the door.

"No," said Jessie; "but I hope to meet with better luck to-morrow."

"Why don't you try to get on the stage," said Mrs. Tracy, patting the girl's shoulder. "You are young, and, to tell you the truth, you've an uncommonly pretty face." [Pg 138]

"The stage?" echoed Jessie. "Why, I was never on the stage in all my life. What could I do on the stage?"

"You would make your fortune," declared the woman, "if you were clever. And there's your sister, too, she is almost as pretty as yourself. She'd like it, I am sure."

At that moment a woman who was passing hurriedly through the dimly lighted hall stopped short.

"What is this I hear, Mrs. Tracy?" she exclaimed. "Are you advising your new boarders, those two pretty, young girls, to go on the stage?"

"Yes," returned the other. "They are looking for work, and drudgery would be such hardship for them. And to tell the exact truth, Manager Morgan of the Society Belle Company, who is stopping with me, told me he would find a place in his company for her if she would leave her sister and go out on the road; and, furthermore, that he would push her, and take great pains in learning her all the stage business."

That evening, by his eager request, the manager was introduced to Jessie Bain.

He told a story so glowing, Jessie felt sorely tempted to accept his offer of a position on the stage. He promised her such a wonderful large salary and such grand times that she was surprised. Jessie's only objection in not accepting the offer was the thought that she should be parted from Margaret, which, the manager assured her, would have to be, as he had no room in his company for two.

"You can board her right here at Mrs. Tracy's," he suggested, "as your salary will be ample to pay for her. It is a chance that not one girl out of a thousand ever gets. You must realize that fact." [Pg 139]

"Do you think I had better accept it, Mrs. Tracy?" asked Jessie.

"Indeed, I shouldn't hesitate," was the reply. "I'm not a theatrical person myself, although I do keep this boarding-house for them, and I don't know much about life behind the foot-lights, only as I hear them tell about it; but if I were in your place, it seems to me that I should accept it. If you don't like it, or get something better, it's easy enough to make a change, you know."

Jessie took this view of the case, too, and she signed a contract with the manager of the theatrical company.

"I hope I shall have a good part in the play," said Jessie, anxiously; "and, believe me, I will do my best to make it a success."

"Your face alone will insure that," said Manager Morgan, with a bland smile that might have warned the girl. "I will cast you for the lovely young heiress in the play. You will wear fine dresses and look charming. The part will suit you exactly."

"But I have no fine clothes," said Jessie, much down-hearted.

"Do not let such a little matter as that trouble you, I pray," he said gallantly. "I will advance you the required amount; you can pay me when you like."

Jessie said to herself that she had never met so kind a gentleman, and her gratitude was accordingly very great. [Pg 140]

The next morning she was waited upon by a French *modiste*, who seemed to know just what she required, and a few days later, half a dozen dresses, so gorgeous that they fairly took Jessie Bain's breath away, were sent up to her.

She tried to explain to Margaret, who had settled down into a strange and unaccountable apathy, all about her wonderful good luck; but she answered her with only vacant monosyllables. And knowing that part of the truth must be told sooner or later, Jessie was forced to admit to Mrs.

Tracy that Margaret had lost her reason, but that she was by no means harmful.

"That is no secret to me," responded Mrs. Tracy. "Every one in the boarding-house thought that from the first day you came here, though you tried hard to hide her malady from us. And I repeat my offer, that you can leave your sister in my charge, and I will do my very best for her. Let me tell you why," she added, in a low voice. "I had a daughter of my own once who looked very like your sister Margaret. She lost her reason because of an unhappy love affair, and she drooped and died. For her sake my heart bleeds with pity for any young girl whose reason has been dethroned. God help her!"

So it was settled that Margaret was to remain with Mrs. Tracy.

"After a few rehearsals you will get to know what you have got to do, quite well," said Manager Morgan, as he handed Jessie her part to learn. "Our company has been called together very hurriedly. We expected that it would be fully a month later ere rehearsals would begin and our members be called together. I have the same people who were with me last year, all save the young lady whose place you take, and they are all well up in their parts and don't need rehearsals. We go out on the road in one week more. I shall have to coach you in your part."

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The handsome Mr. Morgan made himself most agreeable during those days of rehearsal, and if Jessie Bain's heart had not been entirely frozen by the frost of that earlier love for Hubert Varrick, which had come to such a bitter ending, she might have fancied this handsome, dandified manager.

The company were to open their season at Albany, and at last the day arrived for Mr. Morgan and Jessie to start.

There was to be just one rehearsal the following forenoon, and the next evening the play was to be produced.

It was a bitter trial for Jessie to leave Margaret alone there; but the bitterest blow of all was that she could not make Margaret understand that they were to be separated from each other for many long weeks.

It was snowing hard when the train steamed into Albany. Mr. Morgan, who had gone up by an earlier train, met her at the depot.

"We will go right to the theater," he said; "the remainder of the company are there; they are all waiting for us."

Jessie felt a little disappointed at not getting a cup of good hot tea; but she was too timid to mention it.

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A dozen or more faces were eagerly turned toward them when they entered the theater. Four very much over-dressed young women, sitting in a group and laughing rather hilariously, and half a dozen long-ulstered, curly-mustached *blasé*-appearing gentlemen, stared boldly at the timid, shrinking young girl whom Manager Morgan led forward.

"Our new leading lady, Miss Jessie Bain," he announced, briefly; adding quickly after this general introduction: "Clear the stage every one who is not discovered in the first act."

The way these gentlemen and ladies fairly flew into the wings astonished Jessie. They acted more like frightened children, afraid of a school-master than like ladies and gentlemen who were great heroes and heroines of the drama. Jessie stood quite still, not a little bewildered.

"Excuse me; but were you ever on before?" asked one of the girls, eyeing Jessie curiously.

"No," she answered; "but I do hope I will get along. I am very anxious to learn."

At this there was a great deal of suppressed tittering, which rather nettled Jessie.

"You must have wonderful confidence in yourself to attempt to play your part to-night, with only this one rehearsal. Aren't you afraid you will get stage-frightened?"

"I used to take part in all the entertainments that we used to give at home in the little village I came from. Once I had a very long part, and I always had an excellent memory."

"Let me give you a little word of advice," said the girl, who introduced herself as Mally Marsh, linking her arm in Jessie's and drawing her into one of the dark recesses of the wings, where they were quite alone together. "Did you see the girl in the sealskin coat who sat at my right as you came up? I want to tell you about her."

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CHAPTER XXII.

"PRAY, PERMIT ME TO ESCORT YOU HOME," SAID THE HANDSOME STRANGER, STEPPING TO JESSIE'S SIDE AND RAISING HIS HAT WITH A

PROFOUND BOW.

Jessie looked out on to the stage at the very pretty girl at whom her companion was nodding.

"That is the one you mean?" she said.

"Yes; that's Celey Dunbar," returned her companion; "and I repeat that I want to warn you about her. Celey was Manager Morgan's sweetheart last season. We all thought he was engaged to her at one time, but he soon tired of her. She is as fond of him as ever, though, and she'll make it hot for you if you don't watch out.

"Now, you see the girl in the long gray cloak, going on with her part out there? Well, that's Dovie Davis. Her husband is the handsome, dashing young fellow over yonder, who is to be your lover in the play. She's as jealous as green-gages of him, and while he is making love to you, on the stage, she'll be watching you from some entrance, as a cat would a mouse, and woe be to you if you make your part too real! The other lady over there is keeping company with that good-looking fellow she is talking to; so keep your eyes off him.

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"The fellow in the long ulster and silk hat I claim as my especial property. Don't look so dumfounded, goosie; I mean he's my beau. We always manage to get into the same company, and it would be war to the knife with any girl who attempted to flirt with him."

"You need not be afraid of my ever attempting to flirt with him," said Jessie gravely.

"Well, it doesn't come amiss to learn a thing or two in season," returned Mally, with a nod. "All theatrical companies pair off like that.

"The other two young gents who passed by the wing a moment ago, and were watching you so intently, are married. Now, let me repeat the lesson again, so as to impress it upon your mind: Celey Dunbar is Manager Morgan's ex-sweetheart; Mrs. Dovie Davis is married; that gay, jolly girl is Daisy Lee, the soubrette of the company; she'd cut out any one of us if she could; but she's so merry a sprite we don't mind her, especially as none of the fellows take to her particularly."

To Jessie that rehearsal seemed like a bewildering dream. The ladies of the company looked at her coldly, but the gentlemen were wonderfully pleasant to her. They talked to her as freely as though they had known her for years, instead of only an hour. This embarrassed Jessie greatly; she hardly knew how to take this unaccustomed familiarity.

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After rehearsal was over, Manager Morgan took her back to her hotel, frowning darkly at Celey Dunbar, who made a bold attempt to walk with them.

"Be ready at seven o'clock sharp," he said, as he left her at the door.

Left to herself when dinner was over, Jessie sat quietly down in her lonely little room to think.

She wondered how such people as she had met that day could play the different parts in the beautiful story whose every incident Manager Morgan had explained to her.

"Certainly it isn't very romantic," she thought, "to have the hero lover of the play a married man."

Night came at last, and feeling more frightened than she had ever felt in her life before, Jessie emerged from her dressing-room. Mally Marsh accompanied her to the wing to see that she went on all right when her cue was given.

"There's a big house out in front," whispered Mally. "Ah! there's your cue now."

Out in the center of the stage stood a young man, exclaiming eagerly, as he looked in their direction:

"Ah, here comes the little society belle now!"

"Go on; walk right out on the stage," whispered Mally, giving Jessie a push.

Jessie never knew how she got there.

The glare of the foot-lights blinded her. The words her companion uttered fell upon dazed ears. She tried to speak the words that she had learned so perfectly, but they seemed to die away in her throat; no sound could she utter. A great numbness was clutching at her heart-strings, and she could move neither hand nor foot.

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"Aha! our little beauty is stage-frightened," she heard Celey Dunbar whisper from one of the wings of the stage, in a loud, triumphant voice. "I am just glad of it. That's what Manager Morgan gets by bringing in a novice. Ha! ha! ha!"

Those words stung Jessie into action, and quick as a flash the truant lines recurred to her, and to the great chagrin of her rival in the wings, she went on with her part unfalteringly to the very end.

Her beauty, and her fresh, sweet simplicity and naturalness quite took the audience by storm, and the curtain was rung down at length amid the wildest storm of applause that that theater had

ever known.

The manager was delighted with Jessie Bain's success. The ladies of the company were furious, and they gathered together in one of the entrances and watched her.

"Stage life is coming to a pretty how-de-do," cried one, furiously, "when women who have been before the foot-lights for ten years—ay, given the best years of their lives to the stage—have to stand aside, for a novice like that!"

"My husband plays altogether too ardent a lover to her!" cried Dovie Davis, jealously. "I won't stand it! Either she leaves this company at the end of a fortnight, or my husband and I do; that's all there is about it!"

This appeared to be the sentiment of every woman in the company, and they did not attempt to conceal their dislike as she passed them by during the evening.

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Just before the curtain went down, Manager Morgan received a telegram which called him to Rochester. He had barely time to catch the train, and in his hurry he quite forgot to leave instructions to have some one see Jessie Bain to the hotel.

As Jessie emerged from her dressing-room she looked around for Mr. Morgan. He was nowhere about.

"I thought you'd never come out of your dressing-room, ma'am," said the man who was waiting to turn the lights out. "Every one's gone—you're the last one."

"Has—has Mr. Morgan gone?" echoed Jessie, in great trepidation.

"Every one's gone, I said," was the saucy reply.

And the man turned the light out in her face, and she was obliged to grope her way as best she could along the dark entry. After floundering about the building for almost ten minutes, until the great tears were rolling down her cheeks with fright, she at length called loudly to some one to come to her assistance.

The same man who had turned out the gas on her now came grumblingly to her rescue. At length she found herself out on the street.

Before she had time to turn and ask the man the way to the hotel, he had slammed the door to in her face and turned the key in the lock with a loud, resounding click, and Jessie found herself standing ankle-deep in the snow-drift, with the wind whirling about her and dashing the blinding snow in her face.

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Suddenly from out the dark shadows of an adjacent door-way sprung a man in a long ulster.

"Don't be frightened, Miss Bain," he exclaimed. "I have been waiting for you almost an hour, to see you home."

Jessie started back in dismay. At that instant he half turned, and the flickering light from the gas-lamp fell full upon his face, and she recognized him as one of the members of the company—Walter Winans, whom Mally Marsh had said was her beau.

Even had this not been the case, Jessie could never have admired so bold-looking a fellow.

"Excuse me, but I am very sorry that you waited for me, Mr. Winans," said Jessie, coldly. "I can find my way back to the hotel alone."

"Phew! What an independent little piece we are, to be sure!" he cried. "You're not expecting any one else, are you?" he inquired looking hastily around.

"No," said Jessie, simply.

"Come on, then, with me," he said, seizing her arm and fairly dragging her along.

Discretion seemed the better part of valor to Jessie. She thought it would not be wise to offend the young man; and, to tell the truth, she was rather glad to have some one to pilot her along through the terrible snow-drifts.

"Let me tell you something," said Winans, without waiting for her answer. "I have taken quite a liking to you, Jessie Bain—this is between you and me—and I hope very much that the feeling will be reciprocated, little girl. I'll be only too glad to escort you to and from the theater every night, if you like. Don't let any of the girls of this company talk you into the belief that they have any claim on me."

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"You must not think it strange that I took an interest in you, little Jessie, from the first moment I saw you," continued Winans, pressing the girl's hand softly, as they pushed on bravely through the terrible snow-drifts. "There was something about you very different from the rest of the girls whom I have met."

"I trust you will not talk so to me, Mr. Winans," said Jessie.

"But I must," he insisted. "I must tell you all that is in my heart. Surely you can not blame a fellow so very much for being unfortunate enough to fall desperately in love with you!"

He had spoken the words eagerly, and it never occurred to him that they had been uttered so loudly that any one passing might have heard them.

Suddenly from out the shadow of an arched door-way sprang a woman, who planted herself directly in the snowy path before them.

"Stop!" she cried. "Don't dare advance a step further!" and quick as a flash she drew a heavy riding-whip from the folds of her cloak. Once, twice, thrice it cut through the snow-laden air, and fell upon Winans' defenseless head.

Smarting with pain, he dropped Jessie's arm and sprang forward, and attempted to wrest the whip from the infuriated young woman's hands.

"Take that! and that! and that!" she cried, again and yet again; and with each word the blows rained down faster and faster upon his face and hands. [Pg 150]

There was but one way to escape, and that was in ignominious flight.

"So," cried Mally Marsh, as she turned to Jessie "this is all the heed you paid to my warning, is it? If I gave you your just deserts, I would thrash you within an inch of your life, for attempting to take my lover away from me! Now listen to what I have to say, girl, and take warning: You must leave this company at once. If you do not do so, I will not answer for myself. Do not make it an excuse that you have no money. Here!" and with the word she flung a bill in her face. "The depot is to your right. Go there, and take the first train back to the city whence you came. Go, I say, while yet I can keep my wrath in check."

Jessie stood there for a moment like one stupefied. She tried to explain how it had happened, but her companion would not listen and walked away.

As one lost, Jessie wandered to the depot, where a policeman, noticing her distress, drew her story from her. He said he knew of a most respectable old woman who was looking for a companion and wrote her name and address on a piece of paper for Jessie. The policeman readily consented to allow her to remain in the station until morning. It was a long and weary wait and at eight o'clock Jessie went to the house to which the policeman had directed her.

A pompous footman conducted her to a spacious drawing-room, and placed a seat for her.

After a long and dreary wait which seemed hours to Jessie, though in reality it was not over twenty minutes, she heard the rustle of a woman's dress. An instant later, a little white, shrivelled hand, loaded with jewels pushed aside the satin *portières*, and an old lady appeared on the threshold. [Pg 151]

Jessie rose hesitatingly from her seat with a little courtesy.

"You came in answer to my advertisement for a companion?" the little old lady began.

"Yes, madame," returned Jessie.

"Where were you in service last?"

"I have never had a position of the kind before," said Jessie, hesitatingly, "but if you would try me, madame, I would do my very best to suit you."

"Speak a little louder," said the old lady, sharply. "I am a trifle hard of hearing. Mind, just a trifle, I can not quite hear you."

Jessie repeated in a louder tone what she had said.

"Your appearance suits me exactly," returned Mrs. Bassett; "but I could not take a person into my household who is an entire stranger, and who has no references to offer to assure me of her respectability."

Jessie's eyes filled with tears.

"I am so sorry," she faltered; "but as I am a stranger in Albany, there is no one here to whom I could apply for a reference."

"I like your face very much indeed," repeated Mrs. Bassett, more to herself than to the girl; then, turning to her suddenly, she asked: "Where are you from—where's your home?"

"A little village on the St. Lawrence River called Fisher's Landing," returned Jessie. "My uncle, Captain Carr, died a week ago, and I was forced to leave my old home, and go out into the world and earn my own living." [Pg 152]

"Did you say you lived at Fisher's Landing?" exclaimed the old lady, "and that Captain Carr of that place was your uncle?"

"Yes, madame," returned Jessie.

JESSIE BAIN ENTERS THE HOUSE OF SECRETS.

The old lady stared at Jessie through her spectacles.

"You need no other recommendation. I once met Captain Carr under thrilling circumstances, my child. I was out in a row-boat one day—some ten years ago—when a steamer almost ran down our little skiff. I would have been capsized, and perhaps drowned, had it not been for the bravery of Captain Carr, of Fisher's Landing. I made him a handsome little present, and from that day to this I have never heard from him. Captain Carr dead, and his niece out in the world looking for a situation! You shall come to me, if you like, reference or no reference, my dear."

"Oh, madam, you are so very, very kind!" sobbed Jessie.

The little old lady touched a silver bell close at hand, and a tidy, elderly maid appeared.

"Harriet, I have engaged this young woman as companion," she said. "She came in answer to yesterday's advertisement in the *Argus*. You will take her to her room at once. She is to occupy the little room directly off mine." [Pg 153]

The room into which she ushered Jessie was a small, dingy apartment, with draperies so sombre that they seemed almost black. The curtains were closely drawn, and an unmistakable atmosphere of mustiness pervaded the apartment.

"Have you had breakfast, miss?" asked Harriet, looking sharply into the girl's pale face, and adding before she had time to reply: "Even though you have breakfasted, a cup of hot tea will do you good this cold, crisp morning. My lady will be pleased to have you come down to the table. The bell will ring in about ten minutes. You can easily make your way there. Step down the corridor, and turn into the passage-way at the right; the second door."

Jessie bowed her thanks, and murmured that she would be very grateful for a cup of tea. It was not long before she heard the breakfast-bell. Hastily quitting the room, she made her way down the corridor. In her confusion, the girl made the mistake of turning to the left, instead of the right, as she had been directed.

"The second door," she muttered to herself.

As she reached it she paused abruptly. It was slightly ajar. Glancing in hesitatingly, she saw that it looked more like a young lady's *boudoir* than an ordinary breakfast-room. Before a mirror at the further end of the apartment sat a young girl in the sun-light. A maid was brushing out the wavy masses of her warm-tinted auburn hair.

While Jessie was hesitating as to whether she should tap on the door and make her presence known or walk on further through the corridor, a conversation which she could not help overhearing, held her spell-bound, fairly rooted to the spot. [Pg 154]

"I assure you it is quite true, Janet," the lovely young girl was saying in a very fretful, angry voice. "The old lady has got a companion in the house at last. But she shall not stay long beneath this roof depend upon that, Janet. She is young and very beautiful.

"I would not care so much, if it were not that the handsome grandson is expected to arrive every day."

"Surely, Miss Rosamond, you, with all your beauty, do not fear a rival in the little humble companion."

"Companions have been known to do a great deal of mischief before now, and, as I have said, the girl is remarkably pretty. I saw her from the library window as she was coming up the front steps, and then, when old Mrs. Bassett came down to the library, I was safely ensconced behind the silken draperies of the bay-window, and I heard all that was said. You may be sure that I was angry enough. She shall not stay here long, if I can help it. I will make it so unpleasant for her that she will be glad to go. I detest the girl already, on general principles."

Jessie Bain cowered back, dazed and bewildered, almost doubting her own senses as to what she had just heard.

Smarting with bitter pain, Jessie turned away and hurried swiftly down the corridor in the opposite direction.

She was quickly retracing her steps back to her own room, when she met Harriet again in the corridor. [Pg 155]

"I was just coming for you, miss," she said, "thinking that you might not be able to find your way, after all, there are so many twists and turns hereabouts," and without further ado she quickly retraced her steps, nodding to Jessie to follow.

The breakfast-room into which she was ushered was by far the most commodious room in the house.

A great, square apartment with ceilings and panelings of solid oak, massive side-boards, which contained the family silver for fully a century or more, great, high-backed chairs with heavy carvings, done up in leather, and a polished, inlaid floor, with here and there a velvet rug or tiger's skin.

The old lady was seated at the table as Harriet ushered in the young girl. She smiled, and nodded a welcome. Opposite her sat a little old man with large ears, who peered at her sharply from over a pair of double-barreled, gold-rimmed eyeglasses.

"This is the young person whom I have just engaged as my companion," said Mrs. Bassett, shrilly, turning toward her husband.

"H'm!" ejaculated the old gentleman. "What did you say this young woman's name was?"

"Bain," she replied.

"Hey?" he exclaimed, holding his right hand trumpet fashion, to his ear. "Give me the name a little louder."

"Miss Bain— Jessie Bain!" shouted his wife, in an ear-splitting voice that made every nerve in Jessie's body throb and quiver.

"Ah—h'm— Miss Bain," he repeated; adding, as he cleared out his throat: "I am very anxious to have the papers read while we breakfast. You may as well begin by reading this morning's reports," he said, handing her a paper which lay folded beside his plate. "You may turn to the stock reports first, Miss Bain. Third column on the first page, Miss Bain."

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She had scarcely finished the first paragraph ere the old gentleman commanded her to stop.

"Can you understand one word that this young woman is reading?" he inquired, turning sharply to his wife.

"No. Miss Bain must read louder," she said. "I do not quite catch it."

The perspiration stood out in great balls on Jessie's pale face. She had raised her voice to almost a shout already, and her throat was beginning to ache terribly, for the strain upon it was very great. How she ever struggled down to the bottom of that column, she never knew. The appearance of the breakfast tray was a welcome relief to her.

"You read very nicely," complimented the old gentleman. "I enjoy listening to you. I shall give you the privilege of reading all my papers aloud every forenoon."

Jessie looked helplessly at him. The strain had been so great that her throat pained her terribly; but she made no demur. How could she?

At that moment the door swung slowly open, and a tall, beautiful girl entered.

Jessie knew her at the first startled glance. It was the lovely girl whom she had heard talking to her maid about her, but a little while before.

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She took the seat at the end of the table without so much as deigning to glance at the new-comer.

"My dear, let me present you to Miss Bain— Miss Bain, my husband's *protégée*, Rosamond Lee," exclaimed Mrs. Bassett.

Jessie bowed wistfully, shyly; Miss Rosamond barely lifted her eyebrows in acknowledgment of the presentation.

The old gentleman and his wife screamed at each other on the main topics of the day, Miss Rosamond looked exceedingly bored, while Jessie had great difficulty in swallowing, her throat ached so severely.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"OH, TO SLEEP MY LIFE AWAY, AND BE WITH THEE AT REST!"

Rosamond Lee completely ignored the lovely young stranger seated at the table opposite her; but Jessie had the uncomfortable feeling that she was watching her.

The conversation had ceased, when suddenly Mr. Bassett announced: "I have just received a letter from my grandson. He will be with us a week from to-day. He will remain with us a month."

During the next few days the household was quite upset, so great were the preparations made for the coming stranger. Most of the forenoons had been spent by Jessie in reading the daily papers

to the old couple in the library. One morning Rosamond Lee came to her quite excitedly, just as she was about to begin her duties. [Pg 158]

"Miss Bain," she said, arching her eyebrows haughtily, "I do not think my guardian has thought to mention the subject to you, but for the next few weeks you are to exchange places with my maid, Janet; she has hurt her hand, but that will not hinder her from reading the papers and attending to Mrs. Bassett's wants. During that time, while you are performing the services of maid to me, you will remember that your place is not in the library, but in my own suite of rooms. I must also mention to you that you will be excused from joining us at the table."

Jessie flushed and then paled. It was not so much on account of the menial position to which she was assigned, as the manner in which the change had been made known to her.

"You may as well commence your duties at once," said Rosamond, imperiously, "and make the change to my apartments without further delay."

"I have a letter to write for Mrs. Bassett, to her grandson, I believe," said Jessie, in a low voice. "Shall I not remain in the library until after that is done? Mrs. Bassett told me to remind her of it to-day."

"Never mind about it," said Rosamond Lee, hurriedly, "I will attend to it. I always write the letters to her grandson for her. I am amazed that she should call upon you. You must come with me at once to my rooms."

Jessie put down the paper she was reading and followed her.

As Jessie Bain entered Rosamond's room, she was surprised at the array of dresses lying on the sofa, the chair-backs, and every conceivable place. [Pg 159]

"I want these all overhauled at once," began the beauty. "They must be finished by the end of the week."

Jessie looked around at the dresses, surprised at the great amount of work which Miss Lee was so confident she could accomplish in so short a time.

Jessie was sure that she saw Rosamond Lee's maid busily stitching away when she had first entered the room, but she rose hastily and went into an inner apartment, and a moment later returned with her hand done up and her arm in a sling.

Rosamond Lee said to herself that it had been a wise stratagem on her part to make her maid exchange places with Jessie Bain until after the handsome young man should come and go.

The tasks that Rosamond Lee laid out for Jessie were cruelly hard. She would say to her each morning, as she laid out this or that bit of work:

"This must be finished by to-morrow morning."

As soon as the clock struck nine, Rosamond would seek her downy couch. Not for anything in the world would she have lost the few hours of beauty-sleep before midnight, so essential to young girl's good looks.

But there must be no beauty-sleep for the tired young girl who plied her needle.

"How dare you!" Rosamond cried. "What do you mean by loitering in this manner?"

Miss Rosamond insisted that while she was performing the duties of maid to her, Jessie must take her meals up in her room, declaring that it really took too much time for her to go and come to the dining-room to her meals. [Pg 160]

On the third afternoon of her banishment she heard the sound of carriage-wheels, followed by the servants in the corridor crying out excitedly:

"He has come at last! Now the old gentleman and his wife will be in the seventh heaven!"

It mattered little to Jessie Bain. She cared not who came or went. She knew that some young man was expected; but she had not taken interest enough to listen when the maid, who had come in to do up their rooms that morning, had broached the subject concerning him.

"Miss Rosamond is very much in love with him," commented the girl, in a significant whisper, after taking a swift glance over her shoulder to make sure they were quite alone. "Well, it's no wonder, either, for a handsome-looking gentleman he is—tall, broad-shouldered, and kindly. He will inherit an enormous fortune from old Mr. and Mrs. Bassett, for they just idolize him. His mother was their only child. He always came here once a year, ever since he was a little lad, they say, and all the old servants love him."

The maid had scarcely finished her recital, concerning the coming of the handsome heir, when the door was suddenly flung open, and Rosamond Lee, breathless and flushed with excitement, sprung into the room.

"Where's my pale-blue dress with the black velvet bows? Get it for me, somebody—anybody! I want to put it on at once!" she fairly cried.

"The pale-blue dress is not finished yet," Jessie answered, falteringly. "You know you changed

your mind about having it altered the next moment after you had laid it out, and told me not to touch it until you decided fully just how you wanted it done. I have been sewing on the rose-pink cashmere—"

"You horrid creature!" screamed Rosamond Lee. "I can scarcely keep my hands off you! You didn't want to see me looking well in my pale-blue dress, and delayed fixing it on purpose. Oh, you horrid, horrid creature!" and with this she seized Jessie Bain by the shoulders and shook her until the girl's slender form bent like a reed in the storm.

The maid, who watched this proceeding, was fairly speechless with terror. She would have flung herself between Jessie Bain and the infuriated beauty had she dared, but she knew that would mean instant dismissal, and despite her intense indignation, she was obliged to stand there and coolly witness it all.

"There," cried Rosamond Lee, fairly out of breath, "I hope I have taught you that I won't be trifled with. Now help me get on the rose cashmere as quick as you can."

Jessie Bain never knew how she managed to fasten the dress on the irate beauty.

The maid came to her rescue, noting that Jessie Bain was by far too nervous to do the heiress's bidding.

The look of thankfulness she gave her amply repaid her.

A moment later Miss Rosamond flounced out of the room. The door had scarcely closed after her ere Jessie Bain's strength gave way entirely, and she sank to the floor in a swoon.

"Poor thing!" cried the maid, bending over her, "I shall advise her to leave this place at once. But, after all, maybe it is with her as it is with me—she would have no home to go to if she left here, and her next mistress might be as cruel, though she couldn't be any worse."

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Her diligent efforts were soon rewarded by seeing Jessie Bain open her eyes.

"You are faint and weak. Come to the window and get a breath of air. A breath of the cool, crisp air will do you a world of good."

Jessie made no attempt to resist her when she took her in her arms and carried her to the window, and threw open the sash. Jessie inhaled a deep breath of the cool morning air. Ah, yes! the air was refreshing.

"Don't lean so far out," cautioned her companion, "Miss Rosamond might see you! She is standing in the bay-window of the library with handsome Mr. Hubert; and to see her smile, so bland and child-like, any one would declare that she had no temper at all, but, instead, the disposition of an angel."

Jessie gave a startled look, intending to get quickly out of sight ere Rosamond Lee should observe her; but that glance fairly froze the blood in her veins. Yes, Rosamond Lee was standing by the window, looking as sweet and bland as a great wax doll.

But it was on the face of her companion that Jessie's eyes were riveted. It seemed to her in that instant that the heart in her bosom fairly stood still, for the face she saw was Hubert Varrick's!

"He has had ever so much trouble," the girl went on. "He has been married, but his young wife died, and he is now a widower, free to marry again if he finds any one whom he can love as he did the one he lost."

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With that, the girl left the room, and then Jessie Bain gave vent to the grief that filled her heart to overflowing.

"I must go away from here," she sobbed; "I must not meet him again, for did I not give his mother my written word that I would not speak to him again, nor let him know where I was, and I must keep my solemn pledge."

CHAPTER XXV.

"AH! IF I BUT KNEW WHERE MY TRUE LOVE IS!"

Hubert Varrick felt excessively bored at the beauty's persistent efforts to amuse him during the afternoon that followed, and he experienced a great relief when he made his escape to his own room.

He had come there to visit his aged relatives and have a few days of quiet and rest from the turmoils and cares of a busy life, not to dance attendance on a capricious society girl. He had

been back from Europe only a month. Directly on his return, he went to Fisher's Landing, there to be met with the intelligence that Jessie's uncle had died a fortnight ago, and that she was thrown penniless on the world, and had started out to battle for bread, none knew whither.

The shock of this intelligence nearly killed Hubert Varrick. He almost moved heaven and earth to find her; but every effort was useless; Jessie Bain seemed to have suddenly vanished from the face of the earth.

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Hubert had been with his grandparents but a day when he felt strongly tempted to make excuses to get away at once; but before the shadows of that night fell, an event happened which changed the whole current of his life.

It came about in this way:

When he excused himself for leaving the drawing-room late that afternoon, under the plea of smoking a cigar and having letters to write, Rosamond, much incensed, had retired to her own *boudoir*, for she felt that she had made no headway with the handsome young heir. There was no one else to vent her spite on, save the young girl whom she found bending patiently over her dresses, stitching away as though for dear life.

"Why don't you sew faster?" Rosamond cried at length. "You will never get that done in time for me to wear this evening."

"I promise you, Miss Rosamond, that I will have it finished if the velvet ribbon comes in time."

"Hasn't it come yet?" cried the beauty, aghast. "Why, it's almost dark now. There's nothing else for it but for you to go after it, Jessie Bain; and mind that you get there before the store closes. Start at once."

Jessie laid down her work, walked slowly to the closet, and donned her hat and little jacket. After carefully learning the street and number, Jessie set out on her journey. It was fully two miles. The girl's heart sank as she stepped from the porch, and noted how deep the snow was. She wished that the heiress had given her her fare on the street-car; but such a thought had never entered the selfish head of this pampered creature of luxury.

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Half an hour or more had passed. Long since one of the servants had lighted the chandelier, heaped more coal in the glowing grate, and drew the satin draperies over the frosty windows.

"Dear me, I wish I had told her to get a few flowers for me!" Rosamond muttered. Then she sat up straight in her chair. "Gracious me! how forgetful I am," she cried. "That velvet ribbon did come just as I was about to go down to luncheon, and I tossed it on a divan in the corner. It must be there now."

Springing from her seat, she went to the spot indicated. Yes, the little package was there.

"That Jessie Bain must have seen it," she muttered, angrily. "She must have passed it by a dozen times. No one can tell me that she did not open it—those girls are so prying. And now for spite she'll take as much time as she wishes to go and come. She ought to be back by this time. When she does come I shall scold her."

One, two hours passed. The clock on the mantle slowly chimed the hour of seven. Still the girl had not returned. Rosamond Lee was in a towering rage. She had sent for her own maid to help her dress, and she was obliged to wear a dress which was not near so becoming to her as the blue cashmere which she felt sure would fascinate handsome Hubert Varrick.

When the dinner-bell rang she hurried to the dining-room. Only the old gentleman and his wife were at the table.

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"Where is Mr. Varrick?" she asked. "Surely, he has not dined yet?"

"Oh, no," said the old lady, complacently sipping her tea. "He went out for a walk some two hours ago, and he has not yet returned."

Rosamond started. Some two hours! Why, that was just about the time that Jessie Bain had left the house.

She wondered if by any chance he had seen her. What if he should have asked the girl where she was going, and learn that she had been sent by her so long a distance, and in the deep snow, on such a trifling errand! The girl might tell it out of pure spite. Laughing lightly, Rosamond shook off this fear.

She had never seen a man whom she liked as well as she liked Hubert Varrick. She always had her own way through life, and now that she had settled it in her mind that she would like to have this same Hubert Varrick for her husband, she no more thought it possible for her will to be thwarted than she deemed it possible for the night to turn suddenly into day. Rosamond was almost beside herself with excitement when that wedding was so summarily broken off.

"It was the hand of Fate!" she cried. "He was intended for me. That is why that marriage did not take place."

She had made numerous little excuses to go to Boston with her maid, and always called at his mother's house, making herself most agreeable to the haughty mother, for the sake of the

handsome son.

Rosamond had quite wormed herself into the good graces of Hubert's mother. She had not been there for over six months, however, and consequently had never heard of Jessie Bain.

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She had been waiting long and patiently, when suddenly she had read of his marriage to Gerald Northrup, and almost immediately after came the startling intelligence of the disaster in which he had lost his bride. And again Rosamond Lee said that Gerelda was not to have him, that Fate intended him for her; and she timed her visit to her guardian's when she knew he would be there.

Rosamond tried hard to take an interest in the dinner, but everything seemed to go wrong with her. The tea was too weak, the biscuits too cold, and the tarts too sweet.

She did her best to keep up the conversation with her guardian and his chatty old wife, but it was a dismal failure. At every footstep she started. Why did he not come?

It was a relief to her when the meal was over. She walked slowly into the drawing-room, angry enough to find old Mr. Bassett and his wife had preceded her, and that they had settled themselves down there for a long evening. Up and down the length of the long room Rosamond swept to and fro, stopping every now and then to draw the heavy curtains aside, in order to strain her eyes out into the darkness of the night.

Ah, what a terrible storm was raging outside! What a wild night it was! The snow drifted in great white mountains against the window-panes, and as far as her eyes could reach, the great white snow-drifts greeted her sight. The bronze clock on the mantle struck the hour of eight in loud, sonorous strokes. With a guilty thrill of her heart, she thought of Jessie Bain. Hastily excusing herself, she hurried to her room.

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Of course the girl would be there—there was no doubt about that. With a nervous hand Rosamond flung open the door, crossed the handsome *boudoir* with swift step, and looked into the little room beyond. But the slender form which she had expected to see was not there.

"Janet!" she called, sharply, "where is that Jessie Bain? I sent her on an errand—hasn't she returned yet? What in the world do you think is keeping that girl?"

"Look out of that window, ma'am, and that will tell you," returned Janet, laconically. "I tell you, Miss Rosamond, your sending the girl out on such a night as this is the talk of the whole house."

"Did she go round tattling in the servants' hall?" cried the heiress, quivering with rage.

"I'll tell you how it came about," said Janet. "One of the maids, who was at the window, called to her as she was going out. I heard it all from another window."

"Why, where are you going, Miss Bain?" she called, 'you are mad to step out-of-doors in the face of such a storm as this!'

"I'm going on an errand for Miss Rosamond," she answered.

"You will have a hard time getting to the street-car."

"I shall not ride," said Jessie Bain, 'I shall walk!'

"Walk?" screamed the other. 'Oh, Jessie Bain, don't you do it; you will perish; and all because that Rosamond Lee was too stingy to give you your car-fare. I wish to Heaven that I had the money with me, I'd give it to you in a minute. But hold on, wait a second— I'll go and tell the servants about it, and I reckon that some of them can raise enough money to see you through.'

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"With that I slipped down to the servants' hall, to be ahead of her, and to hear what she would say, and, oh! bless my life, what a tongue-lashing they all gave you! It's a wonder your ears didn't burn like fire, miss."

"They said it was a beastly shame. They wished a mob would come in and give you a ducking out in the snow-drift, and see how you would like it. They were not long in making up the money, but when they went to look for Jessie she was nowhere to be seen."

"I am almost certain that Mr. Hubert Varrick must have heard something of what was said, for one of the girls saw him standing in the door-way, listening intently. Before she could utter a word of warning he turned, with something very like a muttered threat on his lips, and strode down the corridor."

"When night fell and Jessie Bain had not returned, the anger of the servants ran high. I attempted to take your part, saying that you didn't know how bad the day really was, when they set upon me with the fury of devils."

"Don't attempt to shield her!" they cried, brandishing their fists in my face, some of them grazing my very nose."

"Like mistress, like maid.' We hate you almost as much as we do her. None of us shall close our eyes to-night until Jessie Bain has been found; and if she lies dead under the snow-drifts, we will form a little band that will avenge her! If Jessie Bain has died from exposure to the terrible storm, Rosamond Lee, who caused it all, shall suffer for it! If she is not here by midnight—hark you, Janet! bear this message from us to your mistress, the haughty, heartless heiress—"

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But what that message was, Janet whispered in her mistress's ear.

CHAPTER XXVI.

HUBERT VARRICK RESCUES JESSIE BAIN.

We must return to Jessie Bain.

The girl had scarcely proceeded a block through the blinding snow-drifts ere she began to grow chill and numb.

"I can never make my way to the store!" she moaned. "I— I will perish in this awful cold!"

She grew bewildered as to the direction which had been given her. "It can not be that I am going the right way," she sobbed.

Involuntarily she turned around and took the first cross-street in view. She had scarcely made her way half a dozen blocks when the knowledge was fully forced upon her that she must have lost her way, that each step she took was bringing her toward the suburbs of the city instead of the business portion.

Jessie stopped short. Then she fell. Hubert Varrick, on the other side of the street, saw the slender figure suddenly reel backward, whirl about, and then fall face downward in a huge snow-drift that swallowed her from sight. He plunged quickly forward, muttering to himself: "What a terrible thing it is for a weak woman to be out on such a night as this!"

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And he wondered if it could be the poor sewing-girl whom he had just heard the servants discussing. They had said that Rosamond Lee had sent her to one of the stores for a few yards of velvet ribbon, without giving her her car-fare, expecting her to walk all the way in the face of such a storm.

"I declare, it is a thousand pities!" muttered Varrick.

In less time than it takes to tell it he had reached the spot where the girl lay prostrate.

Heavens! how thinly she was clad! And he shivered even from the depths of his fur-lined overcoat at the very thought of it.

Deftly as a woman might have done, he raised her, remembering that there was a drug store across the way to which he could carry her. For one instant his eyes rested on her face in the dim, uncertain, fading daylight; then an awful cry broke from his lips—a cry of horror.

"My God! is it Jessie Bain? Am I mad, or am I dreaming?"

He looked again. Surely there was no mistaking that lovely face, with the curling locks lying over her white forehead.

Do not censure him, that in that instant he forgot the whole world, only remembering that fate had given into his arms the one being in this wide earth his soul longed for. He had found Jessie Bain.

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Mad with delight, he clasped her in his arms and covered her face with fervid kisses. He kissed the snowy cheeks and lips, and the cotton-gloved hands. Then the thought suddenly occurred to him that he was losing valuable time. Every moment was precious, her young life might be in jeopardy while he was keeping her out there in the bitter cold.

In a trice he tore off his warm fur coat, wrapped it about her, and hurried over to the drug store, bearing his beautiful burden as though she were but a child.

"This way!" he called out sharply to the clerk in attendance. "Attend quickly to this young lady! She has been overcome with the cold! She is dying!"

The young man behind the counter responded with alacrity, and hurriedly resorted to the restoratives usually applied in those cases, Hubert Varrick standing by, watching every action, his heart in his eyes, his face pale as death.

Every effort of the young man to revive Jessie Bain seemed futile.

"I should not wonder, sir, if this was a case of heart failure," he declared. "Generally they die instantly, though I have known them to linger for several hours. You had better summon an ambulance, sir, and have her taken to the hospital. There is one just around the corner. Shall I ring for it, sir?"

"No; I will carry her there myself. You say it is just around the corner?"

Feeling the man generously, even though he had failed to restore the poor girl, Hubert Varrick caught her in his arms once more, again faced the terrible storm with her, and arrived at the hospital, panting at every step, for he had run the entire distance.

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He summoned a doctor. To him he stated his mission, adding that he feared the girl was dying, and that he would give half his fortune if the doctor would but save her life, as it was more precious to him than the whole world beside.

The man of medicine said it was only a question of suspended animation. If pneumonia did not set in, there was no cause for alarm.

Jessie was quickly given in charge of one of the nurses, a gentle, madonna-faced woman. She was quickly put to bed, and everything done for her that skill and experience could suggest. Hubert Varrick begged permission to sit by her couch and watch the progress of their efforts.

"Do your best," he cried, his strong voice quivering with emotion, "and I will make it worth your while. You can name your own price."

The long hours of the night passed; morning broke cold and gray through the eastern sky, making the soft lamp-light that flooded the room look pale and wan in the dim, gray morn. The white face lying against the pillow had never stirred, nor had the blue eyes unclosed. The sun was high in the heavens when it occurred to him, for the first time, that the folks would be greatly worried about him. During the night the girl's white lips had parted, and she murmured, faintly: "I must push on through the terrible storm, though the faintness of death seems creeping over me, for Miss Rosamond is waiting for the velvet ribbon."

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Hubert Varrick's strained ears had caught the words as he bent over her, and as he heard them his rage knew no bounds, for it was clear enough to him now that Jessie Bain, the girl he loved, had been the victim of Rosamond Lee's cruelty. The blood fairly boiled in his veins. He felt that he could never look upon Rosamond Lee's face again.

He was so accustomed to terrible surprises that nothing seemed to affect him of late. That Jessie Bain should have found employment under his own grandfather's roof shocked him a little at first.

But as he began to fully realize it, he said to himself that it was the hand of fate that had led her there, that he might find her. It was not until the sun had climbed the horizon, had crossed it, and was sinking down on the other side, that consciousness came back to Jessie Bain. With the first fluttering of the white eyelids, the doctor in attendance motioned Hubert Varrick away.

"She must not see you," he said. "It might give her a set-back. Just now we can not be too careful of her."

This was a great disappointment to Varrick, but he tried to bear it patiently.

For two long and weary weeks Jessie Bain was too ill to leave the shelter of that roof. Hubert Varrick took rooms in a lodging-house opposite, that he might be near her at all times.

Great was Jessie Bain's consternation, when consciousness returned to her, to find herself in a hospital, with a kindly-faced nurse bending over her.

"What has happened?" she cried. "Why am I here? Ah, let me get back to Miss Rosamond!" she cried. "She will be so very angry with me."

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Gently the nurse informed her that she had been there a fortnight. She told her how a gentleman had saved her from the terrible storm, bringing her there in his arms, his own coat wrapped about her, and how he had ever since spent his time hanging about the place, feeling with gold those who attended her to do everything in their power for her.

"I did not know that there was any one in this whole wide world that would do so much for me," murmured Jessie, in bewilderment. "Please thank him for me, kind nurse."

"Nay, you must do that yourself, child," said the woman, smilingly. "And let me tell you this: he seems to be greatly in love with you."

"It can not be."

"I assure you that it is quite true. Every one is speaking of how devoted he is to you. If I were you, I'd— Ah! here he comes now. I will leave you alone with him to thank him, my dear."

So saying, the nurse left the room.

"Little Jessie!" Hubert whispered, almost beside himself with joy.

"Mr. Varrick!" she breathed in a low voice of awe.

Then he poured a tale of passionate love into her ears, but before Jessie could answer he had caught the little hands again in his warm clasp, covered them with kisses, and was gone.

Jessie Bain tried to collect her scattered senses. Her head seemed in a whirl. All that had happened within the last few minutes appeared but the coinage of her own brain.

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When the nurse came in again she found the girl feverish with excitement.

"Come, come, my dear; this will never do," said the nurse. "You will be sure to have a relapse if you are not very careful. Think how badly that would make the young man feel."

Jessie smiled. Suddenly a low cry broke from her lips, and she started up pale with emotion. She had suddenly recalled poor Margaret and she told the nurse the whole story.

"Give me her address, and I will telegraph there for you," said the nurse. "To be frank with you, the gentleman left a well-filled purse, which he bid us place at your disposal. You are to want for no luxury that money can purchase for you."

Jessie Bain was overcome by the wonderful kindness of Hubert Varrick. Her first thought was that she could never accept another penny, for she was too much indebted to him already. Then came the thought of Margaret—poor Margaret! She begged the nurse to send a telegram in all haste, informing the boarding-house keeper that the money for Margaret Moore's board would be forthcoming.

This request was carried out at once, and within an hour the answer came back that Jessie Bain's telegram had come too late. No money having come in time for the girl's board, she had been sent to one of the public asylums, and while *en route* there, by some means she had made her escape, and her whereabouts was then unknown.

Jessie's grief was great upon hearing this. The nurse believed that the bitter sobs which shook Jessie's slender frame would give her a relapse that would keep her there for many a day.

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"There is but one thing to do," she said, trying to console Jessie, "and that is to get back your health and strength as soon as you can, and make a search for her. You will find her if you advertise and offer a reward to any one who will tell you of her whereabouts."

Surely, the money which Hubert Varrick had placed at her disposal could not be used for a nobler purpose; and then, if Heaven intended her to get well and strong again, she could soon pay him the amount borrowed. Again the nurse did everything in her power to carry out her patient's wishes. The advertisement duly appeared in the leading New York papers, but as the days passed, all hope that she would be able to find Margaret was abandoned.

In the third day after Hubert Varrick's departure, a long letter came for her.

"What do you think I have for you, Miss Bain?" said the nurse.

"Has the—the letter come that Mr. Varrick said he would write?" she asked, eagerly.

"That's just what it is," was the smiling reply; and the thick, white envelope was placed in her hands.

"I will leave you alone while you read it, Miss Bain," and added smilingly: "A young girl loves best to be alone when she reads such a letter as I imagine this to be. There—there; don't blush and look so embarrassed."

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The next moment Jessie was alone with Hubert's letter.

CHAPTER XXVII.

"I WOULD RATHER WALK BY YOUR SIDE IN TROUBLE THAN SIT ON A THRONE BY THE MIGHTIEST KING."

With trembling hands the girl broke the seal, drew forth the missive, and slowly unfolded it. It was long and closely written:

"DEAR LITTLE JESSIE," it began, "I know that the contents of this letter will surprise you, but the thoughts born of longings impossible to suppress, even though I would, fill my brain to overflowing and must find utterance in these pages.

"There are many men who can express their heart-thoughts in burning words, but this boon is not given to me. I can only tell you my hopes and fears and longings in the old, conventional words; but the earnest wish is mine that they may find an echo in your heart, little girl.

"With your woman's quick wit you must have read my secret—which every one else seems to have discerned—and that is, I love you, dear—love you with all the strength of my heart.

"I wonder, Jessie, if you could ever care enough for me to marry me.

"There, the words are written at last. I intended them to seem so impressive, but

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they read far too coldly on the white paper, to express the world of tenderness in my soul which would make them eloquent if I could but hold your hands clasped tightly in my own at this moment and whisper them to you.

"If you can but care for me, dear Jessie, I will be the happiest man the whole world holds. Your 'yes' or 'no' will mean life or death for me.

"I can not think, after all that I have gone through, that Heaven would be so cruel as to have me hope for your love in vain. When I come to you, Jessie, I shall ask you for my answer. I am an impatient lover; I count the long days and hours that must wing their slow flight by until we meet again.

"I will not take you to the home of my mother, Jessie, dear, for I quite believe you would be happier with me elsewhere. There is a beautiful little cottage in the suburbs of the city, a charming, home-like place. By the time that this letter reaches you I will have purchased it, so confident am I that I can win you, little Jessie.

"I shall set workmen upon it at once, to make a veritable fairy's bower of it ere you behold it, and it will be ready for us by early spring.

"We will spend the intervening time—which will be our honey-moon—either in Florida or abroad, as best pleases you. Your will shall be my law. I will make you so happy, Jessie, that you will never regret the hour in which you gave your heart to me.

"It will take but a day for this letter to reach you, and another must elapse ere I can hear from you. They will be two days hard for me to endure, Jessie. When a man is in love—deeply, desperately in love—it is madness for him to attempt to do any kind of business, as his mind is not on it, he can think of but one object—the girl whom he idolizes. His one hope is to be near her, his one prayer is that her love is his, in return for the mighty affection that sways his whole being, and leads him into the ideal—the soul-world, which throws the halo of memory and anticipation around the image of her whom he loves.

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"Yours lovingly,
"Hubert Varrick."

Jessie Bain read the letter through, the color coming and going on her face, her heart aglow. Once, twice, thrice she read it through, then, with a little sob, she pressed it closely to her breast.

"Hubert Varrick loves me!" Jessie whispered the words over and over again to herself, wondering if she should not awake presently and find it only an empty dream.

He was waiting for her answer. She smiled at the thought.

"My darling Hubert, my love, my king, as though it could be anything else but yes—yes, a thousand times yes!" she murmured.

But even in this moment of ecstatic joy, the sword of destiny fell swiftly and unerringly upon her hapless golden head.

God pity and help her in her mortal anguish, for in this moment she remembered that she had given Hubert's mother her sacred promise, nay, her *vow*, that she would never cross her son's path again.

When the nurse returned, after the lapse of perhaps a quarter of an hour, to Jessie's bedside, she found the girl sobbing as though her heart would break, and the letter torn into a thousand pieces, which were fluttering over the counterpane.

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"I hope you have not heard any bad news, Miss Bain," she said, earnestly.

Jessie raised her tear-stained face from her hands, and smiled up into her face, the most pitiful smile that ever was seen.

"I have heard music so sweet that it might have opened up heaven to me, if fate had not been against me," she murmured, with quivering lips, the tears starting afresh to her blue eyes.

These words completely puzzled the old nurse. But ere she could utter the words on her lips, Jessie continued:

"I wish I could have some writing materials; I should like to answer this letter which I have received."

"Do you think you feel strong enough to attempt to write it now?" she asked dubiously.

"Yes," said Jessie; adding under her breath: "I must write it quickly, while I have the courage to do it."

The pen which she held trembled in her hand. But at length, after many futile attempts, she penned the following epistle:

"Dear Mr. Varrick,—Your letter has just reached me, and oh! I can not tell you how

happy your words made me. But, Mr. Varrick, it can not be; we are destined by a fate most cruel, to be nothing to each other. I may as well tell you the truth— I do love you with all my heart. But there is a barrier between us which can never be bridged over in this world. Your mother knows what it is; she will tell you about it.

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"I intend leaving this place to-day, and going out into the coldness and darkness of the world. Please do not attempt to find me, as seeing you again would only be more pitiful for me. But take this assurance with you down to the very grave: I shall always love you while my life lasts. Your image, and yours alone, will forever be enshrined in my heart.

"Good-bye again, dear Hubert, I bless you from the bottom of my heart for the love you have offered me and the honor you have paid me in asking me to be your wife. Think kindly of me some time.

"Yours, with a breaking heart,
"Jessie Bain."

When next the nurse made her rounds, to her great amazement she found the girl, weak as she was, already dressed, and putting on her hat. Nurses and doctors were unable to change her determination to leave.

"What of the young gentleman from whom you had the letter?" asked Jessie's nurse.

"The letter that I have written is to him," she said, in a very husky voice. "He will understand. I will leave it in your care to send to him, if you will be so kind."

The nurse took charge of the letter.

"I do not wish you to mail it until to-night," said Jessie, eagerly, "for I— I will not be able to leave ere that time. You have been so kind to me," she added, "Oh, believe me that I do not know how to thank you for all you have done!"

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"A little more strength would not have come amiss to you," one of the doctors said gravely. "One thing, however, I insist upon—rest until late in the afternoon, and then leave us if you really must."

With a little sigh Jessie took off her hat again.

Remaining there a few hours longer would not matter much, she told herself; Hubert Varrick would not receive her letter until the following morning. She could leave that night, and be so far away by day-break that he could never find her. But what strange freaks Fate plays upon us to carry out its designs.

When the nurse left Jessie Bain, she took the all-important letter with her, and quite forgetful of the promise which she had made the girl, not to send the letter out until night, she proceeded to stamp it as she saw the letter-carrier stop at the door to take up the mail.

It would be very nice to send it by special delivery, she thought. He will receive it all the sooner; and hastily adding the additional stamp required, she handed it to the postman.

An hour later it was on its way, and a little past noon Jessie's letter reached its destination and was promptly delivered.

Hubert had been summoned to his mother's home from the hotel where he had been stopping. She had been seized with a serious illness, and had hastily sent for him to come to her at once. He had responded with alacrity to his mother's telegram. He had scarcely divested himself of his fur overcoat in the corridor, ere the special messenger arrived with Jessie's letter. He thrust it into his pocket, this sweet missive, to read at his leisure, murmuring as he did so: "This is neither the time nor place to learn the contents of my darling's letter. I must be all alone when I read it."

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Thrusting it into his pocket, Varrick hurried quickly to his mother's *boudoir*. With a great cry of relief she reached out her hand to him. "Thank God, you are here at last."

The trouble about Jessie Bain had been temporarily bridged over when he had married Gerelda; yet, ever since, there had been a constraint between mother and son which she very perceptibly felt.

She had always said to herself that he would never forget Jessie Bain, and when he became a widower the terror was strong within her that he would make an attempt to find her.

"Will the girl keep her promise," she asked herself over and over again, "and never cross his path again?"

It all rested on that. But it weighed heavily on her mind that she had accused the girl wrongfully, and she told herself that God would surely take vengeance upon her if she stood at heaven's gate with that sin on her soul.

In this hour, she must tell Hubert the truth, keeping nothing back. She would not implicate herself, as that would bring horror into his eyes. He must never know that she had concocted that plot in order to ruin the girl.

Hubert greeted his mother with all the old-time boyish, affectionate ardor and she asked herself

She gave a glad cry as he came up to the velvet divan upon which she reclined, and held out her arms to him.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A MOTHER'S PLEA.

"Hubert, my boy!" she murmured, tremulously.

"Mother!" he answered, embracing her; then, flinging himself on a low hassock by her side, he caught both of her hands in his and kissed them.

"I am so glad you are come, my son," she breathed—"I am so ill!"

He tried to cheer her with his brave, bright words; but she only smiled at him faintly, wistfully.

She brought round the subject uppermost in her mind.

"I wonder what has become of Jessie Bain?" she asked, abruptly.

"Why do you ask me, mother?" he replied, evasively, flushing to the roots of his curling hair—and that blush betrayed to her keen eyes that he had not as yet lost interest in the girl.

"I want you to promise me, Hubert," she whispered, "that if anything should ever happen to me, you will not think of even searching for Jessie Bain, in order to marry her."

He dropped the white, jeweled hands he held, and looked at her in grave apprehension, a troubled look in his earnest eyes. [Pg 186]

"I wish I could promise what you ask, mother," he said; "but unfortunately, I— I can not; it is too late! I have already searched for Jessie Bain, and found her, and have offered her my heart and hand."

A low cry from his mother arrested the words on his lips.

"I knew it— I feared it!" cried Mrs. Varrick, beating the air distressedly with her jeweled hands. "But it must not be, Hubert."

"It is too late for interference now, mother; the fiat has gone forth."

Still she looked at him with dilated eyes.

"Would you marry her against my will?" she gasped, looking at him with a gaze which he never liked to remember in the years that followed.

"Do not force me to answer at such a time, mother," he said, distressedly. "I could not tell you a falsehood, and the truth might be unpleasant for you to hear."

"She will not marry you!" cried Mrs. Varrick. "I know a very good reason why she will not."

A smile curved the corners of her son's mobile lips, and he drew from his pocket the precious missive and held it up before her.

"I do not know of any reason why I should keep anything from you, mother," he said. "This letter is Jessie's acceptance."

A grayish pallor stole over Mrs. Varrick's face.

Even in death—for she supposed herself to be dying—the ruling passion that had taken possession of her life, was still strong within her. [Pg 187]

Her idolized son must never make such a *mes-alliance* as to marry Jessie Bain—a girl so far beneath him.

"I have not as yet read its contents," continued Hubert. "If you like, mother, I will read it aloud to you, and upon reflection, when you see how well we love each other, you will realize how cruel it would be to attempt to tear our lives asunder. I am pledged to her, mother, by the most solemn vows a man can make; and though I love you dearly, mother, not even for your sake will I give her up. Only a craven lover would stoop to that. A man's deepest and truest love is given to the woman whom he would make his wife. His affection for his mother comes next."

Mrs. Varrick was too overcome for speech by the angry tempest that raged in her soul.

By this time Hubert Varrick had broken the seal, drawn forth the letter, and commenced reading

its contents aloud. He had scarcely reached the second page ere he stopped short, dumfounded; for there the words confronted him which made the blood turn to ice in his veins, and his heart to almost stop beating.

He sprung to his feet and looked at his mother.

"Mother," he cried, hoarsely, "what can this mean? Jessie refuses me, and she says you know the reason why she must do so. What is that reason, mother? I beg you to tell me."

"She has given me her solemn promise not to marry you. That much I may tell you, nothing more," returned Mrs. Varrick, huskily.

"But it is my right to know, mother," he cried, sharply. "You must not keep it from me. I tell you that my whole life lies in the issue." [Pg 188]

"Step to my desk in the corner—the key is in it—and you will find in the right-hand drawer a folded paper; bring it to me. This will tell you what you want to know," she said, unsteadily, as he placed the paper in her hand. "Open it, and read it for yourself."

This he did with trembling hands; but when his eye had traversed half the page, he flung the note from him as though it were a viper that had stung and mortally wounded him.

"You see it is a confession from Jessie Bain that she stole my bracelet; it is her written acknowledgment, with her name affixed. That is the reason why she feels there is a barrier between you. Our ancestors, Hubert, have always been noted for being proud, high-bred men and women. No stain has ever darkened their fair names. If you wedded this girl, you would be the first to bring shame upon the name of Varrick."

"Not so, mother," he cried. "Despite the evidence of my own eyes, I can not, I will not believe my darling guilty. There is some terrible mistake—something which I do not understand. I will make it the work of my life to clear up this mystery, and to prove to you, despite all the evidence against my darling, that she is innocent."

"Will you make a vow to me that you will never marry her until her innocence is proven?" she cried, seizing Hubert's hand and pressing it spasmodically in both of hers. "Remember that I, as your mother, have a right to demand this—you owe it to me." [Pg 189]

For a moment Hubert Varrick hesitated.

"If you are so sure of her innocence, surely you need have no hesitation," his mother whispered.

Hubert Varrick did not speak for an instant; a thousand tumultuous thoughts surged through his brain.

Slowly, solemnly, he turned toward his mother.

"So sure am I that I can prove her innocence, that I will accede to your request, mother dear," he answered, in a clear, firm voice, his eyes meeting her own.

"I am content," murmured Mrs. Varrick, sinking back upon her pillow.

She said to herself that if he followed that condition he would never wed Jessie Bain.

Hubert rose quickly to his feet.

"I will take you at your word, mother," he declared promptly, rising suddenly to his feet. "You shall hear from me in regard to this within three days' time. I am going direct to Jessie. If your symptoms should change for the worse, telegraph me."

Kissing his mother hurriedly, and before she could make any protest to this arrangement, Hubert hurried out of the room and out of the house.

He was barely in time to catch the train for Albany, and arrived there just as the dusk was creeping up and the golden-hearted stars were coming out.

He made his way with all haste to the place where he had left Jessie. He must see her, and have a talk with her. He would not take "no" for an answer. [Pg 190]

The neat little maid who opened the door for him recognized the gentleman at once.

He had placed a bill in her hand at parting, and she was not likely to forget the handsome young man.

He was shown into the visitors' sitting-room.

"I should like to be permitted to see Miss Bain," he said. "Will you kindly take that message for me to the matron in charge?"

The girl looked at him with something very like astonishment in her face.

"Did you not know, sir—" she asked, somewhat curiously, as she hesitated on the threshold.

"Know what?" he demanded, brusquely. "What is there to know, my good girl?"

"Miss Bain has gone, sir," she replied. "She left the place for good quite an hour ago!"

Varrick was completely astounded. He could scarcely believe the evidence of his own senses; his ears must have deceived him.

At this juncture the matron entered. She corroborated the maid's statement— Miss Bain had left the place quite an hour before.

"Could you tell me where she went?" he asked.

"She intended taking the train for New York. She was very weak, by no means able to leave here, sir. We tried to keep her; but it was of no use; she had certainly made up her mind to go, and go she did!"

It seemed to Hubert Varrick that life was leaving his body.

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How he made his way out of the place, he never afterward remembered.

There was but one other course to pursue, and that was, to go to New York by the first outgoing train, and try to find her.

Hailing a passing cab, he sprang into it, remembering just in time that the New York express left the depot at seven o'clock. If the man drove sharp he might make it, but it would be as much as he could do.

He gave the man a double fare, who, whipping up his horses, fairly whirled down the snow-packed road in the direction of the depot.

"I am afraid that I can not make the train, sir," called the driver, hoarsely, as Hubert Varrick leaned out of the window, crying excitedly that he would quadruple his fare if he would make the horses go faster.

Again he plied his whip to the flanks of the horses, but they could not increase their speed, for they were doing their very best at that moment.

Nearer and nearer sounded the shrieking whistle of the far-off train. They reached the depot just as the train swept round the bend of the road.

"Thank God, I am in time!" cried Hubert Varrick, as he rushed along the platform. "If I had missed this train, I should have had to wait until to-morrow morning. I shall have little enough time to purchase my ticket. I—"

The rest of the sentence was never uttered. He stopped short. Standing on the platform, watching with wistful eyes the incoming train, was Jessie Bain!

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A great cry broke from his lips. In an instant he was standing beside her, her hands in his, crying excitedly:

"Oh! Jessie, Jessie. Thank Heaven I am in time!"

"Mr. Varrick!" she gasped, faintly. At that instant the train stopped at the station.

"You must not go on board!" he cried, excitedly. "Jessie, you must listen to what I have to say to you," he commanded. "You must not go to New York."

There was a sternness in his voice that held her spell-bound for an instant.

"Come into the waiting-room," he said. "I must speak with you."

Drawing her hand within his arm, he fairly compelled her to obey him; and as they crossed the threshold the train thundered on again.

The room was crowded. This certainly was not the time or place to utter the burning words that were on his lips. An idea occurred to him. He would get a coach, drive about the city, through the park, and as they rode, he could talk with her entirely free from interruption.

Hailing a coach that stood by the curbstone, he proceeded to assist his companion into it. She was too overcome by emotion to exert any will of her own.

He took his seat by her side, and a moment later they were bowling slowly down the wide avenue through which he had driven so furiously but a little while before.

"Now, Jessie," he began, tremulously; "listen to me, I pray you. I have traveled all the way back to Boston for your dear sake, to see you, to hold your hands, to speak with you, and to tell you I do not consider the little tear-blotted note you sent me, a fitting answer to my letter. I can not take 'no,' for an answer, Jessie, dear. You could not mean it. When I read what you wrote me, in answer to my burning words of love, it nearly unmanned me. You said, in that little note, that you did care for me; you acknowledged it. Now, I ask you, why, if this be true, would you doom me, as well as yourself, to a life of misery. You say there is a mystery, deep and fathomless, which separates us from each other for all time to come? This I must refuse to believe. You say it is something which my mother knows? Will you confess to me, Jessie, my darling, my precious one, just what you mean? Remember that the happiness of two lives hangs upon your answer."

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The girl was crying as though her heart would break, her lovely face buried in her hands.

He sat by her side very gravely, waiting until the storm of tears should have subsided.

He well knew that it was better that such grief, which seemed to rend her very soul, should waste itself in tears. At length, when her sobs grew fainter and she became calmer, he ventured to speak once more.

"I beg you to tell me, Jessie," he went on, "just what it is that holds our two lives asunder."

He longed with all his soul to take her in his arms, pillow the golden head on his breast, and let her weep her grief out there. But he must not; he must control the longing that was eating his heart away.

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"Be candid with me, Jessie," he said, his voice trembling and husky. "Do not conceal anything from me. The hour has come when nothing but frankness will answer, and I must know all, from beginning to end. What is it, I ask again, that my mother knows which you alluded to in your note, saying that it had the power to part us? Dear little Jessie, sweet one, confide in me! I repeat, keep nothing from me."

Through the tears which lay trembling on her long lashes, Jessie raised her lovely blue eyes and looked at him, her lips quivering piteously.

For an instant she could not speak, so great was her emotion; then by a mighty effort she controlled herself, and answered in a broken voice:

"I— I made a solemn pledge to your mother, the day I left your house, that I would never cross your path again, that I— I should do my best to avoid you and steal quietly away out of your life. I — I signed the paper and left it in your mother's hands. That, and that alone, satisfied her. Then I went away out of your life, though it almost broke my heart to do so. I— I have kept my promise to her. I meant to go away and to never look upon your face, even though I knew that Heaven had answered my prayer and given me your love—which I prize more than life itself—when everything else in this world was taken from me."

As Varrick listened, a terrible whiteness had overspread his face.

"Answer me this, Jessie," he asked; in the greatest agitation: "Why did you sign the other paper which you left with my mother that day? Answer me, Jessie—you must!"

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"I signed no other paper than that which contained the promise I have just spoken to you about," the girl returned earnestly, puzzled as to what he could mean.

For answer, he drew forth the note which he had taken from his mother's writing-desk and placed in his breast pocket, and put it in Jessie's hand.

"This note has been written by my mother," he said, "and this is your signature, which I would know anywhere in the world, my darling," he went on, huskily. "Oh, my love, my love! explain it to me!"

She had taken the paper from his hands, and run her eyes rapidly over the written words. They seemed to stand out in letters of fire. Her brain whirled around; her very senses seemed leaving her.

"Oh, Hubert! Hubert! listen to me!" she cried, forgetful of her surroundings, as she flung herself on her knees at his feet. "This is not the paper I signed, although the signature is so startlingly like my own that I am bewildered. I signed a paper which said that I would never cross your path again; but not this one—oh, not this one! I— I never saw this paper before. Oh, Hubert— Mr. Varrick— I plead with you not to believe that I could ever have signed a paper acknowledging that I took your mother's diamond bracelet! I have never taken anything which did not belong to me in all my life. I would have died first—starved on the street!"

Words can not describe what the thoughts were that coursed through Hubert Varrick's brain as he slowly raised her.

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"Tell me, Jessie," he cried, "did you read over the paper which you signed?"

"No," she sobbed; "I did not read it. Your mother wrote it, telling me what was in it—that I was never to cross your path again, because she wished it so, and I signed it without reading it. Indeed, I could not have read a line to have saved my life, my eyes were so blinded with tears, just as they are now."

A grayish pallor spread over his face; a startling revelation had come to him: his *mother* had written the terrible document, every line of which she knew to be false, relying upon the girl's agitation not to discover its contents ere she signed it!

Yes, that was the solution of the mystery; he saw through the whole contemptible affair.

Only his mother's illness prevented him from stopping at the first telegraph office and sending a dispatch to her to let her know that he had discovered all.

"You do not believe it—you will not believe that I took the bracelet?" Jessie was sobbing out. "Speak to me, oh, I implore you, and tell me that you believe me innocent!"

He turned suddenly and took her in his arms.

"Believe in your innocence, my darling?" he answered, suddenly. "Yes, before Heaven I do! You are innocent—innocent as a little child. I intend to take you directly to my mother, and this

mystery shall then be unraveled."

Despite the girl's protestations, he insisted that it must be so, and the first outgoing train bore them on their way back to Boston. [Pg 197]

It so happened that he found a lady acquaintance on board, an old friend of his mother, who willingly took charge of Jessie on the journey.

"Keep up a brave heart, little Jessie," whispered Hubert, as he bid the ladies good-night. "All will come out well. Nothing on earth shall take you from me again."

CHAPTER XXIX.

RETURNING GOOD FOR EVIL.

When the train reached Boston, Varrick took a cab at once for his home, Jessie and his mother's friend accompanying him. They had barely reached the entrance gate, ere they saw, through the dense foliage of trees that surrounded the old mansion, that lights were moving quickly in the east wing of the house that was occupied by his mother.

His sharp ring had scarcely died away when the footman came hurriedly to the door.

"Now that I have seen you safely home, with Miss Bain beneath your mother's roof, I shall have to hurry on," declared his mother's friend. "I know your mother will forgive me, Hubert, for not stopping a few days, or at least a few hours, when you explain to her that it is a necessity for me to resume my journey. You must see me back to the carriage." [Pg 198]

Persuasion was of no avail. Leaving Jessie in the vestibule for a few moments, Hubert complied with her request. When he returned a moment later, he found her in earnest conversation with the servant.

"Oh, Mr. Varrick— Hubert!" Jessie cried excitedly. "You must go to your mother at once. I hear she is very, very ill, and that all of the servants, for some reason, have fled from the house. Even the nurse, for some reason, refused to remain. Oh, Mr. Varrick!" she repeated, eagerly, "let me go to her bedside and nurse her. She is out of her head, and will never know."

Tears rushed to Varrick's eyes.

"You are an angel, Jessie!" he cried, kissing her hand warmly. "It shall be as you wish. Follow me!"

They entered noiselessly. Mrs. Varrick was tossing restlessly to and fro on a bed of pain. The family doctor was bending over her, with a look of alarm in his face. Hubert stole softly to the bedside, Jessie following.

All in an instant, before the doctor could spring forward to prevent them, both had suddenly bent down and kissed the sufferer repeatedly.

"Great God!" gasped the doctor, "the mischief has been done! I did not have an instant's time to warn you. Your mother is alarmingly ill with that dread disease, small-pox! I am forced to say to you that after what has occurred—your contact with my patient, I shall be obliged to quarantine you both."

"Great God!" Hubert cried, turning pale as death as he looked at Jessie. [Pg 199]

"Do not fear for me, Mr. Varrick," she said, "I am not afraid."

"For myself I do not care, for I passed through such a siege when I was a child, and came out of it unscathed. But you, Jessie? Oh, it must not be—it shall not be—that you, too, must suffer this dread contagion!"

"It is too late now for useless reflection. It would be better to face the consequences than seek to avoid them. If it is destined that either one of you should succumb to this disease, you could not avoid it, believe me, though you flew to the other end of the world. Take it very calmly, and hope for the best. Forget your danger, now that you are face to face with it, and let us do our utmost to relieve my suffering patient."

"He is right," said Jessie.

In this Hubert Varrick was forced to concur.

"Heaven bless you for your kindness!" he murmured.

The touch of those cool, soft hands on Mrs. Varrick's burning brow had a most marvelous effect

in soothing her. During the fortnight that followed she would have no one else by her bedside but Jessie; she would take medicine from no one else. She called for her incessantly while she was out of her sight.

"If she recovers, it will all be due to you, Miss Bain," the doctor said one day.

There came a day when the ravages of the terrible disease had worn themselves out, and Mrs. Varrick opened her eyes to consciousness. Her life had been spared; but, ah! never again in this world would any one look with anything save horror upon her. Her son dreaded the hour when she should look in the mirror and see the poor scarred face reflected there.

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When she realized that she owed her very life to the girl who had watched over her so ceaselessly and that that girl was Jessie Bain, her emotion was great. She buried her poor face in her hands, and they heard her murmur brokenly:

"God is surely heaping coals of fire upon my head."

On the very day that she was able to leave her couch for the first time, and to lean on that strong brave young arm that helped her into the sunny drawing-room, Jessie herself was stricken down.

In those days that had dragged their slow flight by, Mrs. Varrick had experienced a great change of heart. She had learned to love Jessie a thousand times more than she ever hated her. And now when this calamity came upon the girl, her grief knew no bounds.

What if the girl should die, and Hubert should still believe her guilty of the theft of the diamonds. God would never forgive her for her sin. There was but one way to atone for it, and that was to make a full confession.

It was the hardest task of her life when her son, whom she had sent for, stood before her. When she attempted to utter the words, to lead to the subject uppermost in her mind, her heart grew faint, her lips faltered.

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"Come and sit beside me, Hubert; I have something to tell you," she said.

He did as she requested, attempting to take her thin, white hands down from her poor disfigured face.

"Promise, beforehand, that you will not hate me."

"I could not hate you, mother," he said, gently.

Burying her face still deeper in the folds of her handkerchief, while her form swayed to and fro, she told him all in broken words. At length she had finished, and a silence like death fell between them. Raising her head slowly from the folds of her handkerchief, she cast her eyes fearfully in his direction. To her intense amazement, she saw him leaning back comfortably in his seat.

"Hubert!" she gasped, "are you not bitterly angry with me? Speak!"

"I was very angry, I confess, mother, when this was first known to me; but I have had time since to think the matter over calmly. You acted under the pressure of intense excitement, I concluded, and pride, which was always your besetting sin, mother; and that gained the ascendancy over you to the extent that you would rather have seen Jessie in a prison cell, though she was innocent, than see her my wife!"

"You knew it before I told you?" she exclaimed. "But how did you find out?"

"That must be *my* secret, for the time being, mother," he returned. "Be thankful that no harm came from your nefarious scheme. If Jessie had been thrown into a prison cell and persecuted unjustly, I admit that I should never have forgiven you while life lasted. Now, every thought is swallowed up in the fear that her illness may terminate as yours did, mother. But this I say to you: if she were the most-scarred creature on the face of the earth, I should still love her and wish to marry her."

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"I should not oppose it, my son," said his mother.

The terrible calamity which Mrs. Varrick had so long dreaded had not happened—her son had not turned against her.

We will pass over the fortnight that followed. Heaven had been merciful. Despite the fact that she had nursed Mrs. Varrick day and night, she herself had suffered but a slight attack of the dread contagion, and there were tears in both Hubert's and his mother's eyes when the doctor informed them that there would be no trace of the dread disease on the girl's fair face.

The road back to health and strength was but a short one, for Jessie had youth to help her in the great struggle. When she found that Mrs. Varrick had become reconciled to her, and had even consented to her marriage with her idolized son, and was laying plans for it, her joy knew no bounds.

It was the happiest household ever seen that gathered around Jessie Bain when she was able to sit up. All the old servants were so glad to see Jessie her bright, merry self once more, and to have their young master Hubert and pretty Jessie reunited. They talked of their coming wedding as the greatest event that would ever take place there, and they made the greatest preparations for the coming marriage.

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Again cards were sent out, and the first person who received one was Rosamond Lee.

Her amazement and rage knew no bounds. She had never heard from Jessie Bain since the hour she was sent out in that terrible storm. Nor had she ever seen Hubert Varrick since, nor heard from him. Somehow it had run in her mind that he might have met the girl, and she had told him all that had happened; and she decided that, under existing circumstances, she had better remain away from the wedding.

"There is no use in my remaining in this house, with this fussy old man and woman," she said flinging down the invitation, which she had been reading aloud to her maid. "I only came to this lonely place with the hope of winning handsome Hubert Varrick, and I have fooled away my time here all in vain, it seems. We had better get away at once."

Despite the protestations of old Mr. and Mrs. Bassett, Rosamond Lee and her maid left the house that very day.

The servants of the place were indeed glad to get rid of them; and as they were being driven away in the Bassett carriage, the maid, looking back by chance, saw every one of them standing at an upper window, making wild grimaces at them, which Rosamond Lee's maid venomously returned, saying to herself that she should never see them again.

Rosamond Lee's home was in New York City, and it was not until she got on the train bound for the metropolis that she gave full vent to her feelings and railed bitterly against the unkindness of fate in giving a grand man like Hubert Varrick to such a little nobody as that miserable, white-faced Jessie Bain.

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"I hope she will never be happy with him!" she added, in a burst of bitterness.

When they reached the city, they drove directly to the boarding-house where they were accustomed to stop. As strange fate would have it, it was the very boarding-house beneath whose roof Jessie Bain and Margaret had found shelter when Jessie had come to New York in search of work. The landlady was very glad to welcome back Miss Rosamond Lee and her maid.

"You came back quite unexpectedly, Miss Lee," said the landlady. "We can get your room ready, however, without delay. There is a young girl in the little hall bedroom that your maid has always had. Still, as she doesn't pay anything, she can be moved. By the way, I want you to take notice of her when you see her. She's as pretty as a picture but she's not quite right in her head.

"She was brought here by a young girl who took pity on her, and while the young girl was off securing work, she suddenly became so unmanageable that we thought the best thing to do was to send her to an asylum. But on her way there she made her escape from the vehicle. The driver never missed her until he had reached his destination.

"Search was made for her, and for many weeks we attempted to trace her, but it was all of no avail. Only last night, by the merest chance, we came face to face with her at a flower-stand, where they had taken her for her pretty face, to make sales for them. I brought her home at once, for there had been a good reward offered to any one who would find her.

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"Here another difficulty presented itself.

"The young girl who caused the reward to be offered is now missing—at least, I can not find her."

"Why don't you insert a 'personal' in the paper?" drawled Rosamond Lee.

"That would be a capital idea. Gracious! I wonder that I did not think of it before," said the landlady. "But, dear me! I'm not a good hand at composing anything of that kind for the paper."

"I'll write it out for you, if you like," said Rosamond, indolently.

The landlady took her at her word.

"The name of the young girl whom I wish to find is Jessie Bain," she began.

A great cry broke from Rosamond Lee's lips, and her face grew ashen.

"Did I hear you say Jessie Bain?" she asked.

"Yes; that was the name," returned the landlady, wonderingly. "Do you know her?"

"Yes— I don't know. Describe her. It must be one and the same person," she added under her breath.

"I shouldn't be at all surprised," continued the woman, "for she went to Albany, the very place you have just come from."

"It's the same one," cried Rosamond Lee. "Tell me the story of this demented girl over again in all its details. I was not paying attention before. I did not half listen to all you said."

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The landlady went over the story a second time for Rosamond's benefit.

Miss Lee meanwhile paced the room excitedly up and down.

"I'll tell you what I think," she cried excitedly. "Those two girls are surely adventuresses of the worst type. You say at first that she called the demented girl her sister, and then afterward

admitted that she was not. You see, there was something wrong from the start. Now let me tell you an intensely interesting sequel to your story: The girl Jessie Bain has, since the few short weeks that she left your place, captured in the matrimonial noose one of the wealthiest young men in Boston."

"Well, well what a marvelous story!" declared the landlady; and her opinion of Jessie Bain went up forthwith instead of being lowered, as Rosamond calculated it would be.

"The idea of an adventuress daring to attempt to capture Hubert Varrick!" the girl cried. "That is the point I want you to see. I have a great plan," continued Rosamond. "I will write to Hubert Varrick at once, that he may save himself from the snare which is being laid for his unwary feet by that cunning creature, or I will go to his mother and tell her all about it. I will make it a point to have a talk with this Margaret Moore at once. Do send her in to me."

The landlady could not very well refuse the request so eagerly made. When Margaret Moore came into the room, a few minutes later, and Rosamond's eyes fell upon her, she gave a sudden start, mentally ejaculating:

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"Great goodness! where have I seen that girl before? Her face is certainly familiar!"

CHAPTER XXX.

A TERRIBLE REVELATION.

Rosamond Lee stared hard at the lovely girl as she advanced toward where she sat.

"Where have I seen that face before?" she asked herself, in wonder. "Come and sit down beside me," she said, with a winning smile, as she made room for her on the divan. "I would like so much to talk with you.

"I have heard all of your story," she continued, "and I feel so sorry for you! I sent for you to tell you if there is any way that I can aid you in searching for your sister, I shall be only too happy to do so."

"The young girl you speak of is not my sister," corrected Margaret; "but I love her quite as dearly as though she were."

"Not your sister?" repeated Rosamond.

"No," was the answer; "but I love her quite as much as though she were."

"Tell me about her."

Margaret leaned forward, thoughtful for a moment, looking with dreamy eyes into the fire.

"I have very little to tell," she said. "I have not known the young girl as long as people imagine. Her uncle saved me from a wrecked steamboat, and she nursed me back to health and strength. Who I am or what I was before that accident, I can not remember; everything seems a blank to me. There are whole days even now when the darkness of death creeps over my mind, and I do not realize what is taking place about me. This sweet, young girl has been my faithful friend, even after her uncle died, sharing her every penny with me. Now she is lost to me forever. She went away, and I can not trace her. There is another feeling which sometimes steals over me," murmured Margaret, "a thought which is cruel, and which I can not shake off, that sometimes impresses me strangely, that somehow we have met in some other world, and that she was my enemy."

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"What a strange notion!" said Rosamond.

"Oh, that thought has grieved me so!" continued Margaret, in a low, sad voice.

"I hear that she left you to go on the stage," said Rosamond.

"Yes; that is quite true," was the reply. "She went with a manager who was stopping at this house."

"Supposing that I should put you on the track of your friend, would you—"

"Do you know where she is?"

"I think I do," was Rosamond's guarded answer. "But what I was going to say is, if I take you to a gentleman who knows her whereabouts, will you tell him, as you have told me, that she went off with a strange man to be an actress?"

"Yes, indeed; why not?" returned Margaret.

"We will take the afternoon train," suggested Rosamond.

The landlady made no objection to this, and the first act in the great tragedy was begun as the Boston express moved slowly out of the depot, bearing with it Rosamond Lee and her companion. [Pg 209]

On their journey Rosamond talked incessantly of Jessie Bain, plying the girl beside her with every conceivable question concerning her, until at last Margaret grew quite restless under the ceaseless cross-examination. All unconsciously, her manner grew haughty, and Rosamond noticed it.

At a way-station, some twenty miles this side of Boston, a tall, dark-bearded man boarded the train. The only seat vacant was the one across the aisle from the two girls. This he took, and was soon immersed in the columns of the paper which he had taken from his pocket.

"Are we almost there?" exclaimed Margaret.

The stranger across the aisle started violently and looked around.

"That voice!" he muttered.

There was but one being in this world with accents like it, and that was Gerelda Northrup, who lay in her watery grave somewhere in the St. Lawrence River.

Captain Frazier—for it was he—gave another quick glance at the two girls opposite him, and bent forward in his seat, that he might catch a better view of the one nearest him, whose face was averted.

Again she spoke, and this time the accents were more startlingly familiar than ever. Frazier sprang to his feet, walked down to the end of the car, then turned and slowly retraced his steps, watching the girl intently the while.

"I could almost swear that I am getting the tremens again, or that my eyes deceive me," he muttered. "If ever I saw Gerelda Northrup in the flesh, that is she!" [Pg 210]

He stopped short, and touched her on the shoulder, his eyes almost bulging from their sockets.

"Miss Northrup— I— I mean Mrs. Varrick—is this you? In the name of Heaven, speak to me!"

She looked at him, her great dark eyes studying his face with a troubled expression.

"Varrick!" she muttered below her breath. "Where have I heard that name before? And your face too! Where have I seen it? It recalls something out of my past life," she muttered.

With a low cry he bent forward.

"Then it *is* you, Gerelda— Mrs. Varrick?"

Rosamond Lee, whose face had grown from red to white, sprung excitedly to her feet.

"What mystery is this?" she cried. "What do you mean by calling this girl Mrs. Varrick? There is a friend of mine—a Mr. Hubert Varrick—who is soon to be married to a Jessie Bain. You haven't the two mixed, have you, sir?"

Frazier turned impatiently to her.

"I have seen the announcement of Hubert Varrick's marriage to Jessie Bain," he returned, his face darkening. "But the question is: how dare he attempt to marry another girl while he has a wife living. I do not know who you may be, madame," facing Rosamond impatiently. "You say that you know Hubert Varrick well, yet you do not appear conversant with his history. He married this young girl sitting beside you, who was then Miss Gerelda Northrup. On their wedding journey the steamer 'St. Lawrence' was lost, and she was supposed by all her friends to have perished in the frightful accident." [Pg 211]

While he had been speaking, Gerelda—for it was indeed she—had been watching him intently.

As he proceeded with his story, a great tremor shook her frame.

With a low cry she sprung to her feet.

"Oh, I remember— I remember *all* now!" shrieked Gerelda. "I— I was on the train with Hubert whom I had just married. Then we went on the steamer. We had a quarrel, and he told me that he did not love me, even though he had wedded me, and I— Oh, the words drove me mad! There was a great rumbling of the boiler, a crashing of timbers, and I felt myself plunged in the water. But my head—it pains so terribly! I scarcely felt the chill of the water. The next I remember I was lying in a cottage, with a young girl bending over me. My God! it was Jessie Bain, my enemy. I remember it all now. I wonder that memory did not come back to me when I heard the name Jessie Bain. She did not know that it was I who was Hubert Varrick's wife, or she would have let me die."

The effect of Gerelda's words was startling upon Rosamond.

"What are you going to do about it?" she asked, eagerly.

"Do?" echoed Gerelda. "I am going to claim my husband. He is mine, and all the powers on earth can never take him from me!"

"I suppose," said Rosamond, "now, from the way this amazing affair has culminated, you will not want me to go with you to Hubert— Mr. Varrick, I mean."

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Gerelda turned haughtily on her.

"No," she said. "Why should you wish to go with me to my husband? What interest have you in him?"

Rosamond shrunk back abashed, though she stammered:

"I— I should like to see how he takes it."

"I would like to accompany you for the same reason," interposed Captain Frazier. "He will be angry enough at you coming back to frustrate his marriage with the girl whom he idolizes so madly."

Gerelda's face grew stormy as she listened. There was an expression in her eyes not good to see, and which Captain Frazier knew boded no good to the object of her wrath.

At this juncture the express rolled into the Boston depot. Bidding Rosamond Lee and Captain Frazier a hasty good-bye, and insisting that under no circumstances should they accompany her, Gerelda hailed a cab, and gave the order: "To the Varrick mansion."

Captain Frazier stepped suddenly forward and hailed a passing cab, saying to himself that he must be present, at all hazards, at that meeting which was to take place between Gerelda and Hubert Varrick.

"Keep yonder carriage in sight," he said, pointing out the vehicle just ahead of them, and producing, as he spoke, a bank-note, which he thrust into the cab-man's hand.

The man did his duty well.

Pausing suddenly, and bending low, he whispered to the occupant of his vehicle that the carriage ahead had stopped short.

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"All right," said Captain Frazier, sharply. "Spring out—here is your fee, my good man."

The captain drew back into the shadow of the tall pines as his carriage drove away, lest the occupant of the vehicle ahead should discover his presence there. He saw Gerelda alight and pause involuntarily before the arched entrance gate that led around to the rear of the Varrick mansion.

Captain Frazier watched her keenly as she stood there for a moment, quite irresolute. His heart was all in a whirl, as he glanced up at the grand old mansion whose huge chimneys confronted him from over the tops of the trees.

"From the very beginning, Varrick has always had the best of me," he muttered. "I never loved but one thing in all my life," he cried, hoarsely; "and that was Gerelda Northrup, and he won her from me. From that moment on I have cursed him with all the passionate hatred of my nature. Since that time life has held but one aim for me—and that was, to crush him—and that opportunity will soon be mine—that hour is now at hand. He will shortly be wedded to another, if Gerelda does not interfere, and then—ah!—and then—"

His soliloquy was suddenly cut short, for the sound of approaching footsteps was heard on the snow.

He would have drawn back into the shadow of the interlacing pines, but that he saw he was observed by a minister who stepped eagerly forward.

"You are a stranger in our midst," he said, holding out his hand to him; "I do not recollect having seen your face before. I— I have a favor to ask of you. Would you mind lending me your assistance as far as the house yonder—the Varrick mansion—which you can see over the trees? I— I am not very well—have just recovered from a spell of sickness. I— I wish to visit the inmates of the mansion to perfect some arrangements concerning a happy event that is to take place on the morrow, within those walls. I find myself overtaken by a sudden faintness. I repeat, would you object to giving me your arm as far as the entrance gate yonder?"

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Captain Frazier complied, with a profound bow.

"I shall be only too happy to render you any assistance in my power," he murmured. "I used to know the family at Varrick mansion a few years ago," he went on. "I am not so well acquainted, however, with the present heir. Pardon me, but may I ask if the event to which you allude, that is to take place to-morrow, is a marriage ceremony?"

The minister bowed gravely.

"Between young Mr. Varrick and a Miss Bain?"

Again the reverend gentleman inclined his head in the affirmative, remarking that the bride-to-be was as sweet and gracious as she was beautiful.

Captain Frazier looked narrowly at his companion for an instant, then he asked, quickly:

"Again I ask your pardon for the questions I wish to put to you, but are you not the same minister who was sent to perform the marriage ceremony up at the Thousand Islands? and, again, the same minister who, later on, united Mr. Varrick in marriage to the beautiful Gerelda Northrup?"

The reverend gentleman bowed, wondering vaguely why the stranger should catechise him after this fashion.

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"You seem well acquainted with the family history, my friend," he remarked, slowly.

"Yes," Frazier answered, shortly, adding, in a low, smooth voice: "It was a fatal accident which robbed Hubert Varrick, some time since, of the bride whom he had just wedded. Her death has never been clearly proven, has it?"

"Oh, yes, it has," returned the minister. "Her body was among the unfortunates who were afterward recovered."

"Ah!" said Frazier, *sotto voce*, adding: "It is so very strange, my good sir, that after this thrilling experience, Varrick should take it upon himself to secure another wife."

The good minister looked at him, quite embarrassed. He did not care to discuss the subject with one who was an entire stranger to him, wondering that he should introduce such a personal subject, and at such a time and place.

"Excuse me, my friend, but I feel a little delicacy in discussing so personal a matter," he said, gently.

But this did not in the least abash Captain Frazier.

"It seems to me that I should insist upon proof positive—ay, proof beyond any possibility of doubt—that my first wife was dead ere I contracted a second alliance," remarked Frazier, quite significantly.

"Mr. Varrick believes that he has this, I understand," said the minister, gravely.

Frazier shrugged his shoulders, turned and looked at the man from under his lowering brows—a look which the minister did not relish.

"But, then, Varrick has always believed in second marriages," remarked Frazier, flippantly.

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The minister started, giving an uncomfortable glance at the other.

"I believe the girl to whom he is about to be united is Varrick's first love?" Frazier went on, nonchalantly.

"Indeed you are mistaken," retorted his companion earnestly. "I have known Hubert Varrick for long years, and to my certain knowledge he never had a fancy for any of the fair sex previous to the time he met beautiful Miss Northrup. She was his first love. Of that I am quite positive."

By this time they had reached the bend in the road hard by the entrance gate.

The reverend gentleman could not help but notice that his companion seemed unduly excited over the questions which he had propounded and the answers which he had received thereto, and he felt not a little relieved at bidding him good-afternoon and thanking him for the service which he had rendered him; and he wondered greatly that he excused himself at the entrance gate, instead of accompanying him to the house, if he was as intimate a friend of the family as he claimed to be.

The minister proceeded slowly up the wide stone walk, from which the snow had been carefully brushed, with a very thoughtful expression on his face.

Mrs. Varrick stood at the drawing-room window, and, noticing his approach, hurriedly rang for a servant to admit him at once.

He found himself ushered into the wide corridor before he could even touch the bell. Mrs. Varrick was on the threshold of the drawing-room, waiting to greet him as he stepped forward.

"I thought I observed some one with you at the gate?" she said, as she held out her white hand, sparkling with jewels, to welcome him. "Why did you not bring your friend in with you?"

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The minister bowed low over the extended white hand.

"You are very kind to accord me such a privilege," he declared, gratefully; "but the person to whom you allude is an entire stranger to me—a gentleman whom I met by the road-side, and whom I was obliged to call upon for assistance, being suddenly attacked with my old enemy, faintness. I may add, however, that he seemed to have been an acquaintance of the family."

"Perhaps he is an acquaintance of my *son*; his friends are so numerous that it is very hard for me to keep track of them," added Mrs. Varrick, asking: "Why did he not come into the house with you?"

"He declined, stating no reason," was the reply.

Looking through the drawing-room window a few moments later, the minister espied the stranger leaning against the gate, looking eagerly toward the house, and he called Mrs. Varrick's attention

to the fact at once.

She touched the bell quickly, and to the servant who appeared, she gave hurried instructions concerning the man.

"I have sent out to invite the gentleman to come into the house," she explained. "Hubert will be in directly, and I know that this will meet with his approval. He has very little time to spare to any one just now," she explained, with a smile, "he is so wrapped up in his *fiancée*, and will be, I suppose, from now on."

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"Naturally," responded the minister, with a twinkle in his grave eyes.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE MIDNIGHT VISITOR.

But we must now return to Gerelda. She fell back, pale and trembling, among the cushions of the carriage, her brain in a whirl, her heart panting almost to suffocation.

At the entrance gate of the old mansion, Gerelda dismissed the cab. Stealing around by the rear wall, she entered the grounds by an unused gravel walk, and gained the arbor. Then she crept up to one of the windows whose blind had swung open from a fierce gust of wind. The room into which she gazed had not changed much. A bright fire glowed cheerily in the grate, its radiance rendering all objects about it clear and distinct.

She distinguished two figures standing hand in hand in the softened shadows. The girl's face, radiant with the light of love, was upturned toward the handsome one bending over her. He was talking to her in the sweet, deep musical voice Gerelda remembered so well.

She saw the girl lay one little hand caressingly on his arm, and droop her pretty, golden head until it nearly rested on his broad shoulder. Then Gerelda heard him say, "I have in my pocket the wedding-gift with which I am to present you. It is not so very costly, but you will appreciate it, I hope," disclosing as he spoke a ruby velvet case, the spring of which he touched lightly, and the lid flew back, revealing a magnificent diamond necklace and a pendant star.

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"Oh, Hubert, you can not mean that that is for me!" cried Jessie.

But the second dinner-bell rang, and ere the sound died away, Mrs. Varrick and a few guests entered the room. All further private conversation was now at an end, but from that moment all sights and sounds were lost to the creature outside. She had fallen in a little dark heap on the ice-covered porch, lost to the world's misery in pitiful unconsciousness.

The house was wrapped in darkness when she woke to consciousness. Gerelda struggled to her feet, muttering to herself that it was surely death that was stealing slowly but surely over her.

Slowly, from over the distant hills, she heard some church-clock ring out the hour. "Eleven!" she counted, in measured strokes. As the sound died away, Gerelda crept round the house to the servants' entrance.

To her intense delight, the door yielded to her touch, and Gerelda glided noiselessly across the threshold. The butler sat before the dying embers of the fire, his paper was lying at his feet, and his glasses were in his lap. So sound was his slumber that he did not awaken as the door opened. Gerelda passed him like a shadow and gained the door-way that led into the corridor.

She knew Hubert's custom of going to the library long after the rest of the family had retired for the night. She would make her way there, and confront him. As she reached the door she heard voices within. She recognized them at once as Hubert's and his mother's.

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She crouched behind the heavy velvet *portières* of the arched door-way, until his mother should leave.

"Good-night again, Hubert," the mother said.

"Good-night mother," he answered.

He flung himself down in the soft-cushioned arm-chair beside the glowing grate, drew a cigar from his pocket and lighted it, dreamily watching the curling rings. Suddenly he became aware that there was another presence within the room beside his own.

His eyes became riveted upon a dark object near the door-way. It occurred to him how strangely like a woman the dark shadow looked.

And as he gazed, lo! it moved, and to his utmost amazement, advanced slowly toward him. For an

instant all his powers seemed to leave him.

"Gerelda, by all that's merciful," he cried.

"Yes, it is I, Gerelda!" she cried, hoarsely, confronting him. "I have come back from the grave to claim you!"

She did not heed his wild cry of horror, but went on, mockingly: "You do not seem pleased to see me, judging from your manner."

For an instant the world seemed closing around Hubert Varrick.

She cried, "I repeat that I am here to claim you!" flinging herself in an arm-chair opposite him.

"Now that your wife is with you once again, you are saved the trouble—just, in time, too—of wedding a new one;" adding: "You are not giving me the welcome which I expected in my husband's home. Turn on the lights and ring for every one to come hither!" she said. "If you refuse to ring the bell, I shall."

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Hubert Varrick cried out that he could not bear it; he pleaded with her to leave the house with him; that since Heaven had brought her back to him, he would make the best of it; all that he would ask would be that she should come quietly away with him.

This did not suit Gerelda at all; she had set her heart upon abusing Jessie Bain, and she would brook no refusal. She sprang hastily for the bell-rope. Divining her object, he caught her arm.

If he had not been so intensely excited he would have realized, even in that dim light, that there was something horribly wrong about her; that once more reason, which had been until so lately clouded, wavered in the balance.

"Unhand me, or I shall scream!" she cried.

Varrick placed one hand hurriedly over her mouth, in his agony, hardly heeding what he was doing.

"For the love of Heaven, I beg you to listen to me!" he cried. "You must—you shall!"

She sprang backward from him, falling heavily over one of the chairs as she did so. There was a heavy thud which awakened with a start the sleeping butler on the floor below. With one bound he had reached the door that opened upon the lower corridor.

"Thieves! robbers!" he ejaculated under his breath.

His first impulse was to cry aloud, but the next moment it occurred to him that the better plan would be to break upon the midnight intruder unawares, and assist his master in vanquishing him. The door was ajar, and in the semi-darkness he beheld Hubert Varrick, his master, struggling desperately with some dark, swaying figure. In that same instant Varrick tripped upon a hassock and fell backward, striking his head heavily against the marble mantel.

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The butler lost no time. Quick as a flash he had cleared the distance between the door-way and that other figure—which attempted to clutch at him in turn—and raising the knife he had caught up from the table of the room below, he buried it to the hilt in the swaying, writhing form. The next instant it fell heavily at his feet. A moan, that sounded wonderfully like a woman's, fell upon his horrified ear.

Varrick did not rise, though the terrified butler called upon him vehemently. He had the presence of mind, even in that calamity, to turn on the gas, and as a flood of light illumined the scene, he saw that it was a *woman* lying at his feet—ay, a woman into whose body he had plunged that fatal knife!—while his master lay unconscious but a few feet distant.

"Help! I am dying!" gasped the woman.

Those words recalled his scattered senses. Self-preservation is strong within us all. As in a glass, darkly, the terrified butler, realizing what he had done, saw arrest and prison before him, and realized that the gallows yawned before him in the near future.

The thought came to him that there was but one thing to do, and that was to make his escape.

Every moment was precious. His strained ear caught the sound of a commotion on the floor above. He knew in an instant more they would find him there with the tell-tale knife, dripping with blood, in his hand.

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He flung it from him and made a dash from the room. It was not a moment too soon, for the opposite door, which led to the private stair-way, had barely closed after him ere the sound of approaching footsteps was plainly heard hurrying quickly toward the library.

In that instant Hubert Varrick—who had been dazed by his fall, and the terrible blow on his head caused by striking it against the mantel—was struggling to a sitting posture. Varrick had scarcely regained his feet ere the *portières* were flung quickly aside, and his mother and half a dozen servants appeared.

A horrible shriek rent the air as Mrs. Varrick's eyes fell upon her son, and the figure of a woman but a few feet from him with a knife lying beside her.

"What does it mean?" cried Mrs. Varrick.

He pointed to the fallen figure.

"Gerelda has come back to torture me, mother!" he cried.

By a terrible effort Gerelda struggled to her knees.

"Hear me, one and all!" she cried. "Listen; while yet the strength is mine, I will proclaim it! See, I am dying—that man, my husband, is my murderer! He murdered me to keep me from touching the bell-rope—to tell you all I was here!"

With this horrible accusation on her lips, Gerelda sunk back unconscious.

Who shall picture the scene that ensued?

"It is false—all false—so help me Heaven!" Hubert panted. That was all that he could say.

The sound of the commotion within had reached the street, and had brought two of the night-watchmen hurrying to the scene. Their loud peal at the bell brought down a servant, who admitted them at once. In a trice they had sprung up the broad stair-way to the landing above, from whence the excited voices proceeded, appearing on the threshold just in time to hear Gerelda's terrible accusation. Each laid a hand on Hubert Varrick's shoulder.

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"You will have to come with us," they said.

Mrs. Varrick sprung forward and flung herself on her knees before them.

"Oh, you must not, you shall not take him!" she cried; "my darling son is innocent!"

It was a mercy from Heaven that unconsciousness came upon her in that moment and the dread happenings of the world were lost to her. There were the bitterest wailings from the old servants as the men of the law led Hubert away.

In the excitement no one had remembered Gerelda; now the servants carried her to a *boudoir* across the hall, and summoned a doctor.

"If this poor girl recovers it will be little short of a miracle," he said.

Through all this commotion Jessie Bain slept on, little realizing the tragic events that were transpiring around her. No one thought of awakening her. The sun was shining bright and clear when she opened her eyes on the light the next morning.

How strangely still the house seemed! For a moment Jessie was bewildered. Had it not been that the sun lay in a great bar in the center of the room—and it never reached this point until nearly eight in the morning—she would have thought that it was very, very early.

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"My wedding-day!" murmured the girl, slipping from her couch and gazing through the lace-draped windows on the white world without. But at that moment a maid entered and she told Jessie Bain the story of the tragedy.

A thunder-bolt from a clear sky, the earth suddenly opening beneath her feet, could not have startled Jessie Bain more. A few minutes later she recovered her composure and hurried to Mrs. Varrick's room.

Mrs. Varrick reached out her hand to Jessie, and the next moment they were sobbing wildly in each other's arms. Little by little the girl's noble spirit in all its grandeur gained the ascendancy. Slowly she turned to the housekeeper, who was sobbing over the fact that there was no one to take care of Hubert's wife, until a trained nurse the doctor had expected should arrive.

"She shall be *my* care," said Jessie, determinedly. "I will go to her at once; lead the way, please."

Who shall picture the dismay of Jessie when she looked upon the face of the woman who had come between her and the man she was to have wedded that day and found that it was the very creature whom she herself had sheltered—the girl whom she had known as Margaret Moore?

The doctor was greatly moved at the heroic stand Jessie Bain proposed to take in nursing her rival back to health and strength.

"Not one woman in a thousand would do it," he declared. "May Heaven bless you for it! Besides," he added in a low, grave voice, "you could serve poor Hubert Varrick in no better way than by restoring her. If she dies it will go hard indeed with young Varrick."

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Jessie realized this but too well, and bent all her energies to nurse her back to health and strength, though what she suffered no one in this world could tell.

If Margaret recovered, she knew that she would go away with Hubert. He might not love her, but he would be obliged to live his whole life out with her. If she died, he would hang for it. Better that he should live, even with the other one, than die.

Her heart went out to Hubert Varrick in the bitterest of sorrow. She realized what he must be suffering. She would have flown to him on the wings of love, but she dared not.

She wrote a letter to him for his mother, at her dictation, adding a little tear-blotted postscript of her own, making no mention of her own great love and the sorrow that had darkened her young

life. In that letter she urged him to keep up brave spirits; that everything was being done for Gerelda, his wife, that could be done; that she was sitting up night and day nursing her.

When Hubert Varrick received that tear-stained missive, in the loneliness of his desolate cell he bowed his head and wept like a child, crying out to Heaven that he was surely the most wretched man on God's earth.

He tried to think out all the horrors of that bitter midnight tragedy, which seemed more like a dream to him than a reality. He could not understand how Gerelda came by that wound, unless, through her terrible rage, she had attempted to take her life by her own hand; and through the same intense rage, strong even in death, wanted to persecute him even after she had known that her moments were numbered.

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As for Gerelda, her life hung by the slenderest of threads for many days after, and during these anxious hours no one could induce Jessie Bain to leave her bedside. But at last the hour came when the doctors pronounced Gerelda out of danger.

CHAPTER XXXII.

CAPTAIN FRAZIER PLOTS AGAIN.

We must return to Captain Frazier, whom we left standing at the gate when he had parted from the minister, who had gone into the Varrick mansion to make arrangements for the wedding which was to take place on the morrow.

"Gerelda must have made herself known to them by this time, and a lively scene is probably ensuing," he muttered. "I should like to have seen Varrick when Gerelda confronted him, and cheated him out of Jessie Bain. In that moment, perhaps, it occurred to him what I must have suffered when he cheated me out of winning lovely Gerelda Northrup at the Thousand Islands last summer—curse him for it! How strange it is that from that very date my life went all wrong! I invested every dollar I had in that stone house on Wau-Winet Island, and that fire wiped me out completely. I have had the devil's own luck with everything I touched. Everything has gone back on me, every scheme has fallen through, and the best of plans panned out wrong. I should say that I am pursued by a relentless Nemesis. I am growing desperate. Why should Hubert Varrick have so much of this world's good things and I so little? I am reduced to very near my last dollar. I have scarcely enough in my pocket to pay a week's lodging; and when that goes, the Lord knows what the outcome of it will be. Up to date, I am 'too proud to beg, too honest to steal,' as the old song goes; but when a man reaches the end of his resources there's no telling what he may do."

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He walked away swiftly among the trees and threaded his way quickly through the net-work of streets, until he found himself at last standing before a dingy little two-story brick house in a narrow court. Advancing hurriedly up to the stone flagging, he knocked loudly. There was no response.

"Evidently no one is in," he muttered. "I will call later in the evening."

He retraced his steps back to the heart of the city, and feeling exceedingly fatigued, he entered a *café*.

"I have almost got to the end of my rope," he muttered, mechanically picking up a newspaper. "If my luck doesn't change within the next few days, I shall do something so desperate that people will never forget the name of Captain Frazier."

He ran his eye idly down the different columns. Suddenly a paragraph attracted his attention. He read it over slowly half a dozen times; then, without waiting to partake of the repast he had ordered, he hurried to the desk, paid his bill, and rushed out into the street.

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"I have no time to lose," he muttered; "this country is getting too hot for me. I must get away at once. If I but had the wherewith I would take the first outgoing steamer. What a capital idea it would be!" he cried, laughing aloud, grimly. "If I could manage to abduct Hubert Varrick's intended bride and hold her for a ransom? I made a success of it with Gerelda Northrup when she stood at the very altar with him; and what a man does once he can do again. The first time it was done for love's sake; now it would be a question of money with me. I have but little time to lose."

Again he made his way to the lonely, red-brick house on the side street, taking good care that he was not observed. In response to his repeated knocks, the door was opened at length by a small, dark-complexioned man.

"Captain Frazier! by all that's amazing!" he cried. "When did you blow into port, I should like to know?"

"I came in this morning," was the reply.

"I am never quite sure what you want of me," replied the other, eyeing the captain suspiciously in the dim twilight. "But come in—come in," he added, hastily. "We are just sitting down to supper. Come and take something with us, if you're not too proud to sit at our humble table."

"I've got over being proud long ago," said the captain, following the other along a very narrow hall.

The interior of the room into which he was ushered bespoke the fact that it was inhabited by men—presumably sailors, from the nautical implements thrown promiscuously about. It was unoccupied, and Captain Frazier took his seat at the head of the table.

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"Some of the boys left very hurriedly when they heard the loud, resounding knock on the front door," his companion said, laughingly, as he heaped the tempting viands on Frazier's plate.

The captain, whose appetite had been sadly neglected, paid great attention to the savory dishes before him.

"We have been accustomed to talking and eating at the same time," he began.

"Of course," returned the other.

"When do you make your next trip out?"

"In a week's time, probably, if all is favorable."

"I think I shall ship with you," said the captain. "This part of the country is getting too unsafe for me. I see by to-day's paper that they are searching for me."

"Well, you must have expected that."

"Yes, I have determined to leave the country," Captain Frazier repeated; "but I do not propose to go alone."

His companion looked at him curiously, wondering what was coming; then, leaning nearer him, the captain whispered a plot in his ear that made his friend open his heavy eyes wide in amazement.

"I haven't a cent of money," admitted the captain; "but if you will work with me, you shall have half the ransom."

"A woman is a nuisance on board of a boat like ours," said the other; "but if you are sure so large an amount will be paid for her return, it will be well worth working for."

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An hour longer they conferred, and when Frazier left the red-brick house on the side street, the most daring plan the brain of man had ever conceived was well-nigh settled.

When the hour of eleven struck clear and sharp, Captain Frazier was standing silently before the Varrick mansion. In making a tour of the grounds, much to Frazier's amazement, he found the rear door ajar.

"The devil helps his own," he muttered, sarcastically. "I imagined that I should have a serious time in gaining admittance, when lo! the portals are thrown open for the wishing."

He made his way through the dimly lighted corridors, dodging into the first door that presented itself when he heard the sound of voices approaching.

He found himself in the library, and had just time to dodge behind a *jardinière* on a heavy, square pedestal, which was placed in a recess in the wall, when Hubert Varrick entered. He was followed a moment later by his mother. He heard him talk over his future plans for the coming marriage on the morrow, and a great wonder filled his mind. Had not Gerelda seen him yet?

It had been many hours since he himself had seen her enter those very gates. While he was thinking over the matter, Hubert's mother left the room. Much to the watcher's discomfiture, Hubert Varrick did not follow, but instead, threw himself down in an easy-chair before the glowing grate-fire, and lighted a cigar.

Scarcely a moment had elapsed ere he heard the sound of cautious footsteps. Peering again out of the foliage which concealed him so well, he saw Gerelda cautiously approach through the open door-way, and again he was compelled to be a listener to all that transpired.

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Then, like a flash, came the terrible *denouement*, and Frazier, crouching behind the huge pillar, distinctly saw the butler enter and he witnessed the crime. He tried to prevent it by springing forward in time to save the hapless girl, but he seemed powerless to move either hand or foot. He could not have taken one step had his very life depended on it. And when the terrible crime had been committed, and people flocked to the room, he dared not come forward, lest he should be accused of the horrible crime himself. In the great excitement he soon made his escape, though it was not until he found himself several blocks from the scene of the catastrophe that he dared stop to take breath.

The next day the captain made another visit to the little stone house, assuring his friends that this would make no difference in their plans, that, as soon as the excitement subsided, he would

carry out his original scheme.

A week passed by, and during that time Captain Frazier, prowling incessantly about the neighborhood, watched carefully his opportunity to meet Jessie Bain.

The owner of a little sloop lying under cover down the bay was greatly annoyed at the loss of time; he was waiting too long, he told Frazier repeatedly, declaring at length that unless Frazier could manage to gain possession of the girl that very night that he would have to sail without her. This decision made Captain Frazier desperate, for he was now reduced to his last penny.

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It was no easy matter to gain an entrance into the Varrick mansion a second time, and no one but the most desperate man in the world would have thought of attempting it; but, as on a former occasion, at last fate aided him.

The drawing-room being considered too warm, one of the servants threw open a large French window to cool off the apartment. This was Frazier's chance. Like a shadow he stole into the room.

It was no easy matter to make out in which room he should find Jessie Bain. At length the sound of light, measured footsteps in a room he was just passing fell upon his keen ear. He pushed the door cautiously open. All was darkness within, save a narrow strip of light that came from the closely drawn *portières* of an inner apartment. Applying his eye to a small slit in the heavy velvet, he saw the object of his search. She was bending over a woman's form lying on a couch, a form he knew to be Gerelda's, while standing a little distance from them was a doctor mixing a potion. He heard him give Jessie Bain strict injunctions regarding the administration of it; then he saw the physician take his leave.

For a moment a death-like silence reigned in the room.

"Let me implore you," sobbed Jessie, "to save the man you love from the terrible fate that awaits him."

"I would not lift my finger or my voice to save him. If I must die, it is a satisfaction to me to know that he must die too!" whispered Gerelda.

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"Cruel, cruel creature!" cried Jessie. "May Heaven find pardon for you, for I can not. I will ask no more for mercy at your hands. But hear me! I will save Hubert Varrick if it lies within human power. I will find a way; he shall not die, I swear it!"

A gleam crept into Gerelda's eyes.

"He is beyond your aid!" she cried, excitedly, half rising on her pillow. The effort this cost her proved almost too much for her. A dangerous whiteness overspread her face, and she fell back fainting, a small stream of blood trickling from her lips. Jessie sprang quickly to her feet, and administered a cordial from a small vial.

At that moment the doctor entered. He was alarmed at the expression on his patient's face.

"There has been a sudden change for the worse," he declared. "Still, I knew it would come sooner or later. I said from the first, if she lived the week out I should be surprised. I see now that the end is very near. When the sun rises on the morrow, her spirit will have reached its last resting-place, poor soul. You will need to exert extra care over her to-night, Miss Bain."

Soon after he took his departure, and once more Jessie was left alone with the girl whom Hubert Varrick had wedded, but did not love—the girl who had blasted all the happiness this world held for her. Yet she felt sorry from the depths of her soul that the girl's life was ebbing away so fast.

Midnight struck, and the little hands of the cuckoo-clock on the mantel crept slowly round to one. Still there was no change, save that the white face on the pillow grew whiter, with a tinge of gray on it now.

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The clock on the mantel seemed to tick louder and louder, and cry out hoarsely:

"Time is fleeing fast! It will soon be too late for Gerelda to clear Hubert Varrick and save him from a felon's death!"

Jessie Bain paced the floor up and down, in agony.

Suddenly a thought came to her—a thought so terrible that it nearly took her breath away.

"I will try it," whispered Jessie, hoarsely.

She crept pantingly across the room to an escritoire which stood in the corner. Raising the lid, she drew from it a sheet of paper and a pen, and catching up a tiny ink-well, she hurried back to the bedside. Bending with palpitating heart over the still form lying there, Jessie Bain muttered:

"No one will ever know," taking a quick glance about the room. "Gerelda and I are all alone together—all alone!"

Thrusting the pen in the limp fingers, Jessie Bain dipped it in the ink, and with her own hand guided the hand of Gerelda, making her write the following words on the white paper:

"VARRICK MANSION, *February 23d*, 1909.

"To those whom it may concern: I, Gerelda Varrick, lying on my death-bed, and realizing that the end may come at any moment, wish to clear from any suspicion, Hubert Varrick. I do solemnly swear it was not he who struck the fatal blow at me which ends my life. It was some stranger, to me unknown.

"[Signed] GERELDA VARRICK.

"Witnessed by ——".

And here Jessie took the pen from the limp fingers affixing her own signature—"JESSIE BAIN."

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The deed was done. Jessie drew a long, deep breath, ere she could reach forth to secure the all-important paper, a great faintness seized her, and throwing up her hands, she fell in a dead faint beside Gerelda's bed.

Scarcely a moment had elapsed ere the *portières* that shut off an inner room were thrust quickly aside by a man's hand.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

IN THE TOILS.

Captain Frazier had seen all that had transpired.

He was just about to spring into the apartment and tear the paper from Jessie Bain's hands, when he saw her fall lifeless by the couch. Quickly he flung the *portières* aside and sprang into the apartment. It was but the work of a moment to secure the document, and to thrust it in his vest-pocket. Then, without an instant's loss of time, he caught up the insensible form of Jessie, throwing a dark, heavy shawl about her, he shot hurriedly out of the room and down the corridor, making for the drawing-room, whose long French windows opened on the porch. He had scarcely crossed the threshold ere he heard the sound of hurrying footsteps.

"Ha! they heard the sound of her fall," he muttered, dashing open the window and springing through it with his burden, landing knee-deep in the white, soft snow-drift.

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It took but a moment more to gain the road, and then he well knew the dark, waving pines would screen him from the sight of any one who might attempt to pursue him. As he stopped to take breath for a moment, he glanced back at the mansion, and saw lights moving to and fro in the upper windows.

Dashing breathlessly onward, he threaded his way up one deserted street and down another, dodging into hall-ways if he saw a lone pedestrian quite a distance off, approaching, remaining there until their footsteps had passed and died away. To add to his annoyance Jessie began to show signs of returning consciousness.

"This will never do at this crisis of affairs," he cried to himself.

He had come well equipped for the emergency, and drawing a small vial from an inner pocket, he dashed half of its contents over the shawl which enveloped the girl's head. Its pungent odors soon quieted Jessie's struggles.

Hailing a passing coupé, he soon deposited his burden therein, jumping in himself after giving instructions to the driver to make all possible haste. They were jostled along the road with lightning-like rapidity, and half an hour afterward had made the distance, and the cab drew up in the loneliest part of the wharf.

"Here we are, sir," the driver said, springing down from his box and opening the door.

The gentleman within did not respond.

"What is the matter with the man?" he muttered, striking a match and thrusting it into the strange customer's face. He drew back with a great cry. The man's face was as white as death, and at that instant he became aware of the strong odor of chloroform, which filled the vehicle to suffocation.

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"Here's a pretty go," muttered the cabman, "and in my coach too.

"The best thing to do would be to dash a cup of water over him and restore him to consciousness."

The cabman hurried to a watering-trough a few feet distant. Snatching up one of the tin cups which was fastened to it by a chain, he soon wrenched it free. But before he had advanced a single step with its contents, a great cry of horror broke from his lips; the horses dashed suddenly forward and were galloping madly down the same street which they had so lately

traversed.

He reported his loss to the nearest station, not daring to mention the serious condition of the occupants of the cab. But up to noon the following day not even a trace of the vehicle could be discovered.

Old Mrs. Varrick was fairly paralyzed over the disappearance of little Jessie, whom she had learned to love as a daughter. She would not believe that she had left the house of her own accord—wandered away from it.

"There has been foul play here," she cried.

And immediately old Stephen, the servant, said to himself:

"It all comes from the stranger who was loitering about the place about a week ago;" and he made up his mind to do a little detective work on his own account. "If he is in the city, I will find him," he muttered. "I will tramp night and day up and down the streets until I meet him. Then I will openly accuse him of abducting poor pretty Miss Jessie."

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He went to his old mistress and asked for leave of absence for a few days. Mrs. Varrick shook her head mournfully.

"I should not think you would want to leave me, when you see me in all this trouble, Stephen," she said. "You should stand by me, though every one else fails me. Only this morning the butler gave notice that he intended to leave here on the morrow, and he, like yourself, has been with me for years."

"I am not surprised to hear that, ma'am," returned Stephen, laconically, "for ever since that fatal night in the library the butler has had a very horror of the place. He's as tender-hearted as a little child, ma'am, the butler is. Why, he takes Master Hubert's trials to heart terribly. He walks the floor night and day, muttering excitedly: 'Heaven save poor Master Hubert!'"

Although every precaution was taken to keep the news of Jessie's disappearance from Hubert Varrick, the knowledge soon reached him.

"My God! did I not have enough to bear before," he murmured, "that this new weight of woe has fallen upon me?"

In his sorrow he was thankful that at least one person besides his mother seemed to believe so utterly in his innocence—and that was the butler. He came to see him daily and wept over him, muttering strangely incoherent words, declaring over and over again that he must be proven innocent, though the heavens fell.

"As near as I can see, it will end in a prison cell for life or the gallows," said Hubert, gulping down a sob.

"But they mustn't hang—you shan't hang!" cried the butler, excitedly. "I will—"

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The sentence was never finished. He sat back, trembling in every limb, in his seat, his face ashy white, his features working convulsively.

At last the butler came no more to see him, and Hubert heard that he, too, had suddenly disappeared.

The day of the trial dawned clear and bright, without one cloud in the blue azure sky to mar the perfect day. It was a morn dark enough in the history of Hubert Varrick, as he paced up and down the narrow limits of his lonely cell, looking through the grating on the gay, bright world outside.

It did not matter much to him if he left it, he told himself. Suddenly there was the sound of a key turning in the lock, and glancing up, Varrick beheld the old butler standing before him.

He greeted the old servant with a wistful smile, and for a moment neither could speak, so great was their emotion.

"I have been a long way off, Master Hubert," he said, huskily; "but I couldn't stay away when I thought how near it was to—to the time."

"Thank you for your devotion," said Hubert, gratefully. "I am glad you came to see me; and, whatever betides," he continued, huskily, "I hope you will think none the worse of me. Believe that I am innocent; and, dear friend, if the time should ever come when you could clear my stained name from the awful cloud which darkens it, I pray you promise me that you will do it. I can never rest in my grave until this horrible mystery has been cleared." The old butler trembled like a leaf. "I shall haunt the scene of that terrible tragedy, and—"

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A great shriek burst from the butler's white lips, and he fell to the floor in a terrible spasm.

The attendant pacing back and forth in the corridor without, hastily removed him. They spoke of it with pity, how devoted he was to his young master.

At noon the case was called, and the greatest of excitement prevailed from one end of the city to the other, for there were few men as popular there as Hubert Varrick. The spacious room was crowded to overflowing. There was a great flutter of excitement when the handsome prisoner

was led into the court-room. Those who had known him from childhood were touched with the deepest pity for him. They could not believe him guilty.

In that hour quite as exciting an event was taking place in another part of the great city.

To explain it we must go back to the thrilling runaway that took place a few days before, when Jessie Bain, powerless to aid herself lay back among the cushions of the coach, all unconscious that the mad horses were whirling her on to death and destruction. They careened wildly around first one corner and then another, making straight for the river.

At one of the crossings a man stood, his head bent on his breast, and his eyes looking wistfully toward the dark water beyond.

"If I had the courage," he muttered, "I would drown myself. I can not rest night or day with this load on my mind. It almost seems to me that I am going mad! How terrible to me is the thought that I—whom all the world has always regarded as an honest man—am an unconfessed murderer!"

The very air seemed to repeat his words—"a murderer!"—and the old butler—for it was he— [Pg 242] shuddered, as he muttered half aloud:

"I never meant to do it, God knows!"

Suddenly the sound of wheels smote his startled ear.

"A runaway!" he cried.

Without an instant's hesitation he threw himself forward. What mattered it if he lost his life in the attempt? He would save the occupants of the carriage, or give his wretched life in the attempt.

Nearer, nearer came the galloping horses, and just as he was about to throw himself forward to seize them by the bits, they collided with the street lamp. In an instant of time the vehicle was smashed into a thousand pieces.

One of the occupants, a woman, was hurled headlong to the pavement; her companion, half in and half out of the coach, was caught in the jam of the door, while his coat was fairly torn from his body, the papers that had been in his breast packet strewn the street. The butler sprang forward to seize the man and save him, but fate willed it otherwise.

He was too late. And as he stood there paralyzed with horror, the team plunged from the dock down, down into the dark waves. In an instant only a few white bubbles remained to mark the spot where horses, vehicle, and the unfortunate man had gone down.

The butler, who had witnessed all the terrible catastrophe, turned his immediate attention to the poor creature whom he believed must be dead, she lay so white and still, face downward, in the snow-drift.

"Great God! It is Jessie Bain!"

He gathered her up quickly in his arms, together with a few papers that lay under his feet, and carried her to his own lodgings, which were but a few yards distant. He meant to convey her, as soon as it was fairly light, back to the Varrick Mansion. [Pg 243]

In the meantime, he would do his best toward restoring her. After pouring a glass of brandy down her throat, he sought to bring back warmth to the ice-cold hands by rubbing them vigorously; but it seemed all useless, useless. Wrapping her in warm blankets, he drew the settle upon which he had placed her, closer to the coal fire and waited to see if the warmth would not soon revive her.

Then his eyes fell upon the papers he had picked up. One of them lay slightly open, and by chance his eyes lighted upon the contents. What was there about it that caught and held his gaze spell-bound? The second and third he scanned. Then, clutching it closely, his hands trembling like aspen leaves, he read on and on until the last word was reached.

"Great God!" he muttered, half dazed and crazed, "it is the confession of Hubert Varrick's wife that he did not do the deed of which she accused him. No one must ever see this!" he cried. "I will burn this confession, and no one will ever know of it."

Cautiously he made his way to the glowing fire. What was that strange, sharp, rustling sound? He glanced fearfully over his shoulder. Jessie Bain was sitting upon the settle, gazing at him with terror-distended eyes. For an instant the girl was bewildered at her strange surroundings, then she recognized the butler who had left the Varrick mansion a few days before. What was she doing here in his presence?

The last thing she remembered was standing over unconscious Gerelda, and guiding her hand to write the words that would save Hubert Varrick's life. As she looked she saw that same confession in the butler's hands. What was he doing with it? Great Gad! how came he by it? As she gazed she saw him carefully approach the grate, and hold the paper over the flames. [Pg 244]

With one bound Jessie Bain had reached his side and torn it from his grasp, just as the flames had caught at it.

"What would you do?" she screamed.

He looked at her with cunning eyes.

"How came you by this?" he cried, in an awful voice, as he struggled with her desperately to gain the paper.

No word answered him.

"You shall not have it!" he cried, wrenching it from her by main force. "You shall not show this up to the world until it is too late to affect Hubert Varrick."

A cry of agony burst from Jessie's death-white lips. She saw, in her terror, that the old butler had lost his reason, and yet withal he was so cunning.

She pleaded with him on her knees, but it was useless. He muttered over and over again that she should not have the paper, that he would keep her there a prisoner until all was over.

Despite her entreaties, to her great horror the man kept his word, and Jessie found herself a prisoner in the isolated place. She was too weak to make any effort to escape; there was none to hear her faint cries.

It must be said for the man that he tended her as faithfully as a woman might have done; but he was deaf to her pitiful and desperate appeal. He taunted her from day to day with the knowledge that it wanted but one day more to Hubert Varrick's trial. At last the terrible time dawned. It seemed to Jessie that she would go mad with the horror of it.

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She tried with all her weak strength to break the firm old locks that held her a prisoner there, but it was useless, useless. The sun slowly climbed the heavens, and she knew, oh God! she knew what was to happen to Hubert Varrick within those hours.

She sunk on her knees, crying out that if she could not aid the man she loved, that the same sun would set upon her lifeless form—she would kill herself.

Hardly had this resolve become a fixed purpose with her, ere she became conscious of a loud knock at the door.

"I— I am a prisoner here!" she cried. "I beg you, whoever you are, break the lock of the door!"

This was hastily complied with, and she saw standing before her two officers of the law.

"Oh, sir!" she gasped, "take me to Hubert Varrick at once, or it will be too late to save him!"

"We are here for that very purpose," answered one of them. "We know all. The late butler of the Varrick mansion has just breathed his last, and confessed all—that it was he who committed the murder, and just how it happened, begging us to come after you, and to liberate you at once, and tell you that Hubert Varrick is now free. A carriage is in waiting. Come at once. Mrs. Varrick awaits you there," he adding, noting how stunned the girl looked, as though she could hardly believe what she heard.

There was one thing that Jessie never quite fully understood: how she reached the lonely cottage of the old butler. She believed his mind must have been wandering when he gave such a singular account of a runaway, and a gentleman being with her in the coupé. She firmly insisted that the butler must have chloroformed her, abducted her, and brought her to that place, in the hope that she would then be powerless to aid Hubert Varrick.

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Who could describe the meeting between Hubert and Jessie and Mrs. Varrick which occurred an hour later at the Varrick mansion.

Hubert would have taken the girl he loved so madly, in his arms on sight and covered her face with kisses, but she held him off at arm's-length, though she longed to rest in his strong arms and weep on the broad bosom that she knew beat for her alone.

"No, you must not touch me, Hubert," she whispered. "It would not seem right so—so soon after—after poor Gerelda's untimely death."

"Forgive me—pardon me, Jessie," he answered, brokenly. "For the moment I had—*forgotten*, my love for you was so great!"

Here Mrs. Varrick quickly interposed:

"Jessie is quite right, my boy," she said. "You must not mention one word of love to her for many a day yet. Perhaps your troubles will be over before many months."

"If you both think that, it will not do for me to remain beneath this roof where Jessie is," he declared, huskily. "I am only human, you know, and we both love each other so!"

Thus it was that it was arranged that it was best for Hubert to go away, travel abroad, and return a year from that day to claim Jessie. But it was with many misgivings that Hubert tore himself away.

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"If anything comes of this enforced separation, always remember that I pleaded hard against it, but in the end yielded to your wishes." On the morrow Hubert Varrick left Boston.

During the months that followed Jessie lived quietly at the Varrick mansion with Hubert's mother.

The year of probation had not yet waned, when, one lovely April morning, while Jessie was walking through the grounds that surrounded the mansion, she espied a bearded stranger standing at the gate, leaning on it with folded arms, evidently lost in admiration of the early blossoming buds and half-blown roses.

"Permit me to gather you some of the roses you seem to be admiring so much, sir," she said, courteously.

"Pardon me, would you permit me to enter and gather for myself the one I care for most?"

The request was an odd one, but she granted it with a smile.

He swung open the heavy gate, and in an instant was by her side, folding her in his arms, and kissing her with all his soul on his lips.

"Am I changed so that Love can not recognise me?" he cried.

"Hubert—oh, Hubert! is it *you—really you?*" sobbed Jessie, laughing and crying all in a breath.

And there Mrs. Varrick found them an hour later, planning for the marriage, which Hubert declared should be solemnized before the sun set. This time he had his own way, and when the stars came out, they shone on sweet little Jessie Bain, a bride; and surely the sweetest and most adorable one that ever a young husband worshiped.

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And there we will leave them, dear reader, for when a girl marries, all the ills of life should be left behind her, and she should dwell in sunshine and love ever after.

Those who knew her as pretty, saucy, sweet Jessie Bain never forgot her. And may I hope that this will be the case with you, my dear reader?

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