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DAINTY'S CRUEL RIVALS OR THE FATAL BIRTHDAY

BY
MRS. ALEX. McVEIGH MILLER

HART SERIES NO. 88

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DAINTY'S CRUEL RIVALS

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CHAPTER I.

"A SWEET GIRL GRADUATE."

"Her eyes
Would match the southern skies
When southern skies are bluest;
Her heart
Will always, take its part
Where southern hearts are truest.

"Such youth,
With all its charms, forsooth.
Alas! too well I know it!—
Will claim
A song of love and fame

"It's a perfect godsend, this invitation!" cried Olive Peyton, with unwonted rapture in her cold voice.

"Yes, indeed!" assented her chum and cousin, Ela Craye, joyfully. "I have wondered over and over how we were going to buy our summer clothes and spare enough money for a trip, and here comes Aunt Judith's invitation to her country home just in the nick of time."

"And how lucky, to think of her step-son, Lovelace Ellsworth, getting home at last from Europe! Either you or I must capture him, Ela!" added Olive, eagerly, her black eyes sparkling with the hope of getting a rich husband.

But Ela Craye snapped shortly:

"We might—if only she had not invited Dainty Chase."

Olive frowned, but answered, courageously:

"Pshaw! aunt might just as well have saved her manners. Dainty can not possibly go. She hasn't a decent thing to wear at such a grand place as Ellsworth."

"She would look pretty in a rag, and we both know it. Dainty by name, and dainty by nature," Ela returned, gloomily, yielding reluctant homage to a fair young cousin of whose charms both were profoundly jealous.

Olive and Ela, who were school-teachers in the southern city, Richmond, Virginia, boarded with a widowed aunt who took this means of supporting herself and her only child Dainty, who had but just graduated at a public school, and hoped to become a teacher herself next year. They were poor, but Dainty, with her fair face and gay good-nature, was like an embodied ray of sunshine.

It had been very kind in the rich Mrs. Ellsworth to invite her three nieces to her grand West Virginia home, and to offer to pay the expenses of their journey. But for her generosity Dainty could not have gone; but now, at her mother's wish, she wrote, gratefully accepting the invitation.

"How thankful I am!" cried the mother, joyfully. "It's just what Dainty needs, this trip to the mountains! She looks so pale and wan since she graduated."

"So you really mean to let her go?" Ela exclaimed, with pretended surprise, while Olive added, spitefully:

"We thought Aunt Judith might be ashamed of her shabby clothes. She hasn't anything to wear, has she, but her last summer's gowns and the cheap white muslin she had for her graduation?"

"Mrs. Ellsworth knows we are poor, and that Dainty must dress plainly. I dare say she is too kind-hearted to be ashamed of her dead half-brother's only child," Mrs. Chase returned, spiritedly; while the thought would intrude, that if only Olive and Ela would pay their neglected board bills she might afford Dainty a new summer gown and dress.

She summoned up courage to hint this fact to them next day, but they met the timid appeal with angry reproaches.

"Don't think we are going to cheat you of our board bill because we can not spare the money till school begins next fall!" cried Olive, sharply; while Ela chimed in scornfully:

"To think of our own aunt dunning two orphan girls for board!"

The poor lady's face fell, thinking of the rent and the grocer's bill, both due, and not enough money in her purse to meet them; but she sighed patiently, and answered:

"I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, dears, but you know how poor I am, and that I must take boarders for a living! I'm sure I would be glad to board you for nothing if I could afford it, though, after all, I'm not really any kin to you, you know, only your dead half-uncle's widow."

It was true, what the sweet, patient woman said; she was not related to them at all, but she had boarded them at the cheapest rates, and been most kind and motherly. They had intended to pay what they owed that very day, but jealousy of her daughter, their lovely cousin, crept in between and made them withhold the pittance, in the malicious hope of preventing Dainty's trip to Ellsworth.

Both girls were handsome and stylish in their way—Olive, a tall, dark, haughty brunette of twenty-four, while Ela Craye was twenty-two, pretty and delicate-looking, with a waxen skin, thick brown hair, and limpid, long-lashed gray eyes. Each girl cherished a hope of winning the rich and handsome heir of Ellsworth, and they feared the rivalry of a girl as fresh and lovely as the morning, and with the rounded slenderness of eighteen, piquant features, rose-leaf complexion, delicious dimples, a wealth of curling golden hair, and large, deep, violet-blue eyes full of soul and tenderness.

How could Love Ellsworth, as his step-mother called him, keep from losing his heart to such winsome beauty joined to the exquisite timidity of a very innocent and shy girl? Olive and Ela knew but too well that finery would not cut much figure in the case. Dainty had a real French art

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in dress, and could look as lovely in a print gown as they appeared in their finest silks. Give her a cheap white gown, and a few yards of lace and ribbon, and she could look like a Peri just strayed away from paradise.

Her cousins fairly cudged their brains for some scheme to keep Dainty from going with them, and a happy thought struck them at last.

They knew that Dainty had never traveled alone in her life, and that she was an arrant little coward among strangers. If they could only give her the slip, she would sooner give up the trip than to follow alone.

They were to go on Wednesday morning, and Mrs. Chase and her daughter were up betimes, packing the girl's trunk with her freshly laundered clothing, after which the mother said:

"All is ready, dear, and you'd better go and tell Olive and Ela that breakfast will be ready in five minutes, for there's no time to lose." [7]

But when Dainty knocked at the door of the room the girls shared together, it flew wide open, and she saw that it was vacant, while a note pinned on the pillow conveyed this explanation:

"DEAR AUNT,—Just for a lark, we concluded, ten minutes ago, to start to Ellsworth to-night instead of in the morning. It will be so much cooler traveling at night, you know. As our trunks were sent down to the station this afternoon, we will have no trouble going, and will not wake you to say good-bye for fear of giving you a midnight scare. It would be no use anyway, for we knew Dainty could not go with us, as her fresh ironed clothes would not be dry enough to pack till morning. So, good-bye, and tell her she can follow us to-morrow, if she is not afraid to travel alone. Hastily,

"OLIVE AND ELA."

Dainty flew downstairs, the pearly tears streaming down her rose-leaf cheeks.

"They have done it on purpose, mamma! I knew all along they did not want me to go!" she sobbed, sinking into a chair by the window, quite unconscious that a tall young man stood outside, having just pulled the old-fashioned knocker at the cottage door.

In their excitement they did not hear him, and Dainty continued, in a high-pitched, indignant young voice:

"I didn't intend to tell you, mamma, but I overheard Olive and Ela saying to each other that they were sorry I was invited to Ellsworth, and planning not to pay their board so as to keep you from buying me anything new to wear."

Mrs. Chase's gentle, care-worn face expressed the keenest surprise and pain as she exclaimed: [8]

"Oh, how cruel they were! And what good reason could they have for wishing to deprive you of the pleasure of such a trip?"

"Jealousy, mamma!" Dainty answered, with flashing eyes and burning cheeks. "They did not tell you all that was in their letter from Aunt Judith, but I overheard Olive saying that aunt's step-son, Lovelace Ellsworth, had returned at last from Europe, and that they must set their caps for him. They were afraid I might rival them. Ela said I would look pretty even in a rag, and she wished they could leave me at home. So you see"—bitterly—"they have succeeded in doing it."

"Certainly not, my darling, for you shall follow them this morning, and let them know you were not afraid to travel alone, as they no doubt hoped you would be!" exclaimed Mrs. Chase, indignantly.

"Oh, mamma, I dare not venture alone! I shall stay at home with you, and let them have Mr. Ellsworth!" protested Dainty; but just then the loud clangor of the door-knocker made both start in alarm.

Mrs. Chase stepped quickly out into the narrow little hall, and opened the door to a tall, handsome stranger, in whose dancing dark eyes she failed to read the fact that he had listened with interest to every word exchanged between her and her daughter.

With a well-bred bow he presented her with a card, on which she read, with astonishment:

"LOVELACE ELLSWORTH.

"Introduced to Mrs. Chase by Judith Ellsworth."

"I am Mrs. Chase, and I am glad to see you," she said, wonderingly, as she gave him a cordial handshake, and ushered him into the little parlor, where he saw a girl, fairer than any flower, wiping the tears away from lovely eyes that looked like violets drowned in dew. [9]

"My daughter Dainty, Mr. Ellsworth," said the widow; and as he took the soft little hand, he did not wonder that her cousins had feared to risk her rivalry for his heart.

With his charmed eyes lingering on her perfect face, he explained:

"I have been in New York for a few days, and mother wrote me to stop in Richmond and join a party of her nieces who would start to-day on a visit to Ellsworth."

Dainty's bright eyes laughed through their tears as she replied:

"Oh, how sorry they will be to have missed you! But they went last night!"

"But were not you, Miss Chase, to accompany them?" he demanded; and she handed him the girls' note, saying, demurely:

"That explains everything."

Lovelace Ellsworth read it with a somewhat malicious smile, exclaiming:

"How fortunate that I came in time to protect you on your journey!"

Mrs. Chase hastened to say:

"We shall indeed be grateful for your escort, as Dainty was about to give up her trip through her timidity at venturing alone. Now, as soon as we have breakfast, she will be ready."

Oh, how angry Olive and Ela would have been to see that pleasant little party at breakfast, and afterward setting forth for the station in Ellsworth's carriage, Mrs. Chase accompanying to see her daughter off, and both of them perfectly delighted with their genial new acquaintance, of whom the mother could not help thinking:

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"How admirably he looks at my bonny girl, as if indeed Olive and Ela were right in fearing her rivalry for his heart! And how good and true he looks, as if he might make any girl a kind, loving husband! What a grand thing it would be for Dainty—"

She broke off the thought abruptly, for the parting was at hand, and her daughter clung tearfully about her neck.

In a minute it was all over, and Dainty was seated in the parlor-car with Ellsworth by her side, saying in his musical voice:

"No more tears now, Miss Dainty; for you must try to amuse me, to make up for your cousins, who have left us in the lurch. But how glad I am they went on ahead of us—are not you? For we shall have such a lovely *tête-à-tête* journey!"

Dainty emerged from her wet handkerchief, like the sun from behind a cloud, blushing and dimpling with girlish mischief, as she exclaimed:

"But they will be so sorry! They will never get over it!"

She was only a girl, not an angel, so she could not help being pleased with the thought of the discomfiture of her scheming cousins who had so cleverly overreached themselves.

The train sped on through the beautiful sunshine of early June, leaving the heated city far behind, and Dainty's heart felt as buoyant as the morning, her journey was so pleasant and her companion so attractive, placing her so completely at her ease, except when he would fix his brilliant dark eyes so ardently on her face that she would blush in spite of herself and look down in sweet confusion while her innocent heart throbbed wildly with a new, sweet sensation almost akin to pain.

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After one of these confusing episodes, Dainty tried to shake off her embarrassment by saying:

"Tell me all about Ellsworth! Is it indeed so grand that my aunt will be ashamed of me, as my cousins declared?"

"No one could be ashamed of *you!*" declared Ellsworth, with another glance that set her pulses beating wildly, though she answered, demurely:

"Thank you; but, of course, you are not a judge of clothes. Olive and Ela said I had nothing fit to wear at Ellsworth."

"I have never seen a prettier or more becoming gown than the one you have on now," he replied, with an approving glance at her crisp, freshly laundered blue linen, while he added: "We have some very nice young men in the neighborhood of Ellsworth, and I am sure they will all fall in love with you at sight."

"Flatterer!" she cried with shy archness; but his words and looks thrilled her heart, and made her think, with sudden passion:

"If only he would fall in love with me, I could excuse all the rest!"

What a change had come to the tired and weary schoolgirl of only yesterday! She was parted from her mother for the first time in her young life, among new scenes and strangers, and Cupid was knocking at the door of her heart. Hitherto she had known only tranquil happiness and little sorrow. How would it be now?

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"Love and pain
Are kinsfolk twain."

Love changes all the world to the heart that admits him as a guest; but Dainty was not wise enough to bar the charming little stranger out.

CHAPTER II.

"THE PRETTIEST GIRL IN THE ROOM!"

Golden curls, a snare for Cupid.
 Eyes of blue, a treacherous sea,
 Where Love's votaries sink drowning,
 Wrecked on hidden reefs; ah, me!
 Lips of bloom like June's red roses,
 Lily throat and dimpled chin,
 Glowing cheeks like fragrant posies,
 Made for smiles to gather in.
 —Mrs. Alex McVeigh Miller.

Meanwhile, Olive and Ela, having reached Ellsworth in a high state of glee at outwitting Dainty so cleverly, received a great shock on learning from their aunt that Lovelace Ellsworth had expected to accompany them from Richmond to his home.

Bitterness filled their hearts when they realized what would be the outcome of their malice—that instead of Dainty having to give up her trip through timidity at traveling alone, she would have the escort of the man from whom they had tried so sedulously to keep her apart.

They had told their aunt that they decided to come earlier because it would be cooler traveling at night, and accounted for Dainty's absence by declaring that she was not quite decided on coming yet, being reluctant to leave her mother alone. If she made up her mind to come anyhow, she would do so later, they said; but they were very careful not to add that Dainty was so timid she would very likely stay at home after their base desertion. [14]

When they were alone, they commiserated each other on the failure of their deep-laid schemes.

"Only to think, that Dainty and Love Ellsworth are together at this moment, and will be all day long! I can see her now in my mind's eye! She is sitting beside him in the car, and the sunshine glints on her curly, golden hair, and brings out the deep pansy-blue, of her big, childish eyes, and the rose-leaf bloom of her flawless skin. She is laughing at everything he says, just to show how deep her dimples are, and how pearly her teeth, and how rosy her lips! It is enough to drive one mad!" cried Ela, not underrating the least of her rival's charms in her jealousy of them.

"We can never undo to-day's work, I fear," added Olive, most bitterly, in her keen disappointment; for the thought of seeing Dainty the mistress of Ellsworth was almost unbearable.

Since she had arrived at Ellsworth and seen how beautiful the estate was, nestling among the green hills of West Virginia, close by the famed Greenbrier River, she had been more anxious than ever to win the master of this grand domain, and a bitter hatred for gentle Dainty crept into her heart.

She knew that she was beautiful in a dark, queenly fashion, and she could only hope that Love Ellsworth would prefer her dark style to Dainty's fair and radiant one. On this chance hinged all her hopes, while Ela, on her part, wondered if he might not find a wealth of brown hair, waxen-skin, and limpid gray eyes as attractive as the more pronounced brunette and blonde types.

Late that afternoon Mrs. Ellsworth invited the two girls into her *boudoir*, saying she wished to have a private talk with them. [15]

She was a woman of sixty years, with abundant snow-white hair, contrasted with piercing dark eyes. In her youth she must have looked like Olive Peyton, and she was still well-preserved and fine-looking for her time of life. Her relatives considered her eccentric and hard-hearted, and she was certainly a woman of strong prejudices and unbending will—fond of having her own way.

She now looked approvingly at her handsome, stylish nieces, and remarked, abruptly:

"I suppose neither of you girls have any idea why I invited you here, so I may as well inform you and get it over. In the first place, have either of you any entanglements?"

"Entanglements?" murmured Olive, questioningly.

"Entanglements?" echoed Ela, doubtfully, with a slight flush breaking through her usual pallor.

"I mean, are either of you engaged to be married?"—sharply.

"Oh, dear no!" cried Olive.

"No, indeed!" muttered Ela, still faintly crimson.

"Or—in love with anybody?" added their aunt, anxiously.

"Only with each other. We are chums and sweethearts," laughed Olive, as they looked at each

other affectionately.

"Very good!" said curt Mrs. Ellsworth, smiling, as she continued: "And you are both as poor as church mice; I know that without asking. Now, don't color up and get angry. Poverty is inconvenient, but it's no disgrace. Besides, I intend to change all that."

While they stared at her in wonder, she nodded her white head sagely, adding:

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"You two girls are the nearest kin I have in the world, and it's time I made some provision for your future. Well, I'm going to do it. That's why I sent for you to come to Ellsworth."

They began to murmur ecstatic thanks; but she cut them short, saying:

"You know that I have quite a large fortune left me by my husband, and that my step-son, Love Ellsworth, is a millionaire. Well, I propose to have you two girls succeed to these fortunes; one by inheritance from me, the other by marrying my step-son."

"Oh, oh!" they cried, their faces shining with delight; and their aunt went on, complacently:

"Love is heart-whole and fancy-free now, but he will fall in love some day and marry, and why not one of my nieces, I'd like to know? Both of you are as pretty as pictures, and I say to you, go in and win. The one that he chooses will be lady of Ellsworth, the other I will adopt as my heiress. How does the prospect please you? Better than drudging in a school, eh?"

They overwhelmed her with rapturous thanks that pleased and amused her at the same time; for she could guess well enough how they hated poverty and longed for riches.

"But why do you look so blank, Ela?" she added, suddenly, and the young girl answered, frankly:

"I was wondering why you invited Dainty Chase, if you wanted Olive or me to marry your step-son? She is the prettiest girl in the world!"

"Dainty Chase pretty? But that can not be. Her father, my half-brother, was a very homely man, and I never heard that his wife was a beauty. I felt sorry for the poor little thing, and wanted to give her a good time; that was why I invited her to come. Of course, I never saw her; but she is my half-niece all the same, and I owe her some kindness, though I don't want her to marry Love, or to inherit my money, so I hope I didn't make a mistake!" the old lady exclaimed, uneasily.

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"Wait till you see her!" both girls cried at once, breathlessly, jealously.

"Is she indeed so pretty? But perhaps she will not come!" consoled Mrs. Ellsworth.

"She will be sure to come if Mr. Ellsworth calls for her. She will not miss such a chance to captivate him!" both girls assured her disconsolately; but they were very careful not to tell how badly they had treated their pretty cousin.

"But she is only a child—scarcely fifteen, I think."

"Oh, Aunt Judith! She was eighteen in May, and graduated in June. She is taller than I am!" cried Ela.

"Well, well, well, I am very sorry that I invited her, if there's any likelihood of her spoiling your chances with Love. But I can't believe she is so pretty till I see her, for John Chase was as homely as sin. Anyway, you girls must try to hold your own against her charms."

"We will try, now that we have you on our side, dear Aunt Judith. Perhaps Mr. Ellsworth may not admire blondes like Dainty. Besides, she is a vain, silly little thing, and very deceitful!" fibbed Olive, trying to prejudice her aunt against Dainty in advance.

Mrs. Ellsworth drew a sigh of relief, and replied:

"If that is the case, she can not charm Love Ellsworth, for he is the soul of truth and honor, and abhors deceit. But there is one thing I must caution you both about, if you wish to please my step-son, and that is, if you hear any of the servants gossiping about Ellsworth being haunted, do not mention it to him, as it makes him very angry, and he has turned away several servants for talking about it."

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They both promised not to breathe such a thing to their host; and as Mrs. Ellsworth saw that they were secretly curious, she explained:

"Of course, you have noticed and admired the ivy-grown stone wing to the left of the mansion. It is all that is left of Castle Ellsworth, that was built before the Revolution by Love's ancestor, Baron Ellsworth. It has fallen into disuse now, and the servants declare it is haunted, but it makes Love perfectly furious to hear such reports."

When the girls were alone again they whispered to each other:

"If Dainty Chase finds out about the ghosts, she will be frightened almost to death, she is such a little coward!"

Sitting on the broad veranda at sunset, the cousins heard the whistle of the train at the station, miles away, that was to bring Dainty, if she decided to come.

"That is Love's train, if he comes," said their aunt. "But there must be some delay, or he would

CHAPTER III. THE HAPPIEST DAY SHE HAD EVER KNOWN.

Olive and Ela sighed with relief, hoping something had happened after all, to keep Dainty at home; but they would have been horrified if they had guessed that Ellsworth had not telegraphed his aunt, choosing to secure a trap at the station, and have a *tête-à-tête* drive over the road with winsome Dainty.

They had started even now, the young man driving a light buggy, with Dainty's trunk strapped on securely at the back. They went at a leisurely pace, for which he accounted by saying lightly:

"I hope you won't mind because we have to travel slowly. The road is rough, and the horse slow—what we call in the country a 'courting horse,'" smiling at her with quizzical dark eyes that made Dainty blush like a rose. "Do not be frightened. I will try to remember that I have known you but a day," he added, softly; and they were silent for a while, while Dainty's eyes drank in the sunset beauty of the mountain scenery.

"What a glorious view! I never before saw anything so beautiful!" she cried.

"Would you like to live in West Virginia?" he asked, eagerly.

"Oh, I don't know!" trembling somehow at his pointed tone, and adding, quickly: "I—I couldn't be happy anywhere without mamma!"

And yet she knew in her heart that this day of separation from all that she had hitherto known had been the most ecstatic of her whole life, filled with thrilling sensations that emanated from the attentions of the man by her side. [20]

"Oh, there are looks and tones that dart
An instant sunshine through the heart;
As if the very lips and eyes,
Predestined to brave all our sighs,
And never be forgot again,
Sparkled and smiled before us then!"

Every glance and tone of Love Ellsworth subtly conveyed the impression that she was already dear to him, and that but for the fear of alarming the shy girl he would have declared his love at once, demanding her heart in return.

What wonder that the day had flown fast to both, and that the drive seemed all too short when, in the purple haze of twilight, they drove in at the gates of Ellsworth, and saw three ladies sitting on the porch watching them with what lively dismay the reader can well imagine.

"I fear you are tired from your tedious journey; but perhaps we can give you a novel ride in an airship while you are at Ellsworth. I have a clever neighbor who is inventing one," said Love, as he helped her from the buggy and led her up the steps to his aunt, under the fire of three pairs of disapproving eyes.

"Your niece, Miss Chase, madame," he said, presenting Dainty to her aunt, with a smile that maddened Olive and Ela, it was so tender.

Mrs. Ellsworth gave her a cordial greeting, saying kindly:

"I can see that you are not tired from your trip, but I will take you to your room to freshen up a bit;" and only pausing to present Love to Olive and Ela, she hurried her away, while he began to make himself agreeable with a secret, comprehensive amusement at the situation. [21]

Mrs. Ellsworth led her niece up a splendid, wide oaken staircase, and along a large corridor to a beautiful room, a symphony in blue and white, where a maid was already lighting the wax candles in the polished silver candelabra on the dressing-table.

"Sheila will help you to unpack and make your toilet for dinner," she said, adding, as an after-thought: "You need not trouble to make an elaborate toilet, as there will be no one but ourselves, but to-morrow we will have some guests, among them several young men worth your while."

The tone was significant, as if her step-son did not count at all, and Dainty's heart sank as she turned away, leaving her alone with Sheila Kelly, the Irish maid.

"Shure, ye have but twinty minutes, miss, to make yer *twilight*, so best give me yer kays, and let me unpack whilst ye bathe," she said, in broadest brogue.

Dainty had conceived an instant aversion to the coarse-mouthed, sly-looking Irish girl, so she answered, quietly:

"You may bring me some flowers for my corsage—some of those pink roses I saw as we drove in—while I unpack the trunk myself."

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CHAPTER IV. THE OLD MONK.

The ill-looking maid flounced away, thinking resentfully that the pretty young lady was afraid to trust her with her keys, while Dainty, whose only reason had been an unwillingness to expose her simple wardrobe, proceeded to lay out a gown for the evening—a delicately embroidered white cashmere that no one would have suspected had been cleverly made over from her mother's bridal *trousseau*.

While she was dressing her hair with deft fingers, she was startled by a very unpleasant sound—a series of harsh, hacking coughs—seeming to proceed from the room next her own. She thought:

"Some one is ill in there. What a terribly consumptive cough, poor soul!"

Presently Sheila hurried in with a wealth of roses glistening with the fresh-fallen evening dew, and after thanking her, Dainty asked, curiously:

"Is there some one ill in the next room?"

"Shure, miss, there's nobuddy in the next room at all, at all, and not a sick crathur in the house. Why is it ye thought so?"

"I heard some one coughing in there—a tight, hacking cough, like some one in the last stages of consumption," Dainty answered; and instantly Sheila Kelly crossed herself and looked furtively behind her like one pursued, muttering:

"The saints preserve us! T' ould *monk*!"

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"The old monk, did you say? Who is he?" exclaimed Dainty, sharply; but the maid shook her head.

"Don't ask *me, miss*, please—ask the young master about the *cough* ye heard, and shure he will tell ye, darlint," returned Sheila, with a somewhat nervous giggle and a second furtive glance behind her, as she added: "Better hurry up, now; ye've only five minutes before dinner is announced, ye see."

Dainty quickly pinned on a great bunch of the fragrant roses, and hurried down to the parlor, where she found the others waiting, Mrs. Ellsworth alone in an easy-chair, Olive and Love at the piano with Ela, who was playing the accompaniment for a sentimental song that Olive sang while Love turned the leaves.

At dinner the hostess managed to separate Dainty and Love as widely as possible, and when they left the table, she pursued the same course, leading Dainty to a distant seat, saying:

"Come and sit by me, dear. I have so many questions to ask you about your home and your mother; and I will tell you some interesting things about your papa's boyhood."

Her step-son, pleased at her seeming interest in his beautiful love, and unwilling to interrupt the flow of their mutual confidences, permitted the two other girls to monopolize him the whole evening; so that when bed-time arrived, he had not had the chance of a single word, except the formal good-night.

He went out then to smoke a cigar, and secretly deprecate Mrs. Ellsworth's selfishness in keeping such a lovely girl to herself all the evening, and the girls went upstairs to their rooms along the dimly lighted corridor.

Dainty slipped her hand through Ela's arm, whispering, nervously:

[24]

"Are your rooms close to mine, Ela?"

"No; mine and Olive's are down there at the end of the corridor, adjoining, and there are only vacant rooms next you."

"But that can not be, Ela, for I heard some one in the room next mine coughing horribly while I was dressing; but the maid denied that any one was in there, and muttered something about the old monk. What could she have meant?"

She fancied that Ela shuddered, and her eyes dilated with alarm as she returned:

"Good heavens! is that old wretch going to haunt us? Why, Dainty, don't you know about the family ghost of Ellsworth?—the wicked old monk, a relative of the family, who murdered one of the brotherhood, and fled to his old home, hiding himself in a dungeon here till he died of consumption. Well, it is said that he haunts the old wing of Ellsworth, and that whenever his awful, discordant cough is heard it forebodes evil to the hearer. But here is your door. Good-

night!"—with a mocking laugh.

Dainty had never slept away from her mother's arms before. Lonely and nervous, she slipped into a white dressing-gown, and sat down by the window to watch the full moon sailing above the purple peaks of the mountain range, and listening in a sort of terror for the monk's cough; but the excitement of the day induced speedy sleep.

How long she rested there in the moonlight, sleeping heavily, like a weary child tired of playing, she could not tell, only that suddenly she started wide awake in terror, feeling as if a cold, icy hand had pressed her warm bosom, turning her cold as death.

Springing to her feet, she found she was not alone, for in the broad glare of the moonlight she saw by her side the tall form of a man gowned in a long black robe girdled with a rosary of beads, while his close-shaven face shone ghastly white under his black skull-cap, and the dull, fixed eyes had the awful stare of death. [25]

With a piercing cry, Dainty sprang past the midnight visitant, rushed to the door, and throwing it open, bounded into the corridor, flying with terror-winged feet toward her cousin's room. Then she pounded on the door, shrieking, piteously:

"For God's sake, let me in!"

The door opened so quickly that Dainty, leaning against it, lost her balance, and fell blindly forward into the arms of the man who had opened it—Lovelace Ellsworth, who had not yet retired, because his heart and mind were so full of her he knew he could not sleep.

CHAPTER V. "ONLY A DREAM."

"Ah, sweet, thou little knowest how
I wake and passionate watches keep;
And yet while I address thee now,
Methinks thou smilest in thy sleep.
'Tis sweet enough to make me weep,
That tender thought of love and thee,
That while the world is hushed in sleep,
Thy soul's perhaps awake to me."

It was almost midnight, yet Love Ellsworth's lamp still burned dimly as he sat by his open window in the flood of white moonlight, going over and over in his mind the events of the day, unable to turn his thoughts from the artless little beauty who had charmed him so.

He was five-and-twenty, and he had had his little fancies and flirtations, like most young men of his age, but this was the first time that his heart had been really touched.

Love's glamour was upon him, and he could not rest or sleep for thinking of shy, winsome Dainty, whose charms had wiled the heart from his breast, so that it was with difficulty he had refrained from declaring his love and begging for her heart in return.

He mused, tenderly:

"How it would have startled her—shy little dove—if I had followed my impulse to tell her of my love during that blissful drive over from the station! But I must be patient, and woo her fondly a little while ere I dare to speak." [27]

How vexed he was at his step-mother's selfishness in keeping Dainty by her side the whole evening, and leaving him to be entertained by the other two girls, whom he secretly despised for their meanness to Dainty.

It made him smile sarcastically to remember how palpably each girl had angled for his heart, giving him the sweetest smiles and most honeyed words, while expressing their chagrin at missing his company on their journey.

"If they could have guessed how glad I was of their absence, they would not have seemed so complaisant," he thought, recalling the happy day he had spent with Dainty; while he resolved to make sure of more like it by inviting some other fellows to Ellsworth, so that Olive and Ela might be provided with escorts, and not keep him from Dainty's side.

Before long, say a week at furthest, he would tell Dainty of his love, and ask her to be his wife. No use putting off his happiness, he thought; and if he could win the little darling, the wedding should follow soon—as soon as he could persuade her to name the day.

So, lost in these happy reveries, he sat at the open window till midnight, when he suddenly rose, stretched his full length, and exclaimed:

"Heigh-ho! I must not dream here all night, for—ah, *what* was that?"

For down the length of the broad corridor a piercing shriek was wafted to his ears, followed by the patter of flying feet, and a body was hurled violently against the door, while an anguished voice cried, entreatingly:

"For God's sake, let me in!"

He sprang to the door, tore it open, and the fainting form of Dainty fell forward into his arms. [28]

"Good heavens!" he cried, in wonder and alarm; and at the same moment he heard the opening of doors and the sound of excited voices outside, as Mrs. Ellsworth, Olive, and Ela, in dressing-gowns, appeared on the scene, wearing faces of lively consternation.

"What is the meaning of these shrieks and this strange scene, Love?" demanded his step-mother, harshly—and suspiciously, it seemed to him.

Still holding Dainty's unconscious form most tenderly in his arms, he replied, haughtily:

"I know no more than you do, madame. I heard a frightened shriek in the corridor, then flying footsteps, and just as I flew to the door, and wrenched it open, Miss Chase fell fainting into my arms."

"Very romantic!" cried Olive, with an irrepressible sneer.

"Very!" echoed Ela, mockingly.

The young man flashed them an indignant glance, and added:

"The young lady must have been frightened badly, to judge by her condition; and I hope no one has been playing any silly pranks to make her unhappy."

The remark was so pointed that both girls colored angrily; and Mrs. Ellsworth cried, testily:

"Who would want to frighten her, I'd like to know? You're talking nonsense, Love Ellsworth; so please carry her to her room as quickly as possible, so that we can bring her out of that faint, and find out what was the matter."

Love obeyed in silence, holding the drooping form close to his heart, and longing to kiss the roses back to the pale lips and cheeks, but not daring to venture on such a boldness under the fire of the coldly disapproving eyes that watched him till he dropped the dear form on the soft bed, and withdrew, saying: [29]

"I will send for a doctor, if you think it necessary."

"Oh, no, not at all," Mrs. Ellsworth answered, shortly; and he seated himself on a chair in the corridor, waiting impatiently for news of Dainty's recovery.

But it was a long time—almost an hour—before the door opened again, and Mrs. Ellsworth came out with Olive, saying:

"She gave us quite a turn, she was so long coming out of her swoon; but she is getting on all right now, and Ela will remain with her the rest of the night."

"But what was it that frightened her so?" he demanded, eagerly.

"Oh, it is too long a story for to-night. She can tell you herself to-morrow," replied Mrs. Ellsworth, vanishing into her own room, while Olive Peyton quickly followed her example.

There was nothing left him but to return to his own room and retire, and wait till morning for relief from his anxiety.

Sleep came after an hour's weary tossing, and in dreams of Dainty the brief night passed, and brought the beautiful summer morning with song of birds and perfume of flowers.

Making a hasty toilet, he left his room, and went into the grounds, where he gathered a large bunch of deep-red roses, and sent them to Dainty's room by a maid.

At breakfast she wore them at the waist of her simple white gown, and they contrasted with the pallor that lingered on her cheeks from last night's experience.

"I hope you are well this morning?" he said to her, anxiously; and she smiled pensively, as she answered: [30]

"I am better, thank you. The sunlight has chased away all the terrors of the night, and I am wondering if indeed I could have dreamed that horrible thing, as Aunt Judith declares."

"So, then, you were frightened by something!" he exclaimed, tenderly. "Would you mind telling me all about it?"

"Perhaps you will think me very silly," she replied, dubiously, lifting her large eyes with a wistful look that thrilled his heart.

"No, indeed. Let me hear it," he cried; while the others waited in malicious joy, knowing how angry it always made him to hear any reference to the family ghost.

Dainty drew a long, quivering sigh, and began:

"There isn't much to tell, after all; only that while I was dressing for dinner, I heard in the next room the sound of a terrible hacking cough, several times repeated, as of some one in the last stages of consumption. When the maid came in I inquired about it, and she crossed herself piously, looking behind her as if in fear, while she muttered to herself about 'the old monk.' When I pressed her for an explanation, she denied that there was any sick person in the next room, or even in the house."

She paused timidly, wondering why his brow had grown gloomy as a thunder-cloud; but he said, with a kind of impatient courtesy:

"Well, go on."

Dainty's hands began to tremble as they toyed with the richly chased silver knife and fork; but she continued, falteringly:

"Afterward, when I was going back to my room, I told Ela what I had heard; and she laughed, and said that the family ghost of Ellsworth was a wicked old monk who had died of consumption." [31]

"Ah!" he cried, with a keen look at Ela; but she was too much absorbed in her dainty broiled chicken to meet his glance.

Then Dainty resumed:

"I retired to my room, but I was nervous and restless, having never slept away from my mother before. I threw on a dressing-gown, and sat down beside the window to watch the moonlit scenery, and to muse on—mamma, wondering if she missed her child, and felt as lonely and depressed as I did. So I fell asleep in my chair, and was awakened suddenly by the touch of an icy hand, and a rasping cough in my ear. I started up. Oh, heavens! I was not alone! Beside me stood the figure of an old monk with a ghastly white face and glassy dead eyes!"

Her face went dead white, even to the lips, at the remembrance, and her voice sank almost to a whisper as she added:

"I shrieked aloud in my fear, and fled wildly from the room, meaning to seek refuge with Olive and Ela in their rooms; but—they tell me I made a mistake—and—and—disturbed you. I am very sorry. I hope you will forgive me."

But his face was stern and cold, and his voice had a strained tone as he answered:

"There was no disturbance. Pray don't mention it. I am only sorry that some one has played a mischievous prank on you—a servant, doubtless. Madame," sternly, looking at his step-mother. "I insist that you shall investigate the matter, and discharge the offender."

He looked back, still gloomily, at Dainty, saying:

"Since you are so nervous over the parting from your mother, let one of the maids sleep in your room at night; but pray do not give credence to any silly stories that are told you by any one regarding the mythical old monk. Ellsworth has never possessed a family ghost, and I am not superstitious enough to believe in the existence of spirits at all. So set your fears at rest. You doubtless dreamed it all, as your aunt declares." [32]

"Of course she did," averred Mrs. Ellsworth, smoothly. And then the conversation turned to other things, while Dainty's heart sank like a stone in her breast, for she felt a subtle premonition that Love Ellsworth was displeased with her, and considered her weak and silly, else why those cold, disapproving looks, so different from yesterday's ardent glances, that told her throbbing heart so plainly that she was tenderly and passionately beloved!

CHAPTER VI. LOVE'S ROSY DAWN.

It's an era strange, yet sweet,
Which every woman's heart has known,
When first her young heart learns to beat
To the soft music of a tone—
That era when she first begins
To know, what love alone can teach,
That there are hidden depths within,
Which friendship never yet could reach.
—*Phebe Carey.*

"Now," said Mrs. Ellsworth, while rising from the breakfast-table, "I have invited some young people to come and spend the day and play golf; so prepare yourselves for conquest, young

ladies, as there will be several eligibles among them."

They wandered out into the beautiful grounds, and the beauty of the day and the scene made Dainty's sad heart brighter, until Ela, who had pertinaciously clung to her ever since they came out, observed, maliciously:

"You have offended Love Ellsworth beyond forgiveness by your story just now. Did you not know that he becomes violently angry at the merest mention of the family ghost, and has discharged several servants for gossiping over it?"

Dainty's heart sank heavily, for she recalled Love's lowering looks while she told the story he had insisted on hearing, and she could not doubt that Ela's words were true. [34]

She said, faintly:

"How should I know it, Ela? You did not tell me last night."

"Did I not? Well, I meant to do so; but I must have forgotten it, and the mischief is done now. Love Ellsworth will never forgive you!" repeated Ela, with a malicious little chuckle.

Dainty's red mouth quivered with pain for a moment; then pride came to her aid, and cresting her golden head haughtily, she cried:

"Why should I care? Love Ellsworth is nothing to me!"

"I'm glad to hear it, for I thought, from the way you rolled your eyes at him last night and this morning, that you had lost your heart to him already, and I thought it a pity to show your heart to a man so plainly," gibed her tormentor, viciously.

"You were mistaken, Ela. I never thought of loving him, and I hope he did not think so," cried the proud child, fearfully.

"There's no telling what he thought. Men are very, very vain, and believe that every girl who gives them a glance is in love with them. I suppose Love Ellsworth is like the rest; and, rich as he is, I have no doubt he is a terrible flirt. But there comes a carriage load of young people, and perhaps you and I may catch a beau, too, Dainty; for Olive seems to have captured Love," glancing toward her cousin, who was indeed holding the young man in unwilling chains, while she lamented that her cousin Dainty was the most arrant little coward in the world, and always going into hysterics over some trifle, so that she and Ela had been very sorry she was invited to Ellsworth, feeling sure that her vagaries would cause dear Aunt Judith no end of trouble. [35]

But in a minute he had to leave her side to welcome the newcomers—three young men and one girl—which paired the party into four couples; and after introductions all around, Dainty found that Love Ellsworth had fallen to her lot; whether by chance or his own design, she could not tell.

They went down to the golf ground, and played for an hour; but Ellsworth found his fair companion very shy and *distract* all the while; and when at last they all sat down beneath the trees to rest, he asked, anxiously:

"Are you offended with me, that you seem so cold and quiet?"

The wistful blue eyes turned gravely on his face.

"I thought you were offended with me, because of last night; you looked so angry while I was telling you of my scare," she answered, timidly.

"Angry with you, child? How could any one have the heart?" he cried. "I was angry, I own, but it was because I believed that some of the servants had played a cruel joke on you. But I have ordered a strict investigation, and if the plot is discovered, the guilty parties shall certainly suffer."

"Oh, if I could think it only a joke; but it seemed so terribly real!" she breathed, tremblingly; and he longed to catch her in his arms and kiss away her fears.

But the proprieties forbid this soothing process; so he hastened to assure her that it could not possibly be real, only a trick of some malicious person, who would certainly be discovered and punished.

"And now, Dainty," he said—"may I call you Dainty?" he added, tenderly; for she had looked up with a start. [36]

She faltered, "Yes," and he proceeded in a low voice thrilling with passion:

"Dainty, you told me your story of last night, now I will tell you mine. When I opened my door at your frenzied knock, and you fell fainting into my arms, I longed to hold you there forever; for, darling, I lost my heart to you even before I saw your bonny face, as soon as I heard your sweet voice sobbing to your mother, inside the window, of the cruel treatment of your jealous cousins. When I came into the parlor, and saw you with the tears in your lovely eyes, I thought you fairer than any flower, and longed to kiss your tears away. All the way to Ellsworth I was longing to tell you that I loved you so I could not live without you, and that you must promise to be my cherished bride. Can you believe in a love so sudden and sweet and overwhelming as this I am confessing to you?"

"Yes, oh, yes!" the girl murmured, forgetting Ela's caution, that he must very likely be a dreadful flirt, and carried away by the fervor of his passion, and the responsiveness of her own heart.

Oh, what a beautiful light of joy leaped to his eyes at her encouraging reply!

"Bless you, my darling, bless you! Then our hearts have leaped to meet each other. You will promise to be mine?" he cried, eagerly, his glad eyes beaming on her face, the only demonstration of love possible under the circumstances, for they were in plain view of all the other couples.

She trembled with exquisite delight, sweet Dainty, and could not reply for a moment.

"Answer, darling," he pleaded. "Will you be mine? If you are too shy to speak, look at me with those tender blue eyes, and I will read my fate." [37]

Slowly, bashfully, the long fringe of her lashes fluttered upward, and the glorious blue met the passionate dark ones in a long, lingering look that needed no words to tell of the love that thrilled either heart with deathless emotion; and he was content. He had won the prize.

[38]

CHAPTER VII. "THE TRAIL OF THE SERPENT."

"Your roses are fading in the hot sunshine, dear. Let us get some fresh ones," said Love to Dainty, anxious to draw her out of sight of the others, that he might seal their betrothal with a lover's kiss.

They moved away toward the rose-garden, followed by the angry, envious glances of Olive and Ela, who hated Dainty with jealous hate, now that they saw how little all their arts had availed to change her lover.

But Love and Dainty had forgotten their existence. They were in Arcady.

—"Love must kiss that mortal's eyes
Who hopes to see fair Arcady,
No gold can buy your entrance there,
But beggared Love may go all bare—
No wisdom won with weariness;
But Love goes in with Folly's dress—
No fame that wit could ever win,
But only Love may lead Love in;
To Arcady, to Arcady."

All around them the flowers bloomed in lavish profusion; the tender-eyed pansies, the golden-hearted lilies, the fragrant roses, shaking out perfume on the warm summer air, while the bees and the butterflies hurried from flower to flower, and overhead the blue sky of June smiled on the happy lovers—so happy, dreaming not of the darkened future.

Where some luxuriant shrubbery formed a convenient screen, Love drew Dainty aside, crying, [39]
ardently:

"I am dying to kiss you, my own little darling! May I?"

Without waiting for consent, he clasped her in his arms, and kissed her lips again and again, with the ardor of the honey-bee rifling the flowers of their sweets, till she struggled bashfully from him, crying:

"But the roses!"

"Come, then, we will get them;" and they sauntered on along the graveled path in a sort of silent ecstasy, until suddenly Dainty recoiled with a horrified cry:

"Oh, see that hideous viper!"

Love looked down and saw a large viper crawling across their path, its hideous head upraised in defiance, hissing venomously at their advance.

"See how angry it is! What a wicked glare in its eyes! See how its red forked tongue darts at us in rage! Oh, is it not an evil omen to our love?" half sobbed Dainty, drawing back and regarding the serpent with fearful interest mixed with unwilling fascination.

"Stand aside, darling, and I will make short work of the evil omen!" Love answered, gayly, as with two sharp blows of the racquet he carried in his hand he destroyed the ominous intruder on their peace, and kicked it aside, saying, soothingly: "Take that as an omen, darling, that I will always thrust aside whatever interferes between us and happiness."

"Oh, you are so strong, so brave! I am not afraid of anything while you are with me!" Dainty

cried, clinging to the arm of her bold, handsome lover, who smiled on her so lovingly as he gathered the beautiful roses to replace those he had sent her that morning, and that were now withering at her waist. [40]

He took some of the fading flowers, kissed them, and placed them very carefully in his pocket-book, saying:

"I will always keep them in memory of the happiest day of my life!"

Dainty's heart thrilled with joy at the words; then she shuddered at the thought of how angry Olive and Ela would be because he loved her so well.

"Perhaps they will hate me, although I have not done them any wrong. I did not make him love me. It was God put it into his heart. But I can guess how they will sneer and say I was bold and forward, trying to get a rich husband. I wish he were poor—almost as poor as I am—so that I could tell them I love him for himself alone, which is true, though they will pretend never to believe it, in their jealous spite," ran her perturbed thoughts; for she could not get Olive and Ela quite out of her mind.

The dread of their spite and anger trailed its venom through her happiness as the hideous viper had trailed across the sunny path, making her cry out that it was evil-omened. Alas! that spite and jealousy were destined to work her as deadly ill as the serpent's fangs.

It was this subtle dread tugging at Dainty's heart-strings that made her murmur wistfully, as they retraced their steps:

"Let us keep our secret awhile yet, lest Olive and Ela should say I was too easily won."

"What do you care for their opinion!" cried her lover, disdainfully.

"Oh, but you do not know how cruel they would be, what cutting things they would say to me!" she cried.

And he laughed. [41]

"Dainty, I believe you are an arrant coward, after all, as your cousin Olive told me this morning."

"Did she say so?"—angrily, the blue eyes flashing.

"Yes; she said you were the most cowardly girl on earth—afraid of your own shadow—and always in hysterics over something, so that she and Ela were sorry you came, dreading that you would annoy your aunt."

"Oh, it is false!" she cried, indignantly. "She only said it to turn your heart against me. And I—I will show her after this whether I am a coward or not!"

"That is right, my little sweetheart. I adore bravery in women, and I want you to prove Olive's story false," he cried, encouragingly; adding: "Of course, if you wish to keep our engagement secret awhile, I will consent to it; but it seems rather cruel to two of our visitors, who are already palpably jealous of me. But I warn you, Dainty, not to flirt with them, for I am the most jealous of men."

"You need not be afraid of me. I can think of no one but you, dear Love!" she whispered, with the loveliest blush in the world.

They rejoined their companions, and Love forced himself to obey the demands of conventionality by showing some attention to the other guests; but his heart was not in his courtesies. He could think only of the bonny sweetheart he had won by such headlong wooing.

"And it is only yesterday that I saw her first, my darling!" he mused, tenderly. "It was love at first sight with us both, it seems, and I take that for a sure sign that Heaven intended us for each other."

[42]

CHAPTER VIII. THE ELLSWORTH HONOR.

"Of all that life can teach us,
There's naught so true as this:
The winds of Fate blow ever,
But ever blow amiss."

Since the world began there was never a truer, sweeter love, nor one that promised more fairly, but, alas! none over which threatening clouds of Fate ever hung more darkly.

Two weeks passed away, and the lovers kept the secret of their engagement with difficulty, for Love was passionately anxious to show his happiness to the whole world.

But Dainty's shrinking from her cousins' comments made her hold her lover to the compact of silence, hoping by delay to win from them more kindly thoughts.

And yet every one could see the handsome young pair were in love with each other.

They could no more hide their mutual tenderness than they could help breathing. Their glances turned so often to each other, their smiles were so tender, their voices had so soft a cadence when they called each other's names, that every one could guess the passion of their hearts.

Ellsworth and the surrounding neighborhood had been very gay the past few weeks.

Dances and picnics, moonlight rides and tea parties, all varied the programme, and contributed [43] to the pleasure of Mrs. Ellsworth's beautiful nieces.

Dainty, even in her simple gowns and hats, was the beauty of every gathering, and might have been the belle of everything had she so chosen; but she was shy and cold with all other men, in her loyalty to her noble lover.

There came a day, toward the second week in July, when Mrs. Ellsworth asked her step-son for a private interview in her boudoir.

"I am obliged to speak to you on a very important subject," she said, anxiously.

He bowed inquiringly.

"Can you not guess the subject to which I refer?" she continued. "Have you forgotten the peculiar provisions of your father's will, by which you will be disinherited in my favor unless you marry on or before your twenty-sixth birthday?"

"I have not forgotten," he replied, calmly.

"Then perhaps you have forgotten that the first day of August will be your birthday?"

"I have not forgotten that, either," he replied, coolly.

The handsome old lady regarded him with some irritation, and snapped out:

"Then perhaps you will condescend to explain the reason for your strange shilly-shallying? Your birthday scarcely three weeks off, and your inheritance dependent on your marriage, yet not even engaged!"

"Dear madame, there is plenty of time yet," he replied, with provoking coolness.

"You expect, then, to be married on your birthday?"

"Certainly, madame. You can not suppose that I am going to remain single, and resign my birthright to you or any one?"—sarcastically.

"I scarcely thought you such a fool," she said, tartly; adding: "But I consider your behavior very strange. You are not yet engaged that I know of, and the bride ought to have more than three weeks to prepare her trousseau." [44]

"That is all nonsense about an elaborate trousseau. She will need only a wedding and traveling-gown, and the other finery can be bought while we are on our wedding-tour in Paris," he returned, airily.

She exclaimed, suspiciously:

"Perhaps you are engaged already to some grand foreign lady, and intend to return to Europe in time to marry her on your birthday?"

"You are mistaken, madame. There is no girl in the world for me but one of our lovely Americans. That is why I came home from my wanderings. I wanted to choose one of my own beautiful country women to be my bride."

"I applaud your taste," she smiled. "I have traveled over the whole world, but I found no women as charming as the Americans; and I am glad you will choose one to reign at Ellsworth. But have you made your choice?"

"Ah, madame! that is hard to do among so many lovely girls," he replied, evasively.

She studied him gravely a moment, then exclaimed, boldly:

"I wish you would make your choice between my nieces, Olive and Ela."

"Dainty is your niece, too, I believe?"—coolly.

"Only my half-niece—the daughter of a half-brother I never loved. I simply asked her here through kindness to give her a good time. But with the other two it was different. I own to you I desired you to fall in love with one, and marry her, while I would make the other my heiress, thus settling them both luxuriously in life." [45]

"Ah! And what did you expect to do for pretty little Dainty?"—curiously.

"Nothing. She would return to Richmond, and become a school-teacher"—irritably.

Love said nothing, only regarded her so gravely, that she snapped:

"Well, what do you say? Can you fall in with my plans?"

"Really, I can't say, you have taken me so much by surprise. Besides, the choice is very limited. Put Dainty in the balance with the other two nieces, and I will promise to choose between the three."

"Love, you are surely not thinking seriously of Dainty Chase for a wife? I assure you that she would not make a fitting mistress for Ellsworth. You admire brave, spirited women, I know, and Dainty is a weak, hysterical little coward, taking dreams for realities. Sheila Kelly assures me that every night since she has been sleeping in her room she has had a hysterical spell, declaring that she has either seen or heard the old monk, although nothing at all supernatural has happened to Sheila, showing that it is nothing but bad dreams and hysterics on Dainty's part. If she goes on in this way long, she will either lose her health or her reason; and I am thinking seriously of sending her home to her mother."

"You will do nothing of the kind. Write at once, and invite her mother to come to Ellsworth," he said, so sternly that she started with anger, exclaiming:

"I will not do it! Instead, I will send away this hateful girl who is trying to thwart all my hopes and plans for Olive and Ela!" [46]

She saw by the pallor of his face and the flash of his eyes that she had gone too far, and her heart sank as he said, haughtily:

"Take care that you do not transcend your authority, madame, in thus threatening to send away the future fair mistress of my home! Yes, I will trifle with you no longer. You shall hear the truth, and govern yourself accordingly. Dainty Chase is my promised bride, and we will be married on the first of August, my happy birthday!"

She could have killed him for the pride and joy that rang in his voice, as he towered above her, proclaiming the truth. An insane rage rose within her, as she hissed:

"It is as I feared and suspected. The sly minx has made a fool of you, and you will be insane enough to marry her; but she does not love you. She only angled for you because you are rich! She had a lover in Richmond, poor like herself, whom she threw over as soon as she found she had a chance to win you. Already he has followed her here, and they have had two secret meetings in the grounds at twilight. Even the servants are gossiping about it."

His eyes blazed, his face grew ashen, and his teeth clinched, as he stormed in bitter wrath:

"It is a hellish falsehood!"

"Do you say so? Then here are the proofs—the notes she lost, that were picked up by a servant, and brought to me. Read them, and be convinced!" she cried, in coarse triumph.

His eyes flashed on her like sheet lightning, as he clinched them in his hand.

"Read them!" she repeated, sharply; and she shrank back in bitter humiliation, as he thundered: [47]

"Do you forget I am an Ellsworth—a descendant of that grand old race whose motto is: 'Honor before everything'?"

"Well?" she cried, cringingly.

"Do you think that an Ellsworth—a born Ellsworth, I mean, not one by the accident of marriage, like you—could stoop to the meanness of invading another person's private correspondence? It is the act of a hound, not a gentleman! No; I will not read these papers; but I will restore them to their owner, and she shall explain or not, as she will, the foul aspersion you have cast upon her honor in declaring she has another lover. I trust in her as I do in Heaven!" and he rushed violently from the room in search of Dainty.

[48]

CHAPTER IX.

"ALL THAT'S BRIGHT MUST FADE."

"I believe my faith in thee
Strong as my life, so nobly placed to be;
I would as soon expect to see the sun
Fall like a dead king from his height sublime,
His glory stricken from the throne of time,
As thee unworth the worship thou hast won."

Love found Dainty sitting in a large double swing out in the grounds, gently swaying to and fro, and with the fragment of a little song on her rosy lips as she waited for him to join her there.

As the beautiful face turned confidingly to his, Love knew that the sudden love-light in her eyes was reflected from her heart, and that he could not possibly have a rival in her affections.

When Dainty saw the pale, agitated face of her lover, she started in alarm, and the sweet song died on her lips as she exclaimed:

"Oh, Love, what is the matter? Are you ill, that you look so frightfully pale?"

Love took the swinging seat opposite her, and with an effort at calmness, answered:

"Do not be frightened, darling. I am not ill. Only very, very angry."

"With me?" she faltered, in dismay.

"Certainly not, dear little one!" he cried, tenderly; continuing with sudden vehemence: "I am [49] angry with the schemers who are trying to part us from each other, darling."

"You mean Olive and Ela," she cried, quickly, the rose-bloom fading from her dimpled cheeks and her sweet mouth trembling as she sighed: "Oh, I knew that we were too happy for it to last and that something would happen! There was a shadow on my heart. That was why I was singing, as you came up:

"All that's bright must fade,
The brightest, still the fleetest,
All that's sweet was made
To be lost when sweetest;
Flowers that bloom and fall,
Buds that blight in springing,
These, alas! are types of all
To which our hearts are clinging."

"What a little pessimist you are, Dainty! Always turning your face to the darker side of life!" cried her lover, somewhat impatiently; adding: "Nothing shall happen to part us, my own little love; though if your aunt and cousins had their way, we would never see each other's face again. Listen, Dainty. They have told me falsehoods about you—that you had left a lover in Richmond; that he has followed you here, and has been sending you notes to meet him in the grounds."

"Shameful!" she cried, indignantly. "How could they be so wicked!"

"And," continued her lover, crumpling the letters into a ball and throwing them into her lap, "they gave me these notes to read, saying you had dropped them, and a servant had brought them to your aunt."

Dainty smoothed out the sheets and glanced at them calmly. [50]

"Oh!" she cried comprehensively. "And did you read them, dear?"

"Certainly not! I could not stoop so low. Besides, I had perfect confidence in you, my dearest," he cried tenderly.

"Oh, Love, how noble you are to me! But your trust is not misplaced. I can explain all about these notes; so please read them now," said the young girl, earnestly, smoothing them out and holding them open before his eyes.

He read, with much amazement, the following notes in a neat, masculine chirography:

"DEAR LITTLE DAINTY,—Will you meet me down at the gate about sunset? I have something very particular to say to you. I know your good heart will make you grant me this small favor. Do not fail me.

"Yours, wretchedly,
VERNON."

"MY CRUEL DARLING,—Is it possible you can refuse my earnest prayer for one short interview? Oh, how you have changed since you left Richmond! Yet such a little while ago you swore you loved me as dearly as I loved you, and promised to marry me in December. I see how it is—that rich Ellsworth is winning you away from me. Oh, my love, I can not bear to lose you! Life would be worthless, even unbearable, if you forsook me now! Oh, let me see you once, just once, and you can not resist my pleadings! I curse the hour that your rich aunt tempted you from love and duty! Oh, return to your better self—come to me, dear! I will be waiting at the gate just at twilight. When you see me, you will repent that cold letter breaking our engagement. Come, oh, come, my love; my heart is breaking for you! [51]

"Despairingly,
VERNON."

Love finished the reading, and looked up in amazement at Dainty's calm face.

She gave him a sweet, reassuring smile as she said:

"The case certainly looks dark against me, does it not, Love?"

"Yes," he replied, somewhat uneasily, in spite of his faith.

"And yet I can explain it all," she returned, happily; adding: "This Vernon Ashley was Ela Craye's lover. They were engaged; but Vernon is only a poor man, a stenographer in a bank, and when Aunt Judith invited her here, she heartlessly threw him over, hoping to catch a richer husband. He followed her to Ellsworth, and sent the first little note to me, begging me to ask Ela to grant him an interview. I asked her, but she refused in scorn; and when I carried him her refusal, he sent her this note of love and reproach. He also told me he would stay in the neighborhood several days, hoping she would relent. That is the true story, and if you wish to verify it, Love, you can easily find Mr. Ashley at Caldwell Station, and he will settle all your doubts."

"I have never had a doubt of you, my darling," he answered, bending forward to kiss her tenderly, as he continued: "But what shameful duplicity to deceive my step-mother with this false story, for I am sure she believed every word she was telling me! But never mind; I will get even with Miss Craye, be sure of that, Dainty. And now I have to tell you of another story. It is said that you have hysterical spells every night, declaring that you are haunted by the mythical old monk, with the consumption. Is this true?"

[52]

Instantly the fair, rosy face became pale and downcast, and Dainty shuddered as if an icy blast had swept over her lissom form.

"Oh, who has told you this?" she cried, regretfully.

"The story was told Mrs. Ellsworth by Sheila Kelly. Is it true?" he demanded, earnestly; and the girl bowed her golden head sorrowfully, faltering:

"Oh, do not be angry with me, Love, but it is true!"

"True? Then why have you kept it from me?" he cried.

"Oh, Love, they told me you always grew angry when you heard anything about the Ellsworth ghost. They warned me that you would never forgive the mention of it. But I can not tell you an untruth. Since you ask me, I must own everything, and take the bitter consequences."

She bowed her fair face in her little white hands, and her form shook as with ague, in spite of the heat of the July weather.

"Since I came to Ellsworth," she cried, "there has never been a night but I have been tortured by the sight or sound of that old sick man. In the dead of night I have felt his cold, clammy hand on my brow, and wakened, sobbing with fright, sometimes to see his dark form fading from sight, and the echo of his hollow cough ringing in my horrified ears. Yet that Sheila Kelly, on her cot across the room, slept heavily on and heard nothing. What secret agonies I have nightly endured only the angels can ever know, Love; but I bore it all rather than incur the risk of your anger and contempt. They had told you I was a coward, and I was trying to be brave, and not to tell you—to tell you—"

[53]

Her voice broke in a storm of choking sobs, and her lover caught her to his breast in a passion of sympathy.

"My own brave darling! How much you have endured, like a patient little martyr, without complaint! Yet I feel sure it is nothing but your too vivid imagination. You have heard the silly stories from the servants, and you dreamed the rest while stolid Sheila Kelly slept on unconscious. But this must not go on. I shall write to your mother to come to Ellsworth to stay with you until our wedding; and then, please God, you will forget, in the shelter of my love, all these nervous fancies."

"Our wedding!" she sobbed, bashfully, against his breast.

"Yes, darling, our wedding; for it must be very soon. I have never told you yet, love, that by the terms of my father's will I must marry on or before my twenty-sixth birthday, or forfeit my fortune to my step-mother."

"What a strange will!" she cried, forgetting her terrors in simple wonderment.

"Yes; my father had some peculiar notions. One of them was a rooted belief in the necessity, or expediency, of early marriages; and to insure my obedience to his wish, he framed his will in the fashion he did. But he was a good man, and I am not quarreling with his plans; for I would gladly get married to-day if you were willing, my precious girl," declared Love, kissing her as a fitting period to his sentence.

Dainty made no answer. She was fluttering with girlish timidity at thought of the early marriage he was threatening. She said to herself:

"I love him dearly, but I am afraid I shall not like to be married soon. I have not enough dignity to look like a married lady."

[54]

Unconscious of her girlish fears, Love continued, fondly:

"The first day of August is my twenty-sixth birthday, and we must be married on that day, my darling."

"Oh, I—" she began; but he stopped the objection with a kiss.

"You are going to say you can not get ready so soon; but you need not make many preparations, love. I want you to wear my mother's wedding-dress; it is so beautiful—a white brocade, veiled in costly lace. And we will be married at Ellsworth. That will be better than going back to the hot city for a wedding—do you not think so? Oh, I intend to have everything my own way, sweet; and so I shall write to your mother to-day to come at once to Ellsworth."

"But Aunt Judith—and the girls? They will be fearfully angry," she whispered, tearfully.

"Yes, they will be very angry, I grant you. But Ellsworth belongs to me, so they will have to behave or leave; and I fancy they will choose the former part. Now come with me to your aunt and cousins, and see how cleverly I shall pay them out for their meanness. Don't tremble so, my timid little love."

And taking her hand, he led her back to the house, to a long, vine-wreathed veranda, where the three ladies were sitting together.

Mrs. Ellsworth had just told them of Love's betrothal to Dainty, and they frowned when the happy lovers came among them hand in hand.

Love placed Dainty in a chair, then turned to his step-mother.

[55]

"Madame, Dainty has explained to my satisfaction the story you told me just now. One of these notes was written to her, the second one to Miss Craye, who will not deny that Vernon Ashley is her lover, and that Dainty only acted the part of a friend in trying to reconcile the estranged lovers."

If a bomb had exploded at her feet, Ela could not have been more startled than at his bold charge.

She started, and paled to an ashen hue, flashing a malevolent look at Dainty, and cried threateningly:

"How dared you tell?"

"It was true," the young girl answered, dauntlessly.

"I deny it!" muttered Ela; but every one could read her guilt in her abashed face.

"How dare you tell such falsehoods on Ela?" stormed Mrs. Ellsworth to Dainty; but her step-son frowned angrily.

"Madame, I will not permit such disrespect to my betrothed. This is my roof, and every one beneath it shall respect her position. Let me add that Vernon Ashley is staying at the station still, hoping that Miss Craye will relent, and recall him to her side. If you need corroboration of the truth, send for him here, and he will tell you how heartlessly Miss Craye threw him over before she left Richmond," the young man answered, indignantly; and Ela, unable to bear the fire of their glances, rose, and hurried away to her room, while the others remained silent, nursing bitter hatred to fever-heat in their hearts, the proud Mrs. Ellsworth blaming Dainty most unjustly for her deserved discomfiture, and registering a secret vow of deadly vengeance.

[56]

CHAPTER X. "THE GRIM FATES."

"I know a maiden fair to see,
Take care!
She can both false and friendly be,
Beware! Beware!
Trust her not,
She is fooling thee!

"And she has hair of a golden hue,
Take care!
And what she says is not true,
Beware! Beware!
Trust her not,
She is fooling thee!

"She gives thee a garland woven fair,
Take care!
It is a fool's cap for thee to wear,
Beware! Beware!
Trust her not,
She is fooling thee!"

Love Ellsworth had won, as it appeared, a signal victory, and he hoped that by his determined will he had vanquished the opposition, so that Dainty would not have to suffer any further persecution.

Indeed, at luncheon, beyond a very slight coolness, the clouds of the morning seemed to have cleared away. Mrs. Ellsworth led the conversation to pleasant generalities, and presently proposed that the whole party should attend a charity entertainment to be given that evening at a country church in the neighborhood. [57]

"Besides the usual supper of berries, cake, and ice cream, there will be some fine tableaux, I am told, and also a tent with a real gypsy fortune-teller, they say. I suppose we ought to patronize it for charity's sake, and because the girls might find it rather amusing!"

"Oh, I would not miss it for anything! I should love dearly to have my fortune told!" cried Olive, with unwonted animation.

"And the fortune-teller is a real gypsy, too; so I heard the preacher's wife say," chimed in Ela; adding: "There's been a gypsy encampment on the banks of the river for more than a week."

The vote was taken, and all decided to go, as it was only two miles away.

At twilight they set forth in the roomy Ellsworth carriage that easily accommodated the five, and on reaching the scene, found it very picturesque, the fine grove around the low white church being illuminated by Chinese lanterns, shedding their light on the decorated tables, where ice cream and accompaniments were served by the ladies of the church to quite a large throng of people.

"How romantic it looks under those dark trees with the flickering lights and leaf-shadows! Just the spot for lovers!" cried Olive, smiling at Love and Dainty in quite a conciliatory manner, adding, lightly: "Do not ask me, Aunt Judith, to do anything so prosaic as to eat cream yet. I shall stroll away by myself under these magnificent trees."

She kept her word, and turned up quite half an hour later, when the other four were eating cream at a table, laughing, and saying:

"I have had such a long stroll, I am hungry now; and, oh! what fun I have had with the old gypsy! She told my fortune for a dollar, and if it comes true, it will be worth more than that to me, for she promised me a rich and adoring husband, beautiful children, and a long and happy life!" [58]

She was more than usually animated, her dark eyes glowing with excitement, and Ela caught the infection, exclaiming:

"Hurry and eat your cream, and take me to the tent, Olive. I want to hear my fortune, too."

Love and Dainty, listening to her careless words, thought that if the gypsy told her truly, she would hear an unwelcome story of a heartless girl who had thrown over a true lover for the sake of captivating a richer one; but they held their peace, and presently the two girls went off together, and the minister and his wife engaged Mrs. Ellsworth in conversation, leaving the pair of lovers free to mingle with the gay crowd of young and old strolling beneath the trees. They spoke little to the casual acquaintances they met, preferring to enjoy each other's society.

It was an ideal July night, warm and odorous with the sweet breath of nature, and the moon shone so bright that the fantastic lanterns were scarcely necessary, save to add to the festivity of the scene.

Love thought Dainty looked more lovely than he had ever seen her to-night, in her soft white gown with a bunch of dewy white lilies at her waist and a wreath of them around her white chip hat, making up such a simple, lovely costume that Olive and Ela had been wild with envy, despite their own shimmering silks, and gay hats loaded with artificial flowers.

When Dainty had come to Ellsworth they had laughed at her simple gowns, and more especially her last summer's hat—a fine white chip, simply trimmed with a bow of white ribbon. [59]

"She can not help looking shabby in that old hat, and her beauty will not count for much. Fine feathers make fine birds," quoted Olive, complacently.

She forgot Dainty's exquisite taste, and that the gardens of Ellsworth were blushing with the rarest flowers, by whose aid the young girl each day transformed the old hat into a thing of beauty.

With the aid of a few long pins, Dainty would, with a few deft touches, adorn the old white chip, now with a garland of roses, now with lilies or geraniums, now with a trailing vine of starry-white jasmine, and even one day, when she wore a very simple blue gingham, chose heavenly blue larkspurs, under whose blue mist her sweet eyes looked more deeply violet than ever, and her skin just like the satiny leaf of a rose.

Olive and Ela pretended to ridicule this unique millinery; but the fact remained that Dainty appeared in a new hat each day, or several times a day, if the sun shone too warm and wilted the flowers too quickly; and her cousins were fain to secretly own to each other that no millinery conception could equal in grace and beauty these clever "makeshifts" of tasteful Dainty.

To-night the white chip was festooned in tulle, and the dewy lilies pinned on just before starting,

to keep them fresh and crisp.

"Where did you get all that tulle?" cried Olive, staring enviously.

"It's old-fashioned!" added Ela, spitefully; but Dainty laughed, good-naturedly:

"I dare say it is, for it came off an old ball-gown of mamma's that I found when I was rummaging her old boxes. She said I might have it; so I tear off bunches of the tulle whenever I want a fresh setting for my flowers. Of course, I know, Ela, that chiffon is more fashionable now, but I can not afford it." [60]

So, in her soft white muslin gown and garnitures of lilies, with the dew still glistening on their green leaves and golden hearts, Dainty made a picture of pure and lovely maidenhood that thrilled her lover's heart with admiration, and every feminine heart with envy.

Arm in arm they wandered about the grove, absorbed in each other, until suddenly they found themselves close to the gypsy tent, and saw a bevy of fair maidens close by, laughing and exchanging confidences over the queer things the fortune-teller had told them.

"She promised me a rich husband, with blue eyes and a perfect love of a blonde mustache!" cried one, exultantly.

"And me a drunken one that would beat me every day, and break up all the furniture in his tantrums. I told her I wouldn't accept such a fortune, and wanted my dollar back, but she wouldn't give it," added another, lugubriously.

"Well, mine was quite as bad. She said I would have a lazy husband and nine children, and have to take in washing to support them," cried still another, bringing the laugh on herself, until Love Ellsworth said, gayly:

"Really, Dainty, we must go in and see what the seeress will grant to us from the grim fates."

"But you can not go together—only one person is admitted at a time!" cried the gay maidens.

"Ladies first!" cried Love, gallantly; and after leading Dainty to the door of the tent, he returned to the bevy of fair ones, and stood chatting merrily with them while he waited for his love's return. [61]

She had gone from him gayly, happily, with laughter on her lips and roses on her cheeks; but presently she staggered forth, pale and changed, her face as white as her lilies, and the tears hanging on her lashes like pearls in the moonlight.

"The old gypsy has frightened her with her promise of a drunken and lazy husband!" cried the merry girls.

"Did she promise you a rich and loving husband?" cried Love, hanging eagerly over the pale, trembling girl.

She faltered a despairing negative; and one of the girls exclaimed, curiously:

"Do tell us what she said, Miss Chase! It can not possibly be worse than what she promised us!"

"Yes, tell us all about it, so that we can laugh at it together!" added Love solicitously, seeing how unnerved she was, anxious to turn it all into a joke.

Dainty leaned heavily on her lover, as though scarcely able to stand, and her eyes turned mournfully to his while she faltered, fearfully:

"Oh, I shall never forget how balefully her black eyes burned on me through the holes in her mask, as if she hated me, and what cruel glee rang in her voice as she hissed in my ear: 'You do well to choose lilies for your adorning, for they are funeral flowers, and you will soon be the bride of Death!'"

And with those faltered words, the frightened girl dropped like a broken flower and hung fainting on her lover's arm.

Instantly there was a great commotion, the girls rushing hither and thither for restoratives, so that Dainty soon sighed and opened her blue eyes in pathetic wonder. [62]

"Love," she murmured, weakly; and one of the girls said, pityingly:

"There, dear; don't worry. Mr. Ellsworth has gone into the tent to scold the old fortune-teller for telling you such wicked falsehoods."

"Just as she told all of us," added another. "Why, I never saw such a spiteful old hag in my life, promising me a drunken, abusive husband, when I am engaged to the dearest fellow in the world!"

Dainty suffered them to soothe her by making light of the gypsy's predictions, while she waited uneasily for her lover's return.

Love had indeed rushed away in bitter wrath to upbraid the grewsome fortune-teller; but on entering the tent, whose darkened interior and somber arrangement framed the black-gowned outlines of a tall, masked woman, he recoiled momentarily in something like awe.

"Advance, mortal!" intoned a deep, sepulchral voice: "advance, cross my palm with silver, and hear the sentence of the stars that rule thy destiny!"

Involuntarily Love obeyed, placing the silver on the extended palm, that seemed to tremble as he cried, angrily:

"The silver is for charity, not that I believe any of your ill-timed jargon."

The tall gypsy, whose brow was crowned with silvery tresses, and through whose black mask glittered fierce black eyes, answered, gibingly:

"Whether you believe or not, your fate will be the same. Listen: you are a favorite of fortune, and deeply beloved by two young girls. One is as fair as a summer morn, the other dark and splendid as a moonlit summer night. Your heart inclines to the blonde, but she is false as hell; and if you wed her, you will rue your mistake throughout your life. The stars command you to wed the dark beauty your friends have chosen for you, and you will be blissfully happy."

[63]

Love Ellsworth stared curiously at the speaker, then laughed, mockingly:

"How like an angel's sounds the tongue of woman,
When pleading in another's cause her own!"

"What mean you?" hissed the veiled gypsy, defiantly; and he answered by snatching a ring from her extended hand, as he cried, gibingly:

"I know you, Miss Peyton, by your voice and this ruby ring that you borrowed from your aunt—an heirloom in the Ellsworth family. I shall keep it to prove to Dainty that it was not a real gypsy who tried to frighten her to death, but only her affectionate cousin masquerading in a false guise in order to further her own plans."

And, with a scornful laugh, he left the discomfited plotter and returned to Dainty and the girls, saying, gayly, as he held up the ruby ring:

"How cleverly Miss Peyton has fooled you all, masquerading as the gypsy, and promising all sorts of dreadful things just to witness your terrors. But she could not deceive me. I knew her at once by her voice, and this ruby ring, that I snatched from her hand just to convince you all that it was no gypsy, but simply Miss Olive Peyton, who knows no more about the future than any of us."

[64]

CHAPTER XI. LOVE'S PRESENTIMENTS.

"Oh, friendships falter when misfortunes frown,
The blossoms vanish when the leaves turn brown,
The shells lie stranded when the tide goes down,
But you, dear heart, are ever true.
Let the silver mingle with your curls of gold,
Let the years grow dreary, and the world wax old,
But the love I bear to you will ne'er grow cold,
I love you, darling, only you!"

Olive Peyton would never forget the unpleasant notoriety of that night, when Love Ellsworth had so coolly exposed her identity, though she carried it off with a high hand, by explaining that the gypsy woman had been called away by her husband's illness, and she had taken her place for the fun of the thing, and to keep the church from losing the money it was to have gained by the fortune-telling. Of course, she knew as much of the future as any lying old gypsy woman; so she did not consider that there was any harm done, as she had also earned several dollars for the church. She had given a few of them bad fortunes, just to see if they would really believe such stuff, meaning to tease them over their credulity to-morrow, when she intended to declare her identity as the gypsy.

No one ventured to dissent from Olive's declaration, that no harm had been done by her personation of the gypsy; for no one suspected the real truth, which was, that she had actually bribed the gypsy to give her her place, hoping thus to work on the feelings of Dainty and her lover.

[65]

But baffled and detected in her wicked scheme, she carried it off coolly as a joke, declaring that no harm had been done.

No one took issue with her except an old physician, who was known to have the courage of his own opinion so strongly that he was even ungallant enough to contradict a lady if he believed that she was in the wrong.

So when she asserted that no harm had been done, old Doctor Platt rumped up his bushy-gray

eyebrows severely at her, and snorted:

"I beg leave to differ with you, miss."

Olive turned on the bold doctor with an imperious frown; but he was not in the least abashed.

He continued, testily:

"I give it as my professional opinion, without charge, that the dreadful prediction you made to that timid, nervous girl, Miss Chase, would have preyed so deeply on her sensitive mind as to cause her premature death, had not the cruel joke been discovered in time to allay her fears."

"Nonsense!" Olive answered, sharply, turning her back on him in anger. But she knew in her heart that she had counted on just what the old doctor said, and hoped, indeed, in her cruel jealousy, to frighten poor Dainty into an early grave.

She hated Love Ellsworth for thwarting her plans—hated and loved him, in a breath; for his splendid, manly beauty had made an ineffaceable impression on her heart. All his indifference did not chill the fire of her passion; so that this love made an added incentive to become the mistress of Ellsworth.

Though she knew he had discovered several of her schemes, and feared that he secretly despised her; and even though she knew he was in love with Dainty, and hoped to marry her in three weeks, she did not lose hope of winning him yet herself. She would try plan after plan to come between them, she vowed; and surely she must at last succeed. [66]

So it was no part of her plan to have Love think ill of her; and after the physician had so publicly expressed his opinion, she went up to the lovers, where they stood a little apart, and exclaimed, sweetly:

"Doctor Platt has given me quite a scare over you, Dainty, and I am very glad now that Mr. Ellsworth discovered my identity so soon, though indeed I meant to reveal it myself to-morrow. But still, as you are so weak and nervous, you might have spent a bad night, and I am glad it is spared you. I meant no harm, only to worry you girls awhile; but I am very sorry now, and you must forgive me, will you not, for my practical joke?"

Dainty looked frankly surprised at this condescension, but she had too sweet a nature to hold malice; so she murmured a gentle assent, and Olive remained talking with them a few moments, dilating lightly on the ridiculous fortunes she had given the girls, just to see their consternation and disappointment over it all.

"I am afraid I am very wicked, for I have always been fond of playing practical jokes on people; but after to-night I shall try to restrain that propensity," she sighed; and wondered why Love gave her such a strange, piercing look.

A strange suspicion indeed had flashed over his mind; for her plot of to-night had made him deeply anxious and uneasy.

He did not believe in her pretty penitence. It rang hollow in his ears, and a sudden terror possessed him that Olive, in her angry rivalry, would do Dainty bitter harm if possible. [67]

He looked down at the dear white form by his side, and trembled with the fear of losing her forever—a fear that was almost a premonition, it was so strong.

He thought, in anguish:

"I must watch closely over my darling by day and night, lest these deceitful plotters find some way to part us."

Olive began to feel her presence irksome to the lovers, and hurried away, saying, carelessly:

"I must go and find Ela; I have not seen her for some time."

Ela had gone with her to bribe the gypsy, and since they had parted company at the door of the tent, Olive had not seen her at all. It now began to seem strange to her, and she had decided to look for her cousin.

Ela had walked away from the crowd and the lights, nursing a secret unhappiness, love and ambition waging a desperate war in her heart.

She had loved Vernon Ashley very dearly; but the ambition to make a grand match had caused her to throw him over in the most heartless fashion, ignoring his letters, and refusing him a single interview, though he prayed for it so humbly.

The discovery to-day of Ellsworth's engagement to Dainty discouraged her hopes of marrying him; but still there remained the hope of being made her aunt's heiress, so she steeled her heart and fought down her murdered love in its heaving grave, saying to herself, consolingly:

"It is painful at first, because I really loved him well; but I shall soon get over the worst, and forget." [68]

She was turning toward the crowd and the lights again, when suddenly a dark form emerged from behind the tree, a pair of hands grasped her wrists in a steely grip, and a low, menacing

voice hissed in her ear:

"Cruel, heartless girl, you shall stay and hear me at last!"

[69]

CHAPTER XII. A MADDENED LOVER.

"What is there that I should turn to,
Lighting upon days like these?
Every door is barred with gold,
And opens but to golden keys.
Every gate is thronged with suitors,
All the markets overflow;
I have but an angry fancy,
What is there that I should do?"

Ela trembled with fear when those hands clutched her and those words were hissed in her ear, for she knew she had come to her reckoning with her wronged lover.

And no one knew better than herself the mad, jealous temperament with which she had to deal. Vernon Ashley's love was a frenzy, a tornado, sweeping all before the wild rush of its passion.

He had spent all the force of this passion on the pale-faced, gray-eyed Ela, and she had returned it with all the love of which her weak nature was capable.

If Mrs. Ellsworth's invitation had never come, Ela would have married her lover, and been as tolerably happy with him as it was possible for a woman whose god was self, and who worshiped gold as the most precious thing in life.

The sudden wild ambition to win the rich master of Ellsworth made her sweep aside like chaff every obstacle she found in her way, and on leaving Richmond, a cold and cruel letter went to Vernon Ashley, breaking their engagement, with the lying excuse that she had been mistaken in her feelings, and found she did not love him, after all.

[70]

Mad with love and jealousy, he followed her to Ellsworth, hoping to win her back.

He could not believe that she did not love him, after all that had passed between them in their happy courtship days; but he comprehended that ambition was spurring her on to win a richer lover, since she had never concealed from him her wild yearning for wealth.

Baffled, thwarted, his heart burning for a sight of her too fatally beloved face, he had lingered in the neighborhood, hoping to surprise an interview from her, and in this hope he had come to the church to-night and waited about till success crowned his hopes.

He saw her steal away to brood alone over her secret pain beneath the dark shadows of the trees, and the sight of the pale, fair face and the limpid gray eyes thrilled his heart with the longing to clasp her madly in his arms and kiss her till the old love flowed back into her breast and made her own her falsehood and plead for his forgiveness.

Lingering behind the tree where she sat, he waited and watched till she turned to go, then the hunger of his heart overcame him. He darted forward, clasping her wrists in a steely grasp, hissing angrily in her ear:

"Cruel, heartless girl! You shall stay and hear me at last!"

Ela trembled with fear, and tried to struggle away; for she knew well that he had a most violent temper when aroused, and that her falsity had lashed his nature almost to madness.

"Let me go, or I shall scream!" she whispered, threateningly.

[71]

But he answered, coolly:

"Dare to scream, and when they come to your aid, they will find a dead woman on the ground!"

"Would you murder me?" she shuddered.

"Do you not deserve it, false-hearted girl? Have you not ruthlessly murdered my love and faith, thrown my heart aside like a worn-out glove? Did you think I was a man to be played with in that fashion?"

She realized that she dare not defy him; she must try to work on the softer side of his nature. With her eyes faltering before the wrath of his piercing black eyes, she murmured:

"Oh, forgive me, I entreat you. I did not mean to play with your love, but I was mistaken in my feelings. I realized I did not love you well enough to marry you, so it was better to break the engagement."

"You lie, false-hearted girl! You loved me well, and you love me still. Love can not be so quickly unlearned. It is ambition that tempted you from me—that love of gold that always cursed your weak nature!" he returned, scornfully, stinging her to retort, angrily:

"What then? You can not help yourself! A girl may take back her promise if she will, and there is no law to make her marry when she does not choose!"

He tightened his clasp on her wrists till she sobbed with pain, and bent his dark face, distorted with demoniac rage, close to hers, hissing:

"And with the poor excuse that there is no law against it, you break a human heart and wreck a human life as ruthlessly as you would trample a flower springing in your path. Are you not afraid?"

"Afraid—of what?" she murmured, uneasily; and her fair face, as the moonlight gleamed on it down through the leaves, was ghastly with sudden fear. [72]

"Of—me!" he answered, with a mocking laugh that made her very blood run cold, as he continued: "I am tempted to kill you for your falsity, but not yet!—that is, I will wait till I see how things turn out. Perhaps," mockingly, "you will tell me if you expect to marry Lovelace Ellsworth?"

She faltered:

"No; he is engaged to my cousin."

"Are you speaking the truth?"

"Yes," she sobbed, nervously.

His midnight eyes flashed dangerously as he answered, menacingly:

"I hope that you are, and it will be well for you if you are, for, mind you, Ela Craye, there is, as you say, no law to punish you for what you have done to me, yet I mean to take justice into my own hands. You may never be mine, but I swear no other man shall ever possess you. Remember this that I tell you now: In the hour that you wed another, there will be murder done! Either your life or my rival's shall pay the forfeit for what you have done!"

"How dare you threaten me? Let me go! I—I—"

Ela began to sob hysterically, and then he caught her in his arms, clasping her fiercely, and kissing her in a sort of frenzy.

"One more kiss—for old time's sake! Do you remember how sweet our love used to be, Ela? You shall never forget it! I seal the memory of it on your brow with these last kisses fiery with my heart's passion! Nay, you dare not scream! The crowd would come rushing here, and you would not like to have them find you here in my arms!" [73]

But Ela's fear of him made her frantic, and she began to shriek, though he stifled the sound with his kisses. Then sudden steps crashed through the undergrowth, and a man's tall form loomed up in the moonlight.

"What is that cry? Good heavens! Unhand that lady, you hound!" thundered Love Ellsworth, rushing on the scene, and clutching Ashley with such strength that he released his hold and staggered back from his victim.

Instantly Ela clung wildly to his arm, sobbing fearfully.

"You are safe now; but—good heavens! that wretch is escaping!" exclaimed Ellsworth, regretfully, as, hindered by her hold, he beheld Ashley making off into the woods, from whence the next minute a pistol shot whistled back, grazing Love's temple, and burying itself in the tree beyond.

A startled cry escaped him, and Ela wailed:

"Oh, that wretch! He has wounded you!"

"It is nothing—a mere scratch," he answered, a little nervously, putting his handkerchief to his brow to stanch a few drops of blood, as he added: "But I had a narrow escape certainly. But why did you venture so far from the light, Miss Craye? Your cousin has been searching for you everywhere, and at last sent me to find you. I heard your smothered shriek, and hastened to your assistance, just in time, it seemed. Was the fellow trying to rob you?"

"Yes," she faltered, nervously, glad of the pretext for hiding the truth. "But he did not succeed, thanks to your timely appearance on the scene. I am very sorry I strayed so far away. I was tempted by moonlight, and had not a thought of danger. Oh, believe me, I am very grateful for your aid; I will never forget it." [74]

"Let us go and relieve your cousin's anxiety," Love returned, leading her away from the dark shadows of the trees back to the old church again, where the story of the dreadful highwayman created such a sensation that the gathering was soon broken up, every one departing for home, while many regrets were expressed that Miss Craye could not describe the appearance of her assailant clearly enough to lead to his identification.

CHAPTER XIII. SAD FOREBODINGS.

When Love and Dainty were parting in the hall that night, he detained her a few moments, saying:

"I must start early in the morning for Lewisburg, our county seat. It is twenty miles distant, and I shall not return until night. Do you think you can bear the day without me?" playfully.

"Must you really go?" she sighed.

"Yes; I have some business that must not be postponed. I would take you with me, darling, but it is a long drive over rough mountain roads, and would fatigue you too much. But I hate to leave you for a whole day, Dainty, and I shall be thinking of you all day," whispered the fond lover, longing to take her in his arms and bid her an ardent farewell, but deterred because his step-mother was lingering officiously close by.

They parted with a swift-stolen kiss when her head was turned, and Dainty went reluctantly enough to her room, dreading the almost nightly repeated experience with the grim ghost of Ellsworth.

She had grown to dread with a sickening terror the nights that were stealing some of the rose-bloom from her cheeks and the brightness from her violet eyes; but in her pride lest Love should deem her a coward, she would not yield to the longing to ask him to let her go home to her mother till the wedding day.

"It would be too great a triumph for my cruel rivals to have me go home now, and they would try to turn my lover's heart against me. Besides, now that he has written mamma to come, she will soon be with me, and then I shall not fear anything," she thought, as she entered the room reluctantly, hating the night and the company of the coarse Sheila Kelly, but too unwilling to spend the night alone to dismiss her from the room. [76]

But to her surprise she was confronted by an aged negro woman with a kindly black face that beamed benevolence on the startled girl.

"Hi, honey, yo' look 'sprised ter see me in yo' room. Aine Massa Love tole you dat I gwine tek de place o' dat uppish Irish gal?" she exclaimed, gently.

Dainty smiled and shook her head. The old woman continued:

"Den I must interduce myse'f to yo', honey. My name is Virginny, but yo' kin call me Mammy, kase I been de black mammy o' two ginerations o' Ellsworfs—from Massa Love's pappy down to Massa Love heself—an' maybe I gwine lib to nuss his chillen, too. Hi, what yo' blushin' at? Won't yo' be proud when yo' an' Massa Love git married an' settle down, wif de little ones springing up around yo' like flowers, some wif sassy black eyes like deir pappy, an' some wif blue-vi'let eyes like deir mammy. Oh, I want to lib ter see dat day, an' ter rock dem in my ole arms, an' snuggle deir shiny heads up agin my breast, an' sing to dem like I done sing to deir pappy an' deir grandpappy," folding her arms on her breast and crooning musically:

"Byo, baby boy, bye—
Byo, li'l boy!
Oh, run ter 'is mammy,
En she tek 'im 'er arms—
Mammy's li'l baby boy!

[77]

"Who all de time er frettin' in de middle er de day?
Mammy's li'l boy, mammy's li'l baby boy!
Who all de time er gittin' so sleepy he can't play?
Mammy's li'l boy, mammy's li'l baby boy!

"Byo, baby boy, bye—
Byo, li'l boy!
Oh, run ter 'is mammy,
En climb up en 'er lap—
Mammy's li'l baby boy!

"Who all de time stumpin' 'is toe ergin a rock?
Mammy's li'l boy, mammy's li'l baby boy!
Who all de time er rippin' big hole in 'is frock?
Mammy's li'l boy, mammy's li'l baby boy!

"Byo, baby boy, bye—
Byo, li'l boy!
En 'e run ter 'is mammy

Fer ter git 'im out er trouble—
Mammy's li'l baby boy!"

Dainty had sunk down in the easy-chair at the open window, and the tender tears flashed into her eyes at the sweet domestic picture painted by the loving old black mammy.

How beautiful it had sounded, the picture of the future to her fond young heart; but would it ever come true, or would the malice of her enemies yet come between her and happiness? Sad foreboding filled her mind as she recalled Olive's black looks and cruel words while she played the gypsy fortune-teller.

"She was trying to frighten me to death, and I believe she would have succeeded, had not Love so fortunately discovered her identity," she mused, while mammy crooned on monotonously with her nursery song. Suddenly coming to herself, she cried: [78]

"Dar now, I forgot mys'f, as I often do, and t'ought I was back in de good ole times, nussin' de babies dat's all growed up now, an' some on 'em dead, too! But as I was a-sayin', Miss Dainty, deares', Massa Love he kem down ter my darter's cabin dis arternoon, an' say, 'Well, well, mammy, settin' in de sun an' bakin' yo' ole haid es usual! How it brings up de chilehood days whenever I see yo'! Here's a dollar fer yer, an' some baccy fer yer pipe, an' mammy, I want yer ter do er favor fer yer li'l boy.'

"When Massa Love speak dat coaxin' way he knows I gwine let him tromp on ole black mammy ef he want ter; an' I nods, an' he goes on:

"Mammy, I come to tole yer I gwine git married on my birfday—de first o' August, yo' know. My sweetheart is a-visitin' at Ellsworf, an' she's de prettiest girl in de world! Her cheeks is like roses, an' her hair is bright like sunshine, an' her eyes blue as de dark vi'lets down in de wood. An' she's good as she's pretty; but dem mean servants at Ellsworf dey done tole her ghost stories, an' she's dat nervous she can't sleep at night for vain 'maginings of hearing ole men coughin' an' seein' ole monks paradin' an' layin' cole hands on her face. She must not sleep alone, fer she's never been parted from her mammy before; but she hates dat coarse Sheila Kelly; so, mammy, you must go up ter de house an' watch in my dear girl's room ebery night till her own mammy comes from Richmun', an' yo' must sleep all day an' lie awake all night ter soothe my nervous darlin' ef she gits frightened, an' mammy, you shall hab a silber dollar ever' mornin' fer takin' keer ob my lub.' So you see why I come, honey. Kase he want me, not fer de silber dollar; kase I don' mean ter tek hit at all, only I didn't tell him so, not ter git inter an argyment wif him. So now, honey, lemme he'p yer to baid, an' I'se warrant de ha'nts sha'n't 'sturb you dis night." [79]

"Then you don't believe the stories of the old monk, mammy?" Dainty said, timidly, as she laid her golden head down on the lace pillow.

"Monks, indeed! No, chile, no; deir aine no monks at Ellsworf, an' never was, 'cept when de circus kem ter de kentry, las' summer was a year agone. Dey was two cute li'l monks den, wif white faces like li'l ole men, an' dey was mighty cur'us li'l rascals, an' dat sassy wif deir red suits and yaller caps; but I aine never heerd o' deir gitten loose from de circus, an' I don' b'leeve dey ever did, an' you can 'pend on what I say, fer I been at Ellsworf ever sence I was born, an' dat's a hunnerd years more or less. Now shet yo' eyes, ma honey. I gwine sing yo' to sleep."

And while Dainty dozed away, thinking gratefully of the fond care of her noble lover, the old woman crooned over her in monotonous cadences the lulling nursery song:

"Byo, baby girl, bye—
Byo, li'l girl!
Oh, run ter 'er mammy,
Fer ter git 'er out o' trouble—
Mammy's li'l baby girl!"

Softly the white lids drooped over the tired eyes, and Dainty slept peacefully as a little child.

Then the old black mammy hushed her lullaby song and relapsed into silence, gazing in admiring pride at the lovely sleeping face under its billows of golden hair, perhaps wondering why God made people so different—some as fair and beautiful as angels, others black and homely like herself. [80]

But no discontent or envy marred her humble thoughts. Instead, she murmured a low prayer of blessing for the girl who had prayed for herself, kneeling by the bed, but a little while ago; then put out the light and moved over to the window to keep the vigil her "Massa Love" had commanded over his precious darling.

And as she was accustomed to watching by sickbeds, and had been sleeping all afternoon, she managed to keep awake all night, and Dainty slept dreamlessly till dawn. Apparently the ghost was exorcised.

DAINTY WOULD NEVER FORGET THAT DAY.

Lovelace Ellsworth was delighted when he saw Dainty's bright, happy face next morning, showing that nothing had marred her calm repose.

Black mammy's ebony face shone with delight, too, as she related how peacefully her charge had slumbered, without a single disturbing dream, all night.

"Bress her dear heart! Mammy gwine tek keer ob her ebry night, an' don't want no silber dollar for it, neider, dat she don't!" she exclaimed, pushing away Love's hand, though he afterward surreptitiously dropped the money into her capacious apron pocket.

After breakfast he kissed his darling a tender good-bye and rode away happily, in the July sunshine, on the little business trip of which he had spoken to Dainty the evening before. He returned so late that night that he did not see her until morning, when he received the same encouraging report. Mammy had proved a most faithful guardian, effectually keeping at bay all the unquiet spirits of the night.

Indeed, for quite a week everything went on pleasantly at Ellsworth.

The mistress of the mansion and her two favorite nieces seemed to have swallowed their chagrin and accepted the situation. They were blandly courteous to the lovers, and seemed to have relaxed their endeavors to wound and annoy them; but, could one have looked beneath the surface, a volcano would have been seen to be smoldering beneath the thin upper crust of politeness. [82]

Mrs. Ellsworth, angry and indignant at the thwarting of her cherished schemes, steeled her heart to all the charms of her youngest niece, and cherished a secret resentment that was destined to bear bitter fruit.

Olive Peyton, mad with slighted love and thwarted ambition, was quite as eager as her aunt for revenge on her lovely rival, while Ela Craye was not behind either in her resentment. Having thrown over her lover for the sake of gold, she was all the more anxious to realize her desires. So the three conspirators stood secretly but solidly against the lovers, and only the future could prove whether the forces of good or evil would win in the bitter contest.

True, Ela was a little frightened still when she recalled the sensational interview with her wronged lover; but she knew that he had fled from the scene of his attempted crime, and returned to his office in Richmond. Indeed, she had written him a curt letter, taking credit to herself for not having betrayed his identity to Love Ellsworth that night. She threatened him, frankly, that if he should ever interfere with her or Mr. Ellsworth again, she should denounce him for the attempted assassination, of which Love bore witness in a slight scar on his white brow.

Vernon Ashley made no reply to Ela's letter, and she began to breathe more freely, hoping that he would trouble her peace no more.

During that calm week, Dainty had one bitter disappointment.

It was the news that her dear mother would be unable to join her at Ellsworth until two days before the wedding. [83]

She had very unfortunately taken a young married pair to board after the girls went to the mountains, and the young wife now lay quite ill, the mother of a feeble infant.

Mrs. Chase did not consider the hired nurse very competent, and had not the heart to desert the young couple in their trouble.

"I have taken the care of the babe on myself," wrote the motherly soul, "and I believe it will be two weeks yet before I can safely desert my post. Then my boarders will leave for the country, and I shall fly to you, my darling, whom I have so sadly missed since you went away."

And, oh! what a joyful heart the loving mother bore at the fruition of all her fond hopes for her lovely daughter!

How bitterly she had grieved over her poverty for Dainty's sake! How she had dreaded to see her assume the drudgery of school-teaching, fading her bright bloom in wearisome toil! But now it would never have to be.

The girl's own natural charms, unhindered by the lack of finery, had won for her the love of a noble man, who would fill her life with sunshine. It was a triumph, too, to see how Olive's and Ela's spite had recoiled on themselves, and failed to harm winsome Dainty, whom they hated simply for her grace and beauty.

She rejoiced in Dainty's happiness, and the girl had been careful not to grieve her by a hint of her annoyances at Ellsworth.

"Poor mamma, she has troubles enough of her own fighting the hard battle of poverty; but, thank Heaven! it will soon be over, for Love has promised that her home shall be here with me always," the young girl thought, with a heart full of joy. [84]

So the happy days slipped away, each crowded with pleasures, for there was never a dull day at Ellsworth. The mistress kept it gay with pleasant entertainments, to which she always invited the best people in the county, especially the eligible young men, hoping that the nieces Lovelace had slighted for Dainty might yet catch rich husbands.

But somehow the best catches seemed already engaged, and the next best ones, while politely attentive to Mrs. Ellsworth's guests, did not betray any marked predilection for their society. Though handsome and well-dressed, they failed somehow in that indefinable charm that often wins for a plainer girl a really enviable lover.

This fact has been often observed in life. The most perfect beauty, unless united to an innate goodness that forms an attractive aura about the person, often fails to impress and win.

"What a beautiful girl! Pray introduce me!" exclaims some admiring young man; but on being presented, he feels an unconscious chill, and after leaving the beauty's presence, finds he has lost all interest in what before had charmed him so. The most probable cause is, that the fair face hid an ignoble soul whose influence had vaguely chilled and depressed his admiration.

Olive Peyton was peculiarly of this unpleasant type. Proud, vain, cold, and ambitious, she had never possessed any magnetic power of attraction, and had actually never received a single proposal, though it would have mortified her intensely for any one to find it out.

Ela, who patterned after Olive as nearly as possible, had never had any offer but that of Vernon Ashley, which she had been glad enough to accept until she thought a better chance had presented itself. [85]

So, very naturally, both the young girls cherished an inward spite and envy for the sweet, lovable girl who had won so easily the prize they coveted.

They could see, too, from the actions of the young men who came to Ellsworth, that they envied the proud lover the prize he had won. She might easily have had a dozen other offers had not Love won her promise so quickly. How could any one wonder at it who saw how kind-hearted and gentle she was, always thinking of others more than herself, always pitying another's sorrow, always glad of another's joy, always light-hearted and sunny, hiding her grief, if she ever had one, under a merry smile?

"Her laugh,
As light as wine or chaff,
Breaks clear at witty sallies,
As brooks
Run bubbling through the nooks
Of all her southern valleys.

"Her voice,
By nature and by choice,
Even those who knew her slightest
Would find
As soft as southern wind
When southern winds are lightest."

So the summer days flew, and the happy lover was making all the preparations for the wedding.

It must be a grand affair, of course. Half the county would expect an invitation to the wedding of Lovelace Ellsworth, and he was not averse to having them witness his happiness.

The invitations were sent out two weeks beforehand. Dainty would never forget that day, because it was on that very night that the Ellsworth ghost reappeared to cast its lowering shadow again over her happiness. [86]

It was quite a week since she had seen it, and Love had almost persuaded her that she had dreamed the whole thing, or that Sheila Kelly had probably played ghost to annoy her, when suddenly one night it reappeared more horribly than ever before, striking consternation to even the stout heart of old black mammy, who roused the whole house with her terrified shrieks, and filled Love Ellsworth's heart with rage at her graphic story.

[87]

CHAPTER XV. BLACK MAMMY'S STORY.

In the dead waste and middle of the night, the sleeping household of Ellsworth was startled from repose by long, loud, wailing cries that rang through the wide corridors and vaulted roofs like the shrieks of some lost, despairing soul.

Instantly every sleeper was wide awake. Hurrying on scraps of outer clothing, they rushed from their rooms in wild alarm to the scene of disturbance.

On the floor at some distance from the half-open door lay Dainty Chase, clothed only in her night robes, her fair face upturned to the dim night light like the face of one dead, while over her bent the figure of old black mammy, grotesque in her red flannel petticoat, large-flowered calico sacque, and white turban, and pathetic in the grief with which she chafed Dainty's cold little hands, begging her to open her eyes and speak just one word to her poor old mammy.

"Yo' aine dead, is yo', honey, darlin', is yo' now? Don't you know dat I done chase dat ole debbil, an' made him drap you ter sabe heself? When I clutch him tigh an' pinch he arms, he groan wif pain an' drap ye on de flo', slap me clean ober, and run fer his life. Open yer eyes now, deares', fer here comes Massa Love an' de ladies, an' all."

It was true. There was Love, his step-mother, her nieces, and several of the upstairs servants on the scene; but Dainty Chase lay among them white and still as one already dead, making no reply to the old woman's affectionate pleadings. [88]

With a terrified cry, Love knelt by his stricken darling and clasped her tiny hands in his, but they were cold and limp like the newly dead.

"What means this?" he cried, sternly, to the wailing old negress; and she sobbed:

"Oh, Massa Love, de black debbil heself kem by Miss Dainty's bed, grab her up in his arms, an' fly 'way wif her, an' I follow lik' de wind and pinch he arms so he scream wid pain an' drap her on de floor, kase he seen he cain't git 'way from me. Den he slap me so hard hit made me see stars, an' tumbled me ober by Miss Dainty, while he got 'way ter he own bad place ergin."

"What silly lies! Do not listen to her, Love. She is as hysterical as Dainty!" cried Mrs. Ellsworth, scornfully. "Take the girl back to her room, some of you gaping servants, and let us bring her out of this spell."

But Love took the silent figure up in his own arms and carried her back, after saying sternly to the servants:

"A hundred dollars reward to the person who discovers the fiend who has played ghost and frightened Miss Chase again. Now, Carter, mount the fleetest horse, and bring the nearest physician here at once."

"But that is needless. We can revive her as we did the other night she had another spell like this!" Mrs. Ellsworth cried, as she followed into the room, where he laid his darling down tenderly, drawing the covers over the cold form with reverent hands.

"You can go now, Love. Your presence in the room is not quite seemly, and there are plenty women to attend Dainty," she added, imperiously, while Olive and Ela looked silently on. [89]

To her chagrin, he answered, firmly:

"I shall not withdraw until she revives. She is my promised wife, and I do not recognize any impropriety in my presence at such a crisis."

Fire flashed from her eyes; but she dared not oppose the master of Ellsworth further. She could only say, with a furtive sneer:

"Then Olive and Ela, you had better return to your rooms, as it is improper for you to stay under the circumstances. Do not be uneasy over your cousin. She will soon be all right."

The girls hurried away, and Mrs. Ellsworth remained with the old mammy and two white women servants all vying with each other in efforts to restore Dainty to consciousness, while Love looked on in wild anxiety.

"It is useless, all that you can do. As well wait till the doctor comes!" he said, hopelessly, at last; and indeed the throb of Dainty's heart was so weak it did not seem as if she should ever return to the life from which the great shock seemed to have driven her.

"Poor old black mammy, I was forgetting you! Here, drink this," he said, hurriedly, mixing a stimulant, and placing it to the lips of the trembling old negress, who had sunk to the floor, utterly unnerved, and turning to an ashen-gray pallor. "As soon as you feel better," he added, "I would like to hear a truthful account of all that happened to throw you and Miss Chase into such a state."

The old woman gasped, rolled the whites of her big eyes at him; then, lying heavily back in the arm-chair where he had placed her, muttered, feebly:

"I gwine tell de trufe, an' nothin' else, Massa Love, an ef dat pore darlin' eber comes back ter life ergin, she gwine tell yer de same as I does. De black debbil hese'f comed inter dis room an' grab her up an' run off wif she inter de hall. I seen him plain as day, in his long black gownd wif a string o' beads hangin' down by de side, an' er li'l ole skull-cap on his haid, an' he face all gashly white like a corp—umme!" she groaned; adding: "But I'll tell de trufe—he didn't pear to hab no hoofs nor horns, an' I always did hear dat he had both. Umme! ter think o' seein' dat ole debbil heself, an' livin' arterward!" groaned old mammy, while every one listened eagerly, Mrs. Ellsworth alone giving little sniffs of incredulity. [90]

"Is that all?" queried Love, at this juncture; and dolefully wagging her turbaned head, mammy

answered, impressively:

"No, suh, no, 'tain't all! I gwine begin at de beginnin' now, an' 'late de whole story. Fust t'ing, es I was settin' an' noddin' in my cheer, I heerd de soun' o' somebody coughin' an' coughin' er dreadful hackin' cough, lak some one in de last stage o' consumption. Hit soun' so nateral it made my flesh creep, fer I suddenly 'members de story o' de ghost-cough dat frighten sweet Miss Dainty. I turn my eyes to de baid ter see ef she's awaken' by de noise, an' in de darkness dere all at once flash a li'l blue-green gashly light, flickerin' erbout de ceilin', den here an' dar erbout de room, den down on Miss Dainty's face, an' I see her so pale, wif her big blue eyes wide open, skeered lak, an' she listenin' an' lookin', silent-lak, in turrible fear, so pitiful it nigh bruk my heart!"

[91]

CHAPTER XVI. THE GHOST ALARM.

Mrs. Ellsworth turned from her task of chafing Dainty's cold hands, and glared scornfully at the black mammy, exclaiming:

"How can you listen to such silly lies, Love? The old woman is in her dotage!"

Love gave her a cold glance of rebuke and made no reply, motioning the old woman to continue.

With her big eyes rolling in her ashy-pale face, and her toil-worn black hands nervously clasping and unclasping each other, the old woman went on:

"I'se sorry, Massa Love, but I cudn't git up as quick as I ought to go ober to dat poor chile's aid, kase I was kinder struck dumb wif terror an' 'sprise; an' whiles I was settin' an' watchin' her, all to onct I seen a figger come glidin' from back o' me somewhar to de bedside, an' I seen 'twas dressed in a long black gownd, wif string o' beads down de side, an' a li'l black skull-cap on his haid, an' his face white like a corpse, an' glarin' eyes dat struck terror to my soul!"

"Nonsense!" Mrs. Ellsworth cried, testily; but mammy paid no heed; she only looked at Love, and went on with her story.

"When I seen dat figger all in black, I t'ought sure 'tis de debbil hese'f, an' I got to sabe Miss Dainty from his clutches. I seen him lean down, I seen him look in her pale face, an' I hear her low, stranglin' moan o' fear, an' I pray, 'Lord he'p us!' den I rise to my feet an' start to'ard de baid, dough shakin' lak a leaf; but jest den de brack vilyun swoop down lak a hawk on a li'l chick, an' grab her up in his arms an' run to de do', me a-follerin' an' screamin' at de top o' my voice. Out de do' we dash, de good Lord givin' strength to my laigs, so dat in de hall I catch holt o' dat black gownd, an' hang on a-screechin' an' henderin' de debbil, so dat he hab to let go and drap de honey-chile on de flo'. But de owdacious vilyun clapped me a lick onter my haid, an' I seen so many stars as I fell ober Miss Dainty, dat he got away safe enough befo' yo' all come rushin' out from yo' rooms—umme!" concluded mammy, groaning, for her old gray head ached with the force of the blow she had received in her plucky defense of her beautiful young charge.

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At that moment the old physician, Doctor Platt, was ushered into the room, and Love turned to greet him, saying anxiously:

"Some one has played ghost and frightened Miss Chase into such a long spell of unconsciousness that I fear for her life."

The old doctor looked very grave when he saw his patient lying like one dead among the pillows, in spite of all that the women were doing to revive her, and he muttered in his irascible way:

"The person that was mean enough to frighten this sensitive young girl into such a state deserves lynching."

And having delivered this frank opinion, he turned all his attention to Dainty, and by his skill succeeded after some time in restoring her to consciousness again, though it was indeed a pale, woeful face that looked up at the anxious group around the bed.

"You are better, dear!" cried Love, gladly; and he took her little hand and kissed it before them all in his great joy, heedless of his step-mother's angry frown.

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"Yes, she is better; but I shall stay and watch by her a little while," said Doctor Platt; and he did not go till the pale dawn glimmered through the windows.

By that time Dainty was vastly improved, and able to corroborate mammy's strange story of the abduction by the mysterious visitor that had appeared to her imagination no less a person than his satanic majesty.

Doctor Platt was most indignant; but he laughed at the idea of a supernatural visitant, and concurred in Love's belief of some malicious person in the house playing ghost.

When he started home, leaving Dainty in a deep sleep from the effect of a sedative he had administered for her nerves, he talked quite seriously to Love as they stood on the steps in the struggling light of early morn.

"It would seem as if Miss Chase has a malignant enemy who is trying to frighten her into death or insanity," he said. "Another such experience as this of to-night would probably effect her enemy's purpose. She is of a very nervous physique, and this shock told most terribly upon her. I warn you that the perpetrator should be discovered at once, and severe punishment meted out for the offense. If this proves impossible, why not send the young girl home to remain until her wedding-day?"

"I am loath to do so, because the weather in Richmond is so hot at this season," Love replied; adding: "I shall take such measures, however, that it will be impossible for this thing to occur again!"

The stern tone of his voice and the flash of his eyes assured Doctor Platt that he would keep his word, and he went away much comforted, for all his sympathies had been keenly enlisted by Dainty's misfortunes. [94]

The young girl herself slept on heavily till noon, when she awoke, refreshed by her long rest, and was able to meet the family at luncheon, though her pallid cheeks and wistful eyes were enough to strike remorse to the hearts of her bitter enemies, if they had not been hard and cold as stone.

But her lover's looks and smiles were warm enough to atone for the indifference of the rest, and the soft color flew to her cheeks again as he took her hand tenderly, saying:

"Get ready, darling, and I shall take you for a long drive into the country this evening."

Ah! how Olive and Ela envied her the bliss of the long tête-à-tête drive as they watched the lovers going away in the elegant phaeton behind the spirited gray ponies, the sunshine resting so lovingly on Dainty's curly locks beneath the simple white hat. When they returned, in the last rosy glow of sunset, Dainty seemed to have received a new baptism of beauty, she was so changed from the pale, nervous girl of a few hours ago. Now her cheeks and lips glowed rosy-red, and her eyes were bright with happiness—the happiness of loving and being loved. It made her cousins so angry they could have killed her in their jealous spite, for it lacked but two weeks to the wedding now, and it seemed as if nothing that spite or malice could invent had any power to break off the consummation of the engagement.

They were so furious they would willingly have poisoned her, but for fear of being found out.

No words could tell how they hated that fair face and golden hair, that rosy mouth, those blue eyes and dimples that had rivaled them in the prize they longed to win. [95]

The sight of the happy lovers was gall and wormwood to their envious hearts.

They were indignant, too, because they could see, beneath the surface of Love's coldly courteous manner, that he vaguely suspected them of having a hand in the mysterious plot to frighten his timid betrothed.

To-day he had carried matters with a high hand, interrogating all the servants carefully, and offering a reward of a hundred dollars to any one who should discover the identity of the person playing ghost.

Their greed thus excited, every hireling was anxious to earn the reward, and it would certainly be dangerous for any one to attempt again the cruel role of ghost, for detection seemed almost certain.

The young man had also made some investigations that resulted in showing him how very easy it had been for the malicious enemy of Dainty to intrude on her whenever it seemed desirable to do so.

The room adjoining hers was an unused bedroom that communicated with hers by a narrow curtained door back of her bed. How easy it had been for the intruder to enter the vacant room, imitate the monk's cough there to the heart's content, then glide through the curtained door to the bedside, alarming the sleeping girl by a cold touch or hacking cough, and escaping before she could give any alarm!

Love even found that a small hole had been bored in the wall between the two rooms, thus affording an opportunity for the use of chemicals in displaying the grisly green light whose weird play upon the walls and about the room had so alarmed the victims of the cruel joke.

"How careless I have been! I should have discovered all this long ago if I had believed it was aught but a girl's nervous fancies; but mammy's corroboration assures me it was reality. Now I shall take such steps that she will never be annoyed again," he said, sternly; and suited the action to the word by giving up the room next his own, an airy dressing-room, to Dainty's use, making it perfectly safe by having in a carpenter to attach a wire to the young girl's bed, that, running along the ceiling, passed through into his own room, with a large bell at the end. [96]

The whole household was made aware of this unique ghost alarm, and Love said, sternly:

"At the least disturbance in Miss Chase's room, she has but to touch the wire by her bed, and the communicating bell will ring close to me, so that I can fly to her rescue. I do not need to say that

the practical joker will fare badly at my hands."

Poor, nervous, shaken black mammy had been sent home to rest.

Dainty would not need any one, now that she had her ghost alarm, the young man said, smilingly; and every one understood his determination to protect his love at every hazard. The guilty party must have felt rather disconcerted at the turn affairs had taken.

Black mammy had not told any one yet that she had a clew by which she hoped to win the reward Love had offered for the detection of the impostor; but after she had grappled with the wretch who was bearing off Dainty, she had found in the claw-like grasp of her fingers some bits of torn torchon lace that might have been clutched forcibly from the sleeve of a night-dress.

She kept the fragments carefully, determining to find the garment they matched.

[97]

CHAPTER XVII. THE NIGHT BEFORE THE WEDDING.

Apparently the Ellsworth ghost became disgusted with the prosaic means adapted to secure its identification.

From that horror-haunted night it ceased to invade Dainty's chamber with its grewsome cough and ghoulish presence.

It was true that in some of her occasional solitary moments, in some quiet twilight hour, she had been startled by the sound of that hateful cough, coming from apparently nowhere; but she fled at once in terror from the spot, and forebore to mention it to her lover, who was radiantly happy, deeming that the malicious ghost was exorcised forever.

The beautiful summer days flew past on wings of joy, bringing the fateful first of August that was to witness Dainty's bridal, as well as the twenty-sixth birthday of the handsome master of Ellsworth.

Everything was in readiness for the wedding when the last day of July brought Mrs. Chase to her daughter's arms again, and Dainty's happiness seemed complete.

Everything seemed to be going on so propitiously that Dainty cast her dismal forebodings to the winds.

Surely nothing could part her from her lover now! The malice of her enemies had fallen harmless to the ground.

Mrs. Ellsworth and her two favorite nieces were playing propriety with perfect ease. Indeed, the former had persuaded Olive and Ela to act as bridesmaids, and provided them with elegant gowns of sheer white organdie over rich white silk. Mrs. Chase had brought with her Dainty's pretty, simple traveling gown and hat, and she had yielded to her lover's wish that the marriage vows should be spoken in the same beautiful white robes that had graced his mother at her wedding, twenty-eight years before.

[98]

They had been folded away in linen and lavender many years—the lace veil and satin gown—and the owner would never need them more, for she was wearing the robe of righteousness in the great procession of angels before the Great White Throne. While Love was yet in his babyhood she had passed gently away to heaven like a lily fading on its slender stem.

Love cherished her memory as something holy, and his heart ached with silent grief when, five years later, his father gave him a step-mother, a handsome, stately woman, who had been uniformly kind to him until now, when her imperious nature overstepped the mark in her anxiety to have him marry Olive or Ela.

But thwarted in her will, the lady was bearing her disappointment with what appeared to be graceful resignation, and she spared no efforts in preparing for the grand wedding, that it might do honor to the proud master of Ellsworth. A magnificent banquet was ready, and the floral decorations of the mansion were superb. It was to be a morning wedding, followed by a summer *fete* on a magnificent scale, and that evening the bride and groom would leave for a Northern tour, and thence to Europe.

Sweet, shy Dainty, so like a lovely, modest violet, gazed in wonder at all the preparations for the magnificent wedding, scarcely able to realize that it was to do honor to her, the simple girl with whom her rich and noble lover had seen fit to choose to share his heart, and name, and wealth. She said to herself that she was surely the happiest, most fortunate girl in the whole world, and that her love story read like some romantic fairy tale, with Lovelace Ellsworth as the grand Prince Charming.

[99]

Oh, how proud and happy Mamma Chase was, too, in her daughter's good fortune! The years seemed to fall from her like a cast-off garment, and on her gentle face, Mrs. Ellsworth, who had

wondered so where Dainty got her radiant beauty, read the traces of what had once been rare loveliness before time and sorrow had faded her flower-like bloom. Mrs. Ellsworth could not help being courteous to the gentle lady who was her half-brother's lonely widow, so that last day passed away busily and happily, crowded with excitement, and that night the guest-chambers of Ellsworth were full to overflowing with visitors who had been bidden from a distance to their kinsman's wedding.

Until far into the moonlit summer night the halls and parlors of Ellsworth echoed with music and laughter, for the gay young people crowded together could scarcely be persuaded to retire even for "a beauty sleep" to enhance their charms to-morrow.

But at length all went to their rooms, and the weary servants closed the great house, darkened the lights, and everything sank into silence, broken only now and then by the call of a night bird in the shrubbery, or the whistle of a far-away locomotive. The full moon sailed high in the deep blue heaven, brooding over the sleeping world in its mystery, its beauty, its joy and sorrow.

Love and Dainty had gone along the corridors hand in hand like happy children, pausing to say good-night before their own doors. [100]

"Mamma will share my room to-night—we have so much to say to each other this last night," Dainty said to her lover, with a fleeting blush like the sunset glow.

They were quite alone, with no envious eyes peering in the dim night light, and Love took his charming sweetheart in his arms and clasped and kissed her many times in passionate love.

"This last night!" how solemn it sounds!" he echoed, then laughed. "Oh, my love, my love! what rapture to know that after to-night we never shall be parted again!"

"Never, never!" she cried, joyfully, and clasped her white arms around his neck, laying her soft cheek to his, whispering: "Oh, how glad I am that you love me, that you chose me for your very own, life of your life, heart of your heart! I thank God for His goodness to me, and I will try always to deserve my great happiness."

Sweet, shy Dainty had never spoken to her lover with such ardor and eloquence before, and his reply was such a shower of kisses that she could hardly tear herself away to enter her own room, where her mother waited, and said, laughingly:

"Darling, I thought you and Love were not going to say good-night till the morning dawned!"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE WEDDING MORN.

[101]

Love retired into his room and sat down beside the window to brood over his great happiness.

Something like humility blended with his grateful thoughts.

Who was he, what had he done, that Heaven should be so good to him, giving him the fairest, truest, sweetest girl in the world for his adored and loving bride?

He lifted his dark, dreamy eyes to the moonlit heavens and prayed reverentially:

"God make me worthy of the prize I have won!"

From the next room he could hear the low murmur of voices, as Dainty conversed with her mother in happy tones; but by and by all grew silent, as the fair girl sank to sleep, nestling against her mother's heart for the last time, for to-morrow would give her to her husband's arms.

Love heard the clock in the tower chime the midnight hour, and retired to dream of the happiness that would be his to-morrow.

And never came fairer dreams of the future to any lover's heart, as surely no lover's heart had ever been so bound up in its beautiful idol.

"Love thee? So well, so tenderly
Thou'rt loved, adored by me,
Fame, fortune, wealth, and liberty
Were worthless without thee.
Though brimmed with blessings pure and rare
Life's cup before me lay,
Unless thy love were mingled there,
I'd spurn the draught away.

[102]

"Without thy smile the monarch's lot
To me were dark and lone,
While, *with* it, even the humblest cot

Were brighter than his throne.
Those words for which the conqueror sighs
For me would have no charms;
My only world thy gentle eyes,
My throne thy circling arms."

Wrapped in blissful dreams, he slumbered on till the night passed away. The morning dawned and the sun rode high in the heavens ere he started, broad awake, remembering that this was his wedding-day, and that he had overslept himself.

Indeed, at that moment, some one tapped on the door, and the voice of Harry Chilton, his cousin and best man, called out, gayly:

"Heavens, man! what can you mean by sleeping to within two hours of your wedding?"

"Is it possible?" cried Love, looking at his clock, and finding that the assertion was quite true.

He opened the door to his cousin, and they became immediately immersed in preparations for the ceremony which was to take place in the large parlor at nine o'clock, to be followed by the splendid wedding-breakfast.

The great house was in a hubbub of excitement with the final preparations and the dressing of the guests; but the bride's door had never opened yet, though no one thought strange of that, for she had gently declined all offers of assistance at her toilet, saying that mamma would do all that was necessary. [103]

Never had there been a fairer morn for a birthday bridal. Not the slightest cloud marred the deep-blue sky; the sun shone in radiant splendor on the dewy flowers and the green earth, and the little birds seemed almost to know that there was to be a wedding, they warbled so persistently in the joy of their little hearts.

Time wore on till it lacked but fifteen minutes to the ceremony. The house was thronged with the wedding-guests, and the bishop of the diocese had arrived to perform the ceremony. The musicians were getting ready to play the wedding-march.

Love was all ready, looking faultlessly handsome in his wedding-suit, and he began to grow impatient because he had received no message from his darling that morning.

"How strange if she and her mother have overslept themselves! I will go and knock on the door," he said, suiting the action to the words.

He could not hear the least sound in the room, and he received no answer to his knock. He rapped impatiently again.

"Dainty! Mrs. Chase!" he called, anxiously, several times.

But there was no reply.

He bent his ear to the key-hole, but there was not a sound within the bride's room—all was still as the grave.

The handsome bridegroom grew pale and alarmed, crying out to his best man, who stood by his side:

"Surely something has happened, for I have heard not a sound from the room. We must force the door."

They put their shoulders against it; the lock yielded, it flew open, and they stood within the room.

The curtains and the shutters were closely drawn, and the night-lamp flickered dimly behind a screen. At one end of the room several chairs were littered with the wedding finery—the tiny white silken hose and slippers, the satin gown, the misty thread-lace veil. [104]

In the midst of it all, Mrs. Chase lay on the bed, sleeping heavily, but Dainty was nowhere to be seen.

Love stood looking about him, pale and alarmed, but it was Harry Chilton who first caught sight of a note pinned on the pillow, and drew Love's attention to it.

"She is gone. Perhaps that may explain," he said.

Love caught up the note from the pillow, and read with staring eyes:

"DEAR MR. ELLSWORTH,—I have deceived you, and I can not keep the farce up any longer. I never loved you, never; but mamma always told me to get a rich husband if I could, and I was going to marry you for your money, knowing I would be a wretched wife, because all my heart was given to another.

"But last evening I met my lover in the grounds, and he persuaded me to go away with him. When this reaches you, I shall be his happy bride. We will be poor, but we shall have love to cheer us. Forgive me, and don't let the wedding be spoiled. Marry Olive or Ela.

"DAINTY."

Once in a lifetime a man may excusably swoon. Lovelace Ellsworth fell heavily to the floor like an insensate log.

[105]

CHAPTER XIX. A MADMAN'S DEED.

When he came back to life presently, with a strangling gasp of pain, he met the anxious gaze of Doctor Platt, who was kneeling beside him.

"Good! You are better! Let me help you to rise," said the old man, aiding him to a sofa. Taking a chair by him, he continued: "You have been unconscious for ten minutes, and we have read your letter from Miss Chase, which I believe to be a cursed forgery!"

"You are right," declared Love, sitting upright, deathly pale and trembling; while he added, sternly: "Dainty never went away of her own free will. It is a case of kidnaping!"

"Yes; for there lies her poor mother in a drugged sleep that will most likely last several hours longer. I have examined the dregs left in their pitcher of ice-water last night, and found a potent drug in it. I may also tell you that the overhead wire connecting this room with the bell in yours has been cut, thus making the bell powerless to ring if Miss Chase had wished to summon you to her assistance. There is evidence that the malice of Miss Chase's enemies has triumphed at last," sorrowfully replied the old doctor, who had in his heart been a true and stanch friend to the lovers.

A groan of anguish passed Love's pallid lips.

"Oh, my dearest, what have they done to you, my treasure, the ruthless enemies who hated you!"

At that moment a stately figure in rustling silk crossed the threshold, and a haughty voice [106] exclaimed:

"Doctor Platt and Mr. Chilton, will you kindly withdraw for a few moments? I wish to speak privately with my step-son."

She closed the door on their retreating forms, glanced scornfully at the silent, sleeping face of Mrs. Chase, and exclaimed, eagerly:

"What strange story is this that is being whispered around, Love, that Dainty has deserted you and eloped with a more favored lover?"

"There is the note I found on her pillow. You are welcome to read it," he replied, coldly.

She took it up from the table, glanced quickly over the contents, and groaned:

"What a wicked girl to throw you over at the eleventh hour like this! How will you bear the shame of it, my poor boy, jilted like this, at the very altar, by the poor nobody whom you had stooped to raise to your side?"

Love answered not one word. He simply rested his head on his elbow, and stared curiously into Mrs. Ellsworth's eager, excited face with his dark, penetrating eyes as she continued:

"I am pained for you, my dear Love, but not at all surprised. I feared something like this, for I knew that Vernon Ashley was Dainty's lover, not Ela's, and I believed that love would triumph in the end over the greed for gold. Poor Dainty! she must have loved him well to sacrifice all her ambitions for a poor man's love. But she will be happier with him than she could have been with you. The hand without the heart does not promise well for wedded bliss."

Still without a word, he listened to the fluent tide of her speech, a strange, mocking light in his eyes, whose portent she could not fathom. [107]

She continued, insinuatingly:

"But Dainty Chase has done you a cruel injustice, Love, for, besides depriving you of a bride to-day, she has cheated you out of your inheritance. Remember, unless you are married to-day, your fortune reverts to me!"

He bowed in silence, and Mrs. Ellsworth added, nervously:

"No wonder you are stricken dumb by the magnitude of your misfortune, losing everything that made life worth living, as it were. But cheer up, my dear boy, for I am not so selfish as to wish to deprive you of your fortune; and as soon as I heard that Dainty had eloped with another, I began to plan to help you, and I soon saw that there was a way out of your difficulty."

"Yes?" Love said, inquiringly, and his pale lips curled with a sneer whose subtle meaning she could not understand; but taking it for encouragement, she blurted out, boldly:

"The preacher is here, the people are here, and the wedding-breakfast waits. You can vanquish

fate if you will. Though Dainty is gone, I have two other nieces."

Again that cold, scornful smile as she added, desperately:

"I see that Dainty advises you here to marry either Olive or Ela. Well, you can have either one for the asking."

His pale, writhing lips unclosed to ask, curtly:

"Are you speaking with their permission?"

"Yes," she replied, eagerly and hopefully, feeling sure that he must capitulate now and yield to her wishes. It was better to marry the wrong girl than lose such a princely fortune. It was impossible that he should hesitate over such a question. [108]

She waited, almost confident of his answer, only wondering which he would choose—Olive, who was her secret preference, or the equally pretty Ela.

But he was slow in making his choice. Suddenly sitting upright, he gazed curiously at her excited face several minutes without replying, until the silence grew irksome, and she cried, with veiled impatience:

"I do not wish to hurry you, Love, but you must see for yourself how important it is that you should make a speedy decision. The bishop and the guests are waiting for the wedding, and unless it comes off soon the breakfast will be spoiled."

Slowly Love got upon his feet, and steadying his trembling frame by a hand on the back of a chair, startled her with the mocking words:

"You have plotted cleverly, madame, but you have lost the game. Neither Olive nor Ela will ever be bride of mine!"

Her eyes flashed in her pale face, and she said, insolently:

"Very well, then; I am the mistress of Ellsworth, and you a pauper!"

"Not so fast; you have not heard all," he answered coolly. "I understand the little game you have been playing, madame, you and your two clever nieces. You have plotted to frighten Dainty to death, but foiled in that, you kidnaped her at the eleventh hour, hoping to frighten me into marrying one of your nieces by the threat of disinheritance; but your malicious scheme has failed. There exists an insuperable objection to my marriage with Olive or Ela." [109]

"Insuperable?" she muttered, incredulously.

"Yes; I am a married man already."

A bolt of lightning would not have startled her as much as those calmly spoken words.

It was her turn now to stare speechlessly, while Love continued, earnestly:

"You are detected in your hellish plotting, madame. The proof of it is in that letter there. A base forgery, since Dainty Chase could not possibly have written it—Dainty Ellsworth, I should say rather, for she has been my wife two weeks."

"Your wife?" she faltered, wildly.

"Yes; there was a secret marriage two weeks ago, designed to prevent just what has happened now—some treachery on the part of the three women who hated Dainty and were trying to work her ill. Yes, I understand your game; as I said just now, Dainty was kidnaped, and you know where she is, but your malice can not undo the fact that she is my wife, and my inheritance safe. I go now to break the truth to the wedding guests, and their indignation will compel you to restore me my bride!"

He rushed from the room, heedless of her shrieks for him to stay, and sought the thronged parlor, where the disappointed guests waited for an explanation.

Within the door he paused, raised his hand, and began:

"My dear friends, I—"

The sentence stopped abruptly, for through the window near by hurtled a bullet, sent by a madman's brutal hand. It crashed through his head, and he fell senseless and bleeding to the floor.

CHAPTER XX. THE END OF THE DAY.

Ah, how terrible a *finale* to a birthday wedding that had dawned so fairly and been anticipated

with such happiness.

The bride mysteriously vanished, the bridegroom weltering in his blood! Both the victims of wrong and crime heinous enough to make the very angels turn away from watching such a wicked world.

Yet the sun shone on as brightly, the flowers bloomed as fairly, the birds sang as sweetly as if two beautiful young lives had not been blasted in their happiest hour.

Instantly there was the greatest confusion in the long parlors where the merry guests who had come to witness a bridal now beheld the handsome bridegroom murdered before their startled eyes.

A few moments before they had been excitedly watching for quite a different *denouement*.

Whispers of what had happened—of Dainty Chase's note and her cruel flight—had been circulated among the guests with startling rapidity, and Mrs. Ellsworth had been heard to exclaim that they should not be disappointed of a wedding, after all; she had two more nieces, and Lovelace was not the man she took him for if he could not persuade one or the other to step into the awkward breach and save him from the consequences of Dainty's treachery.

Then she hurried away, to further her scheme with the deserted bridegroom, and the guests waited most impatiently, gossiping among themselves over the strange turn affairs had taken, wondering how Dainty could turn her back on such a bridegroom and such a future, wondering still more if Mrs. Ellsworth would indeed induce her step-son to take Olive or Ela in place of the false bride, and on which his choice would chance to fall. [111]

Preferences were quite evenly divided between the two girls, both of whom tried to look cool and unembarrassed, though their hearts beat furiously with anticipation, and Olive, at least, since her heart was enlisted in the contest, felt a burning thrill of jealousy of her cousin Ela, saying to herself:

"If he should choose her, I know I could not help but envy and hate her, for her heart is not interested like mine in this affair. I believe that she still loves Vernon Ashley, and but for his poverty would rather have him for her husband than any other man. Oh, I pray that his choice may fall on me! I know Aunt Judith secretly wishes it, because I resemble her more than any of her other relatives, and naturally she would prefer for me to succeed her at Ellsworth."

Suddenly she beheld a face that made her start and draw in her breath with a sort of strangled gasp.

Her eyes had strayed to Ela, who stood near the door, then wandered aimlessly to the nearest window—aimlessly, then with a flash of terrified recognition.

Between the rich lace curtains there peered the dark face of Ela's jilted lover, Vernon Ashley, and in the glittering eyes, fixed immovably on Ela, shone a baleful, boding light enough to frighten a stranger, and much more so Olive, who knew of the cruel wrongs that had goaded him to jealous frenzy.

It was simply blood-curdling, the demoniac look on Ashley's face; and Olive watched him with a creeping sort of terror; for Ela had confided to her that it was he who had fired at Lovelace Ellsworth the night of the festival, and uttered dark threats of vengeance that now recurred to her mind and filled her with alarm. [112]

"He is bent on mischief. His eyes glare like a madman's or a drunkard's, I am not certain which; but either way they bode evil. I must warn Ela of her peril," she thought, nervously taking a step forward, but pausing instantly in consternation; for at that moment Lovelace Ellsworth rushed into the room, his handsome face pale as death, his dark, curly hair pushed back in disorder from his high, white brow, his eyes flashing with a strange fire, his ashen lips curled back from his white teeth with a mocking smile.

Consciously or unconsciously, he made his way straight to where Ela Craye was standing, pausing just at her side, and the act sealed his doom.

The man at the window had heard of the wedding that was to take place, and he had returned to Ellsworth, hoping to persuade Ela to take him back into her favor, now that all hope of a rich match was over.

But in the days while writhing in the throes of rejected love, the man had cast to the winds all honor and manliness, and drowned memory and sorrow in the flowing bowl. [112]

A piteous wreck of his former handsome self, he now peered through the window, hoping to attract Ela's attention; but, unfortunately, no premonition of the truth caused her to turn her limpid gray eyes toward the dissipated lover now half crazed with thoughts of either love or vengeance.

And while he watched and waited, he heard the talk of Dainty's flight and Mrs. Ellsworth's promise—they should not be disappointed in the wedding—Ellsworth would persuade one of her other nieces to marry him. [113]

His brow grew dark, his heart beat heavily, his breath came thick and fast with fear. In his passion for Ela he felt sure that Lovelace could choose no one but her, his heart's fickle queen.

"It shall never be!" the maddened lover groaned to himself in jealous fury, for he had said to himself, day after day, that ere Ela should become the bride of another, he would stretch her dead at his feet, and give her sweet white beauty to the worms and the grave rather than to the arms of a rival.

The man was temporarily insane. Love and despair and reckless indulgence in the bottle had made him so. He was as dangerous at this moment as a wild beast from the jungle.

Lovelace Ellsworth rushed into the room, and, without seeing Ela Craye at all, paused directly at the young girl's side, and began to speak.

To the jealous hearts of Olive and Vernon Ashley, the act had but one interpretation.

His choice had fallen on Ela, and he was about to announce it publicly to his friends.

A pang of the bitterest pain and jealousy tore like a red-hot needle through the heart of Olive, and involuntarily, she looked again at the window for the lowering face of Ela's rejected lover, wondering how he would bear the strain of the moment.

The sight of his face made her shudder with alarm, for it had grown dark and demoniac in its fury; and while she gazed, she saw his hand lifted, and the shining point of a pistol directed full at the head of Lovelace Ellsworth. [114]

Simultaneously with the first words of Lovelace, a loud, warning shriek burst from Olive's lips; but both were silenced together by the loud report of the pistol whose contents had entered the victim's head.

With a moan of pain, Ellsworth sank to the floor, and a scene of instant confusion ensued, some rushing to the young man's aid, others pursuing the murderer; for Olive was not the only one who had witnessed the fatal shot.

Several persons had observed the dark face of the stranger peering in at the window, and two persons besides Olive had seen him fire the fatal shot. He was instantly pursued and overtaken, and from his furious ravings he was at first supposed to be an escaped lunatic.

But a guest from the station quickly recognized him as Vernon Ashley, a young man who had visited in the neighborhood some weeks before, and had caused some sensation by declaring he was engaged to Miss Craye, and betraying a furious jealousy of Lovelace Ellsworth.

Ashley was taken away to prison, despite his entreaties to see Miss Craye, who had gone into hysterics, it was said, on hearing who it was that had shot Ellsworth.

When she learned that Ashley was begging to see her, she refused his request with a shudder of fear, and he sent back an angry message:

"Tell her I have carried out my threat!"

They bore him away to prison, shuddering at his insane rejoicings that he had killed his rival, and the house of joy and feasting was turned into one of gloom and sorrow.

But Lovelace Ellsworth was not dead yet, though the end was expected at any moment.

Indeed, it was a wonder that he had not died instantly, declared all three doctors who examined him. The bullet had crashed through the side of his head near the top, and was certainly imbedded in his brain, for all endeavors to locate it failed of success, and they decided not to worry the poor fellow with these useless attempts, but to let him pass away in peace. [115]

Love lay with closed eyes in a comatose condition, breathing heavily, his pulse sinking fast, and it was believed that each moment must be his last.

But as the minutes ebbed and the frail breath of life still fluttered feebly in his frame, they became mystified by his tenacity of life, and decided to risk removing him to his bed, which was accordingly done without any appreciable harm to his condition.

Meanwhile, the house was full of hysterical women sobbing in earnest fright and demanding as much attention as the victim himself, not the least of whom was Mrs. Ellsworth.

She had followed Lovelace to the parlors after his startling communication to her in wild excitement, and had swooned on beholding his fall, recovering from one long spell only to go into another, and actual fears for her life began to be entertained.

It was touching, said all, to see how devoted she had been to her step-son, seeing that the events of to-day would make her the mistress of his splendid fortune.

[116]

CHAPTER XXI.
WOULD HEAVEN TURN AWAY FROM HER
WILD APPEAL?

"Oh, Thou to whom my thoughts are known,
Calm, oh, calm these trembling fears;
Oh, turn away the world's cold frown,
And dry these falling tears!
Oh, leave me not alone in grief—
Send this anguished heart relief!
Oh, make my life Thy future care!
Sweet Spirit, hear my prayer—
Ah, hear my prayer!"

Beneath the ruined wing of Castle Ellsworth were mysterious underground passages and chambers, and in one of these grewsome places Dainty Chase was held a prisoner, while over her head, in the golden light of the summer day, the stirring events of the interrupted wedding were in progress.

While wrapped in the unconsciousness of a drugged sleep the night previous, the hapless girl had been borne away from her mother's side in the arms of the person who had so successfully enacted the part of the monk's ghost, and placed on a couch, where she slept on heavily till the day was far advanced toward its meridian.

She woke at last in semi-darkness, lighted only by the dim rays of a sputtering kerosene lamp, whose vile odor made the close air almost insufferable.

"Mamma!" she murmured, stretching out her arms for the beloved one who had slumbered by her side all night. [117]

But her yearning arms touched empty air, and she found herself resting on a hard and narrow mattress, while her eyes, growing accustomed to the feeble light, showed her the bare stone wall of a narrow chamber like a dungeon, whose only ventilation came from narrow slits in the heavy oaken door.

Half-dazed, the girl lay and gazed about her unfamiliar surroundings until, suddenly overpowered with terror, she shrieked aloud, and springing up, dashed herself against the hard, unyielding door in the wild desire of escape.

In vain! The pressure of her light form did not even shake the heavy, cell-like door that was securely locked on the outside.

She could only sink back upon the narrow cot, while a terrified realization of the truth forced itself on her bewildered senses.

She was a prisoner in some unknown dungeon, locked away from her beloved forever.

The spite and malice of her enemies had triumphed at last. They had parted her from Love before the dawn of her wedding-day. The second attempt to kidnap her must have succeeded well, for she could remember nothing of how she had been brought here.

"Ah! I comprehend all now!" she cried, despairingly. "That pitcher of ice-water last night had somehow a bitter taste. We were drugged—mamma and I—and I was stolen away in the hope of preventing my marriage to Love, so that one of my rivals might be forced on him in my stead, lest he lose his inheritance!"

Then, in spite of her misery, a sweet, mocking laugh dimpled the girl's lips, as she added, gratefully: [118]

"Oh, what a clever thought it was of Love's, that secret marriage! I feared I did wrong letting him persuade me into it; but I see now his presentiments of evil had good ground, and he did wisely in making me his wife two weeks ago."

She clasped her dimpled hands together in a sort of ecstasy, as she continued:

"And oh! how happy he has made me, my darling young husband! How full of bliss our secret honeymoon! Oh, I can never forget while life lasts the sweetness of our wedded love! But how chagrined Aunt Judith and my cruel cousins will be when Love tells them the startling truth. I can guess how they will try to deceive him. They will say to him: 'Dainty has eloped with Vernon Ashley. He was her lover all the while, though she made you think he was Ela's. Now that she has deceived you, it is imperative for you to marry some one else immediately, lest by the terms of your father's will you lose your grand inheritance!'"

The blue eyes beamed, and the rosy mouth dimpled proudly as Dainty's thoughts ran on happily.

"They will be fit to die of rage when they hear my darling laugh them to scorn, and say: 'All your wicked plots to part me from my love are in vain! I knew you were scheming to do this all along, so I forestalled you by making her my wife in secret two weeks ago, and the *denouement* of to-day shows me how wisely I acted. Now you must restore my love to me, or I will denounce you to the world for your treachery!'"

This was how Dainty pictured it to herself, and in her excitement it seemed to her that Love would be coming directly to release her from her confinement, because they could have no interest in keeping them apart any longer, knowing that they were married now, and that there was no chance for Olive and Ela to get him away from his wedded wife. [119]

Oh, how impatient she grew, waiting and hoping for him to come! But long hours of silence and solitude dragged by, till her brave heart began to fail, and she sobbed, piteously:

"Perhaps they are unrelenting in their hate, and will not tell him where to find me. They may leave me here to starve and die!"

Already she felt faint from lack of food, and her heart sank hopelessly from its new dread. She fell on her knees, and prayed to Heaven to have pity on her sorrow, and send her speedy rescue.

It was indeed a sight to move the pity of Heaven; the innocent, white-gowned girl kneeling on the cold stone floor of the damp cell, with her bare feet and naked arms and shoulders, her appealing blue eyes raised upward, the golden hair streaming like a shining veil about her slender form, her sweet lips moving in prayer to God. Would He indeed hear that prayer unmoved, or would He send her relief?

The slow hours dragged away without interruption, and she saw with terror that her miserable light began to flicker with exhaustion. Soon the desolation of darkness would be added to loneliness and hunger.

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CHAPTER XXII. UNMASKED.

Dainty fell back, sobbing, on her hard couch, her frame shaking as with an ague chill.

The horror of her position was enough to drive her mad.

It seemed to her that she was entombed alive, and left to her fate—left to die of darkness, terror, grief, and starvation, the wretched victim of a most cruel persecution; she who had so much to live for; youth, health, beauty, and a loving young husband!

Her faltering voice rang out in a despairing prayer:

"Oh, God, have mercy on me, and on my poor unhappy husband and mother, whose hearts I know are aching with grief over my mysterious absence! Oh, send some pitying angel to guide them to my dreary prison!"

As if in answer to the wild aspiration, a key suddenly clicked in the lock outside, and she sprang upright on the cot with a strangling gasp of fear and hope commingled.

Slowly the heavy oaken door swung outward wide enough to admit a tall, dark-gowned figure, then shut inward again, locking Dainty in with the feared and abhorred ghost of the old monk.

In the dim, flickering light of the cell, the horrible figure towered above the girl, who crouched low in breathless fear at the dreaded apparition, speech frozen on her lips, her heart sinking till the blood seemed freezing in her veins, not observing in her alarm that the ghost had a rather prosaic air by reason of carrying a large basket on one arm.

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Suddenly the ghastly creature spoke: the first time it had ever opened its lips in all its visitations to Dainty.

"You don't seem glad to see me," it observed, in hoarse, mocking accents that somehow had a familiar ring in her ears.

There flashed over her mind some words that Lovelace Ellsworth had said to her lately:

"I am convinced that the pretended monk is a creature of flesh and blood, and if you could only summon courage to tear away its mask when it calls on you again, you would most likely find beneath it the coarse Sheila Kelly, or very probably one of your malicious cousins. Try it next time, and you will see that I am right, darling."

At sound of that gibing voice, with its oddly familiar ring, a desperate courage came to poor Dainty, and suddenly springing erect on her bed, she made a fierce onslaught on her foe, tearing away in one frantic clutch the ghastly mask, skull-cap, wig, and all, and leaving exposed the astonished features of the coarse Irish woman, Sheila Kelly.

The woman uttered a fierce imprecation in her surprise, recoiling a step, then laughing coarsely:

"What a little wild-cat, to be sure! But why didn't you do it long ago?"

"I never thought of it being you, Sheila Kelly! How could I, when I've seen you lying asleep in my room and the old monk standing by my bed?" faltered Dainty in surprise and bewilderment.

"Och, thin it was Miss Peyton playing the part. Shure, she's as tall as mesilf, and I don't mind satisfyin' yer cur'osity now, seein' as yer'll never git out o' this alive to blow on us!" returned the woman, with cool effrontery.

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"What do you mean, Sheila?" cried the young girl in alarm.

"Shure, I mane what I say! Ye're a pris'ner fer life, Miss Dainty Chase, sintenced by yer aunt and cousins to solitary confinement on bread and water till you die—and the sooner you do that last the better they will be pleased!" returned the coarse woman letting down her basket and taking out a glass tumbler, two large bottles of water, some loaves of stale bread, and some of Dainty's clothes, saying, facetiously: "Here's yer duds and yer grub—enough o' both ter last yer a week—and at the end of a week I'll call again with more provisions, miss—and likewise, if you get tired of living in such luxury, here's a bottle of laudanum to pass yer into purgatory," coolly putting it on the only chair the room contained, while Dainty's blue eyes dilated in horror at her fiendish brutality.

"Sheila, Sheila, surely this is some cruel jest! You can not mean to leave me here alone as you say! Oh, what harm have I ever done to you that you treat me so cruelly?" she cried in anguish.

"As for the harrum, none; but I always hated ye from the first time I looked on yer bonny face. As for the raison, 'tis soon towld. I fell in love with the young masther soon's ever he kem home from Yurruup, and I did me best ter make up ter him; but he would none of me. And I seen straight away his heart was wid you, and I hated yer ever since, and forby yer two cousins and t' ould Leddy Ellsworth turned against yer for the same raison, because yer won the masther's heart. So whin they offered ter make me fortune for scaring yer ter death, I was ready and glad ter take the job ter pay off me own score agin ye! So there now, ye see it's small good luck yer pritty face got ye!" concluded the cruel Irish woman, exultantly. [123]

Poor Dainty, gazing into that hard face, felt the utter uselessness of all appeals for mercy. The woman had the heart of a fiend, and was openly glad of her victim's misery.

She determined to appeal to her cupidity, and ventured, timidly:

"If you will only give me my liberty, Sheila, I give you my word of honor Mr. Ellsworth will make you rich."

"Rich, is it? and him a-dying!" grunted Sheila Kelly, indifferently.

"Dying! Oh, what mean you, Sheila? Speak! What has happened to my darling?" shrieked poor Dainty, in wild alarm.

Sheila Kelly shrugged her shoulders, and proceeded to fill the dying lamp with fresh oil from a tin can she had brought in her capacious basket. Then sitting down on the foot of the narrow cot, she began and recounted the events of the morning to her anxious listener, ending with:

"Shure, the mane, murtherin' Ashley is safe in jail, t' ould Leddy Ellsworth, going from one fainting fit ter another, and Masther Lovelace a-laying with ter bullet in his head, niver spakin' a worrud since he was shot, niver opening his eyes, jist a-dying by inches, sez all the docthers."

Oh, the shrieks of despair that filled the gloomy cell! They were enough to move a heart of stone; but Dainty's tormentor was cruel as a fiend.

She listened unmoved to the expressions of despair and the prayers for liberty, and laughed [124] incredulously, when the girl cried, desperately:

"Oh, Sheila! for God's sake, let me go to the side of my dying husband! Yes, he is my own dear husband, and my place is by him now, to soothe his last hours. We were married secretly two weeks ago, because he feared our cruel enemies would devise some scheme to tear us from each other, as indeed they have done. But now that you know the truth, you would not keep a young wife from the side of her dying husband, would you? You will set me free, to go to him?"

But the wretch shook her head, with a mocking laugh.

"You will never see the light of day again!" she said, calmly.

"Oh, Sheila, do you forget that I have a mother to mourn me as well as a husband? A poor widowed mother, who has no one but me in the wide, wide world! I am the light of her eyes and her heart. She will die of a broken heart at my mysterious fate! For her sake, Sheila, if not for my own and my husband's, I beg you for my liberty!" prayed the wretched prisoner, kneeling on the cold floor at her tormentor's feet.

But she might as well have prayed to the cold stone wall as to such a fiend in human form.

"Ye're wastin' worruds, Dainty Chase!" she said, mockingly, as she rose to go. "Ye'll niver come out of this cell alive, I tell you; so the sooner yer make up yer mind ter die, the better; and I'll kem ag'in this day week, hoping ter find yer cold corp on the bed!"

"One word!" implored the wretched girl, detaining her. "Where am I, Sheila Kelly? Is this, as I suspect, a dungeon beneath the ruined wing of Ellsworth?"

"Yes, ye're right; 'tis the underground chambers, where t' ould Ellsworths hid from the Indians [125] and kept their prisoners, and this will be yer tomb, Dainty Chase. Better try the laudanum, and put yersilf out of misery at once!" flashing out, and locking the door on the outside as before.

CHAPTER XXIII.

AH! THE PITY OF IT!

The oaken door clanged heavily to, and the massive bolt, as it shot into place, sounded in Dainty's ears like the trump of doom, shutting her into a living grave; for now that she had heard of her husband's condition, she had no longer the least hope of rescue.

In all the wide, cruel world, who was there that had any interest in poor Dainty Chase save her husband and her mother?

Her husband was dying, and her poor, helpless little mother was powerless to save her.

They would tell her that her fair daughter had eloped with a favorite lover; and how was she to know that the story was untrue?

In her desire to spare her gentle little mother pain, Dainty had withheld the whole story of the persecutions she had suffered at Ellsworth.

In every letter home she had written the substance of these words:

"It is very pleasant here, and I am very happy. I long for you to be with me."

And the mother's heart had rejoiced in her daughter's happiness.

When she should awaken from her drugged sleep, and hear that Lovelace was dying, and her daughter fled with another, there would be no one to comfort her, none to say that the story was untrue. She would have to simply accept it in all its horror, and her tender heart would break with the despair of it all. [127]

"Oh, my husband; my mother!" sobbed the heartbroken girl; and she wondered how Heaven could permit such cruelties as had been practised on her by her relentless enemies.

Before the coming of her heartless jailer she had been suffering with hunger and thirst; but she forgot both now as she lay weeping and moaning and praying, until after awhile the deep sleep of exhaustion stole over her, and she slumbered for long hours, starting fitfully now and then and murmuring feverishly the name of her beloved.

When she started broad awake at last, the lamp had burned low, and she knew by this that another day must have passed.

Her lips were parched with thirst, and she seized the bottle of water, and drank feverishly, though she thought bitterly:

"Most likely it is poisoned, and the draught will bring me a horrible death! But what matter? A speedy death is better than dying by inches in a living tomb!"

But she was mistaken—the water was not drugged. Her enemies would have been shocked at the idea of a downright murder.

When she died of the foul air and deprivation and grief, they would complacently call it the visitation of God. If she was driven to swallow the poison they had sent her, it would be by her own choice that she had died a suicide's death. It would not rest like a weight on their consciences; and they hoped she would do it, for then they would place the body where it might conveniently be found, and the coroner's verdict would say she died from laudanum administered by her own hand. [128]

Oh, the fiendish deed had been plotted well! And when Mrs. Ellsworth revived next day, and heard from Sheila Kelly the story of Dainty's despair, she was well pleased, saying to herself, excusingly:

"I would not have done it, only that she wilfully defied me, and thwarted all my plans for marrying Love to one of my favorite nieces. But it can not be helped now, and her death is quite necessary to my plans; for if Love dies, as they say he is bound to, I should inherit all his money, unless Dainty should return and prove the marriage that he claims took place between them weeks ago. How fortunate he was shot down before he could make the story public; for now it is known to none but me, and it shall never pass my lips—not even to my nieces. Dainty will soon die of her imprisonment, even if she is not tempted to end her sufferings speedily with the laudanum, and then I shall adopt the two girls as my heiresses, and take them here to live with me. As for Mrs. Chase, I hardly know what to do with the woman. They say she woke up soon after the shooting, and is taking on pitifully about Dainty's flight and Love's condition. I shall have to show her some kindness, I suppose, just to keep up appearances."

If she could have looked into the prison to which she had heartlessly consigned her fair young niece, she would have felt encouraged in her schemes; for the lovely girl was fading like some fair flower rudely broken from its stem.

Weeping and praying ceaselessly, she had eaten but a few morsels of the stale bread, for her anguish made her incapable of hunger; but the water was all gone in four days, though Dainty tried to husband it longer; for a fever had seized on her, and she was almost crazed by thirst, raving now and then deliriously in the darkness, for the tiny can of oil was exhausted, too, and [129]

the blackness of the tomb brooded over the cell.

She had sobbed till her throat was dry and parched and aching; she had wept till her tears were all exhausted in their fountains; she was so weak that she could not stand upright on the floor, and she could only lie like a stony image of despair on her bed and wait for death.

And she had looked forward so happily to this wretched week—she and Love. They were to have been upon the ocean now, en route for foreign lands, so happy in their love that listening angels might have envied their bliss. Ah, the pity of it, this terrible reality of pain!

At times, when she was not asleep or delirious, her thoughts flew to Love. She wondered if he were dead yet, and prayed for his spirit to come and visit her in her loneliness.

So the awful hours dragged by, though Dainty did not know whether they were days or months, in the bewilderment of her mind. They seemed to her like endless years; and the time came when she could bear her agony no longer, when, in burning fever and delirium, she prayed for death, and recalled her enemy's subtle temptation.

In the black darkness, the weak, white hand groped for the laudanum and unstopped it.

"God forgive me!" cried the maddened girl, pressing the bitter draught to her fever-parched lips.

Then the vial crashed in fragments on the stone floor, and all was still.

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CHAPTER XXIV. THE DARKEST HOUR.

A week had passed since the fatal birthday of Lovelace Ellsworth, and at the quiet twilight hour he lay among his pillows, a pale, breathing image of the splendid man whose life had been so cruelly blighted on his wedding morn.

It was the strangest thing the medical fraternity had ever heard of—how the young man lingered on with a bullet in his brain; but it was certain, they said, to have a fatal ending soon. The strange, speechless stupor in which he had lain for a week would soon close with death.

And meanwhile, his most faithful nurse was Dainty's mother.

The gentle woman had awakened from her drugged sleep directly after the exciting interview held in her room by Mrs. Ellsworth and her step-son, and her awakening had indeed been a most cruel one.

The news they had to tell her about Dainty was almost a death-blow.

She did not know how to credit the startling story, for she knew that her fair daughter never had a lover before coming to Ellsworth; but she did not know how to contradict the letter they showed her that seemed to be written in Dainty's own hand. She could only weep incessantly, and wonder why Heaven had dealt her so cruel a blow.

Then followed the attempted murder of Ellsworth; and rousing herself from the hopeless despair into which she was sinking, the noble woman gave all her time and attention to caring for the sufferer, trying to lose her own keen sense of trouble in care for another.

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And Love owed much to her tender care; for the hired nurse proved very incompetent, and the ladies of the household gave no help, Mrs. Ellsworth continuing so ill for days as to engross the attention of Olive and Ela.

In fact, they took no further interest in Lovelace Ellsworth, now that he lay unconscious and dying, for what could be gained by kindness to him now? It was better to cling to Mrs. Ellsworth, for she would inherit all her step-son's money by his failure to marry, and perhaps they might come in for a share through her favor.

So Mrs. Chase devoted herself to the sick man, weeping, hoping, and praying for him to recover and help her to find Dainty; for in struggling back to consciousness that morning, she had heard vaguely, as in a dream, Love's assertion to his step-mother that he was already the husband of her daughter.

This very day, a week after Dainty's disappearance, she had sought an interview with the now recovered Mrs. Ellsworth, and begged her to use some of her abundant means, as Love's agent, in searching for Dainty.

"It can not be true—that story that Dainty eloped with another for she never had any lover but Mr. Ellsworth. Besides, when I was awakening from my strange sleep that morning, I heard him telling you he had married my daughter two weeks before," she said, wondering why Mrs. Ellsworth gasped and grew so deathly pale before she burst into that strange laugh, declaring that Mrs. Chase had dreamed the whole thing.

"Nothing of the kind was said by my step-son," she declared, firmly; adding, with a sneer: "Your trouble must have turned your brain, causing you to imagine such a ridiculous thing; and I hope you will not mention it to any one else, for Lovelace Ellsworth was the soul of honor, I assure you, and the last person in the world to lead an innocent young girl into anything so disgraceful as a secret marriage." [132]

"I know that he was very noble," faltered the poor little woman, "and I must indeed have dreamed it if you deny that I heard such a statement. Yet the dream was as vivid as a reality."

"Dreams often are, and this was only another instance," replied the haughty woman, coldly, adding: "I see no use trying to find Dainty. She went away of her own free will, and she will not communicate her whereabouts till she chooses. With that you must rest content. As for my part, I am free to confess that I am so indignant at her treachery to Love that I don't care if I never see her face again!"

Mrs. Chase shrank sensitively from the angry flash of her sister-in-law's black eyes, and returned meekly to Love's bedside to watch the slowly sinking life and wipe the moisture from the pale brow that Dainty had so loved to kiss, and her tortured heart prayed hourly:

"Oh, God, give back his life! Raise him up from this bed of illness, that he may unravel the web of mystery that entangles the fate of my lost darling!"

Mrs. Ellsworth was terribly frightened, for Sheila Kelly had promptly told her of Dainty's declaration that she was already married to Love, and her offer that Love would make her rich if she would set her free.

If the proud woman had felt the least pity for Dainty, it all died now in the dread lest she should escape and rob her of the rich inheritance that would be hers if Love died unmarried. She said to herself resolutely that there was no help for it now. Dainty's life must be sacrificed to the terrible exigencies of her position. [133]

Not that Mrs. Ellsworth would have taken the girl's life with her own white hands, or even deputed another to do so. Oh, no, no! Of course she would not be so wicked, she told herself complacently.

But to imprison the poor girl on bread and water in a sunless dungeon, and goad her to despair till she died of persecution, or even took her own life—oh, that was quite another thing! thought the heartless woman, stifling the voice of conscience in her determination to succeed in her wicked aims.

With Sheila Kelly, as with Mrs. Chase, the mistress of Ellsworth laughed to scorn the assertion of Dainty that she was Love Ellsworth's wife.

"She was only trying to work on your feelings—do not pay any attention to her falsehoods," she said; and Sheila, who had half-way determined to make capital some way out of her important secret, stupidly yielded the point, and again became the tool of her wily mistress.

When Dainty had been imprisoned a week, Sheila visited her again, and, as a result, hurried to her mistress with a pale, scared face, whispering:

"I have earned the promised reward, madame. The girl is out of the way!"

"Dead!" whispered the woman, with an uncontrollable shudder.

"Yes, could and dead for hours, pore craythur!" answered the woman, displaying at last a touch of natural feeling in something like remorse over her hellish work.

"How?" demanded her mistress, hoarsely.

"By the poison, madame. It was all black on her lips, and spilt on the bed-clothes, and the vial broken on the floor; but she got enough to kill her stone dead." [134]

"That is well. If she chose to die by suicide, we are not accountable," she said, heartlessly, though her frame shook as with an ague chill.

No amount of sophistry could make her believe herself guiltless of this terrible deed.

"Will you come and look at the corp', madame? I want you to be satisfied I'm telling the truth," continued the Irish woman, eagerly; and after a moment of hesitation, Mrs. Ellsworth decided to go.

It was best to make sure of her cruel work.

In the twilight gloom they stole away, and threaded the dark, noisome corridors of the ruined wing down to the underground passages, till they reached the dark cell where poor Dainty's life had ebbed away in untended illness and fever, till, crazed and delirious, she had ended all with the tempting draught that promised oblivion of her sorrows in welcome death.

It was a sight to make the angels weep with pity when Sheila flashed her light in the gloomy place, and revealed to Mrs. Ellsworth's shrinking eyes the pale, still form of the girl she had hated and wronged, lying on the squalid couch, with her golden tresses veiling her wasted form and framing the fair, dead face like sunshine; the blue eyes closed on the world that had been so cruel to her; the pale lips stained with the dark liquid she had drained in the madness of her

desperation.

On the chair lay the broken remains of the bread she had been too ill to swallow; but the bottles of water were quite empty, and perhaps they could guess how she had drained them and wept for more in the terrible feverish thirst of her last hours; but they spoke no word to each other of this, only gazed and gazed with a sort of conscience-stricken awe on the dead girl, until at last Mrs. Ellsworth stooped and placed her hand on the white breast. [135]

"Yes, she is gone, poor girl! Her heart is cold and still, her form seems quite rigid; she must have been dead quite a long while," she muttered, in a tone of relief.

In reality, it was but a few hours ago that Dainty had swallowed the laudanum while just sinking into the stupor of a malignant fever; but to all intents and purposes, in the garish light, she looked like a corpse of ten hours' duration.

And now came an important question—how to dispose of the fair, dead girl; for it would never do to leave her here, lest the body be discovered in future, and the crime traced to the door of those who were responsible for her death.

Sheila Kelly had a plan, and she quickly proposed it.

"Yer want iverybody to know she's dead, because if Mr. Ellsworth gets well, he'll be searching for her till kingdom come, unless he knows the truth."

"Yes, you are right; although there is not one chance in a hundred of his recovery. He just lies with closed lips and eyes like a breathing corpse," said Mrs. Ellsworth, impatiently.

"I was a-thinkin' this," said Sheila. "It's a dark night, and there'll be no moon till midnight. I can carry her body in me arrums down to the road, and lay her under the tree by the creek, with the bottle of laudanum in her hand, and a little note, if ye choose to write it, a-sayin' she is deserted by her lover, who refused to make her an honest wife, so she chooses ter die. Then the coroner's 'quest will find the poison in her stomach, and all is over, and no suspicion of our part in her taking off." [136]

"Capital, Sheila!" cried her mistress, approvingly, though she added: "I hate the sensation that will follow the finding of the body; but it is best, as you say, to let the world know she is dead; then, should Lovelace survive, he can not doubt he is a widower, if he was ever married. So you may carry out your plan, Sheila, and come to me at once for your pay."

CHAPTER XXV. AMONG STRANGERS.

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The dark, calm, dewy night closed down presently, and Sheila Kelly promptly finished her wicked work.

The reward was immediately paid into her hands, and she departed in haste from Ellsworth to spend it in riotous living.

The night was warm and sultry, and few people strayed abroad; so out in the road, on the grassy bank by a little purling creek, there lay for hours the motionless form of a seemingly dead girl, by her side a bottle of laudanum, and a pathetic little note detailing the reasons for her suicide.

For awhile all was very still. The bending branches of the trees stirred, and fanned the still, white face, the dew kissed it; the light, airy wings of the summer insects brushed it in flying; the winds caressed it with the sweet odors of clover and daisies, and the waters murmured by with a soothing song, all alike unheeded by the beautiful, silent sleeper.

"Softly!
She is lying with her lips apart;
Softly!
She is dying of a broken heart!

"Whisper!
She is going to her final rest;
Whisper!
Life is growing dim within her breast!"

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Suddenly the sultry darkness was broken by a flash of lightning, followed by a low rumble of thunder. Swift rain-drops flashed down through the leaves upon that still, white face, and a summer storm broke in startling fury on the heated earth, drenching the motionless form with a steady downpour of water.

The wind howled through the trees, breaking and twisting branches, tossing leaves about like feathers, and swelling the little creek to a brawling stream.

All the while the blue sheets of lightning lighted up the sky with splendor, and gleamed through the tossing tree-branches down on the fair, quiet face seemingly locked in death's awful repose. For half an hour the war of the elements raged, then ceased as suddenly as it had begun, and the last faint gleam of lightning showed a startling change.

The lips of Dainty Chase were parted in long, gasping breaths; the blue eyes were dilated in a blank and straining gaze. She rose slowly, staggeringly, to her feet, and as the black clouds parted overhead, and the full moon glimmered through, flooding the wet earth with splendor, as though diamonds strewed every blade of grass, she stepped, slowly, falteringly, down to the road, dragging her drenched body along aimlessly toward the open country that lay beyond.

It would seem as if a miracle had been wrought, giving back life to the dead.

But Dainty's draught of laudanum had been too small to induce death, and the wholesome bath of rain and the electric elements abroad in the air had combined to rouse her from a stupor that might otherwise have terminated fatally. Life—feeble, and faltering, yet still life—stole back along her veins to her numb heart, and set it beating again.

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With a strength almost incredible after the terrible week she had endured, she wandered slowly down the road, obeying blind impulse, not reason; for her mind was yet clouded by delirium, and she had as yet no realization of who she was or where she was.

Her mind was a pitiful blank, and her lips babbled vacant nothings as she dragged herself on and on, further and further away from Ellsworth, and into the lonely woods, unconsciously leaving the beaten track, and pursuing a lonely bridle path that led her into the very heart of the forest.

Now and then, when her strength failed, she would drop down and rest; then start up and wander on again, aimlessly and drearily, until she seemed to be lost in a maze of thick woodland that looked like the haunts of savage creatures and crawling serpents, whose dens were fitly chosen among these jagged gray rocks.

"And when on the earth she sank to sleep,
If slumber her eyelids knew,
She lay where the deadly vine doth weep
Its venomous tear, and nightly steep
The flesh in blistering dew,
And near her the she-wolf stirred the brake,
And the copper snake breathed in her ear."

She came staggering out at last from a great thicket of ferns and found herself near a brawling mountain stream—one of those pellucid trout streams dear to the disciples of gentle Isaak Walton. On its green, sloping banks she sank down to rest, lulled by the low murmur of the waters, and presently the gray shadows of dawn were pierced by the sun's bright rays lighting the solitary wilderness with glory.

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Higher and higher mounted the sun, and all the woodland dwellers started abroad, while the mists of the night fled at the warmth of the advancing day; but wearily, wearily, slumbered the exhausted girl, crouching on the grass, with her pallid cheek in the hollow of her little hand, her hair a tangle of glory glinting in the sun, as it shone through the branches of the trees.

Heavily, wearily, she slept on as one too exhausted ever to wake again, and presently the deep forest stillness was broken by the dip of oars in the murmuring stream, while a man's voice cried, eagerly:

"Another speckled beauty for our string, Peters! Ye gods, what a royal breakfast we shall have this morning! Is your wife a good cook, say? For it would be a thousand pities to have these spoiled!"

The voice had the shrill twang of the commercial traveler, the daring explorer who penetrates the depths of the forests as well as the heart of the cities, and the answer came in the distinct *patois* of the West Virginian backwoodsman:

"Stranger, thar mought be better cooks than my Sairy Ann whar you hail from up yon in New Yorrok; but, I swow, thar hain't another saw-mill in West Virginnny as can ekal the cookin' in my camp! Wait till Sairy Ann br'ils these mountain trout and slaps 'em on to a pone of sweet corn bread. See?"

"Yes, I see—in imagination—and my mouth waters! Let us go back to the mill at once, Peters, and realize our anticipations. Hal-loo! what is that—over on that bank, man?"

"Gee-whillikins! what, indeed?" roared the saw-mill man, rowing rapidly to the bank and springing out so quickly as to almost upset his companion into the pellucid stream.

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Stooping over the sleeping form, the rough backwoodsman scrutinized Dainty with amazement, ending by shaking her vigorously, as he exclaimed, in wonder:

"Wake up, honey; wake up, and tell us whar in thunder you come from, a-sleepin' here like the dead, your clothes all wet and drabbled, and your little feet bare and torn and bloody with the rocks and briars! Why, 'tis a sight to make that soft Sairy Ann cry her eyes out! What's your name, chile, and whar'd you cum from anyway?" as the blue eyes flared wide open and Dainty

stared at his kindly, gray-bearded face with a pitiful, unrealizing moan.

The commercial traveler fastened the boat to a tree and came on the bank, too, full of curiosity; but all their efforts failed to elicit anything intelligible from the sick girl, and at length they came to the very intelligent conclusion that she must be some invalid strayed away from home, and that the only thing to do under the circumstances was to take her back to the saw-mill with them and await developments.

They did so, and thus our forlorn heroine found shelter in a rude shanty deep in the forest, among a few sturdy toilers who were camping here for the summer, a half score of rough but kindly men, the husband and sons of a good soul, Sarah Ann Peters, who did all the household work for the crowd, and accepted with open arms and heart this new claimant on her sympathy.

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CHAPTER XXVI. THE MOTHER'S WOE.

The experienced eyes of this motherly woman soon saw that the lovely young stranger was ill of fever, and in a very serious condition; but having successfully raised a family of nine stalwart sons by her own skill and without aid from the doctors, she "was not feazed," as her husband quaintly said, "by the case." She simply put Dainty to bed, and while she was getting breakfast, brewed a decoction of herbs, which she said would do her a world of good.

Meanwhile, she gladdened the drummer's heart by a delicious breakfast of broiled mountain trout, country ham, fresh butter, sweet corn pone, and strong coffee with thick cream, and he presently went on his way rejoicing after his night in the camp, and expressing the hope that the lovely stranger would soon be well again and restored to her friends.

But those cordial hopes did not seem likely of fulfilment soon, for Dainty continued quite ill for weeks in the lonely logging camp; and, to the surprise of the loggers, none of her friends came in search of her, and no inquiry was made for a missing sick girl.

In the stupor of her fever, she continued for weeks to be unconscious of her surroundings, and the busy, stolid family, who cared for her, did not think it their business to seek out her friends. They simply accepted the duty of caring for her as Heaven-sent, and left the rest to a gracious Providence.

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As for Mrs. Ellsworth, she was struck with consternation when no dead body was found the next morning where Sheila had placed it beneath the tree; but on viewing the swollen, brawling stream, she concluded that it must have swept Dainty's corpse away during the storm, and she lived in daily expectation of its discovery, and the great sensation it would create in the neighborhood.

Thus the summer days passed away, bringing the bright cool September weather, and still the waters did not give up their beautiful dead; but no search was made for Dainty, though Lovelace Ellsworth had astonished his doctors and disappointed his step-mother by clinging to life in spite of his grievous hurt, and was now on the road to recovery, so that the trial of Vernon Ashley for his attempted murder soon took place, and the prisoner received sentence of a term of years in the penitentiary.

Olive and Ela were now domesticated at Ellsworth as the acknowledged heiresses of their aunt, who, by the failure of her step-son to marry on his twenty-sixth birthday, now claimed to be the mistress of his wealth, and took credit to herself for her charitable spirit in caring for the unhappy invalid, who was now fast regaining health and strength.

As for Mrs. Chase, she had been virtually driven from Ellsworth by the caprices of the two proud, heartless girls who had received so much kindness at her hands in the days when they were poor school-teachers in Richmond.

Olive and Ela, who had so vigorously persecuted Dainty, with the able assistance of their aunt, rejoiced without stint when they learned that their machinations had driven their envied cousin to a premature death; and they regretted that the young girl's body had been swept away by the high waters, longing for her death to be made public, that they might exult in secret over the poor mother's woe.

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So bitterly had they hated and envied Dainty that it extended to her gentle mother, and even the sight of her pale, sorrowful face, as she moved unobtrusively about the place, giving the most motherly care to Love in his affliction, goaded them to futile rage, until in the malice of their natures they decided that she should no longer remain at Ellsworth.

To further their purpose, they made secret complaints to their aunt that Mrs. Chase was maligning them behind their backs to the servants, and ridiculing them as "beggars on horseback," who had forgotten their former poverty and toil in the sudden accession of riches.

No doubt Mrs. Ellsworth was glad of a pretext for ridding herself of one whose sweet, sad face

must have been a constant silent reproach to her for driving her loved daughter to death; for she hastened to assail the astonished creature with reproaches, dismissing her denials with incredulous scorn, and declaring that under the circumstances the roof of Ellsworth could no longer be her shelter.

"I will go this evening, madame," her sister-in-law answered with gentle pride, her pale face flushing as she added: "I should not have trespassed so long on your hospitality but I thought I was making myself useful by nursing Mr. Ellsworth."

"There is a trained nurse," Mrs. Ellsworth said, loftily.

"Yes; but she has been both careless and incompetent."

"I shall dismiss her to-morrow. He will only need his man Franklin now," Mrs. Ellsworth returned; and they parted with cold bows on either side, the heartless woman to return to her nieces with the news of Mrs. Chase's banishment, and the latter to take a sorrowful leave of Lovelace Ellsworth, and pack her trunk and Dainty's for immediate departure. [145]

The hot tears that fell on each dainty piece of clothing as she packed it away only the angels knew, for the mother's heart was breaking over the loss of her child.

She could not bring herself to believe that Dainty had fled with another man, for having accidentally made the acquaintance of the old black mammy, she had been favored with a thrilling narration of all that her daughter had suffered from the persecution of ghosts and the attempt at kidnapping.

It was a terrible shock to the mother's heart, and after that she could not believe that Dainty had eloped. She was sure that the girl had been stolen away, and perhaps murdered.

Oh, the curse of poverty! How it goaded the poor mother's heart!

Too poor to spend a penny in search of the beloved only child who had met such a mysterious fate, alone in the world, and almost friendless, she journeyed sorrowfully back to Richmond, only to find that a fire on the previous night had destroyed the cottage where her furniture was stored, and that she had no shelter for her head and no work for her hands. Was it any wonder her poor brain went wild?

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CHAPTER XXVII.

IT SEEMED LIKE SOME BEAUTIFUL DREAM WHEN SHE ENTERED THE GATES IN THE CHILLY SUNSET OF A WINDY OCTOBER DAY.

"Thank Heaven! the crisis,
The danger is past,
And the lingering illness
Is over at last—
The fever called 'Living'
Is conquered at last!"

The day came, late in September, when the autumn leaves were turning red and gold, that Dainty Chase opened wide her startled blue eyes upon the world again.

She had closed them consciously over six weeks ago in the gloomy dungeon beneath Ellsworth Castle, when, pressing to her desperate lips the bitter draught of death, she had bidden the cruel world farewell.

In the long weeks of illness and delirium that followed, many things had come and gone without her knowledge; and now, when consciousness returned again; there was a dazed look in the beautiful pansy-blue eyes that stared wide and dark out of her wan and wasted face, with the blue veins wandering plainly beneath the transparent skin.

"Where am I?" she gasped, faintly, putting her weak little hands up to her head, and wondering in a bewildered way what made her hair feel so thin and short and curly, like that of a year-old infant.

The fact was, that Sairy Ann Peters had been compelled to cut off all of Dainty's golden tresses to stay the progress of the devastating fever, and she had anticipated with womanly grief the sadness of the hour when the girl should realize her cruel loss. [147]

She came quickly to the bedside and took the little trembling hands in her toil-hardened but motherly ones, and said, tenderly:

"So you've come to yourself at last, dearie, and beginning to worrit the fust thing because all your

beautiful long curly hair is cut off! But never mind, chile; it will grow again as pretty as ever all over in shiny leettle rings like a babby's; and I was jest obleeged to crop it off to save your sweet life, you had the fever so miserable bad."

"Where am I?" Dainty repeated, in amazement, her gaze lingering confidently on the homely but gentle face before her and receiving in return the smiling reply:

"Where you are is soon told, honey; you're in a logging-camp, where my husband and nine grown sons are running a saw-mill till the first of October, way up in the mountings, where we hain't seen but two faces besides our own sence we come here the first day of April. It's 'bout six weeks sence my husband found you at day-break, lying sick and raving on the bank of the trout stream where he was fishing for our breakfast, and brought you home with him. I gin you my best bed, and been nussin' you all this while like you was my own darter, which I never had one, but al'ays hankered arter one; but the good Lord He sent me sons every time till I've nine on 'em; and I'm past fifty, and no more hopes of a darter now, though there'll be darters-in-law a-plenty, no doubt, when my boys begin to mate. Well, now you know all you ast me about, chile, and I'm jest as cur'us over you. What mought your name be, and wherever did you drap from, anyway?"

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"I—I don't know," Dainty faltered, weakly, with a bewildered air.

"Sho! you don't know? Ah, well! I see how 'tis. Your memory ain't come back clear yet; and no wonder, after sech a hard sickness as you've come through! Never mind, dearie, it'll all come back arter awhile. Are you hungry now?"

"Thirsty!" faltered the girl; and like a flash the past came back to her, conjured up by that single word, presenting to her mind the dark, noisome cell where she had suffered so terribly with the cruel, burning fever and the terrible thirst, until longing for death, she had pressed the bitter poison to her parched lips.

Then all was blank till now, and she wondered feebly how she had escaped death, and still more, how she had been released from her terrible captivity, and been brought here to this remote mountain camp.

The woman gave her a draught of clear, cold, sparkling water that cleared her faculties immensely, and closing her heavy-lidded eyes again, she began to recall the past from the dim shades of memory.

It was a bitter task, and the hot tears flashed beneath her lashes as she remembered that Sheila Kelly had told her that Love, her husband, was wounded and dying.

The next morning she said wistfully to the kind woman:

"I am beginning to remember things now. Do you know a place called Ellsworth?"

"I've heerd tell of it; it's quite seven miles from here."

"Seven miles! Then how on earth did I ever get to this place?" wondered Dainty, but she only said, reticently:

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"A lady named Chase is there, and I am her daughter. I was very ill, and I can not remember how I came to be out in the woods; but I would like for you to send word to my mother."

"I will see about it," replied Mrs. Peters; and after consulting her family, she reported that all were too busy to go to Ellsworth now, but they intended to break up camp the first of October, to return to their winter home at the station, and if she could be patient till then, she should have a bed in the wagon, and they could easily leave her at Ellsworth on their way past.

With this she was forced to be content, having no claim on her simple entertainers, save that of humanity; but the week, after all, slipped away quite fast in the delicious languor of returning health; and one day the Peters family loaded up three long wagons with their household goods, and set forth for home, having made Dainty and the mother quite comfortable on a mattress for the long journey over the worst stretch of rocky mountain road known in that section of a very rough country.

It seemed like some beautiful dream at last, when, after kindly farewells from her homely benefactors, she stood at the gates of Ellsworth in the chilly sunset of a windy October day, walking slowly and weakly along the graveled paths, past fading summer flowers and flaunting autumn blooms, on her way to the great house, her heart leaping with joy at the thought of her mother's kiss of welcome, and sinking with pain in the fear that she should find her darling dead and buried, according to Sheila's story.

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CHAPTER XXVIII.

MORE BITTER THAN DEATH.

"No—there's nothing left us now

But to mourn the past;
Vain was every ardent vow—
Never yet did Heaven allow
Love so warm, so wild to last.
Not even hope could now deceive me,
Life itself looks dark and cold;
Oh, thou never more canst give me
One dear smile like those of old!"

Dainty dragged her trembling limbs as fast as her strength would permit toward the great house, lifting her large blue eyes eagerly up to the windows in search of some familiar face, though hope was very weak in her trembling heart.

It was two long, weary months since the first day of August, and what might not have happened in that time?

If Sheila Kelly had told her the truth, her young husband must be dead and buried long ago, and the only friend left to her in the wide, cruel world would be her mother, if indeed that dear mother lived, for what more likely than that she had died of heart-break at her daughter's mysterious disappearance?

Dainty, who knew so well her mother's devotion, feared that such a calamity was but too possible.

But she realized that even if her mother lived she was very unlikely to be found at Ellsworth now. Her bitter enemies would have driven her away long ago.

Still a subtle yearning drew her to the home of her beloved, though, as she drew near to the scene of her hopes or fears, her keen emotion almost overwhelmed her, driving the faint color back from her wan cheeks to her weak heart, and making her tremble so that she could scarcely advance one foot beyond the other. [151]

How changed and lonely everything seemed since she had gone away? She did not even meet one of the servants as she hurried on, wrapping closely about her shivering form a thin cashmere scarf that kind Sairy Ann Peters had pressed on her to protect her, in her light summer dress, from the cold autumn winds. Thus panting, trembling, starting, and alternately hoping and despairing, she came close enough at last to gaze at the upper windows of the handsome suite of apartments that belonged to Lovelace Ellsworth.

She paused with a suppressed sob of excitement, and swept her glance rapidly from window to window.

Suddenly, with a cry of ecstatic joy, the girl sank to her knees with clasped, upraised hands.

"God in Heaven, I thank Thee!"

On her pallid, hopeless face had come such a light of joy and gratitude and boundless surprise as can only shine after long grief and pain when the grave seems to give up its dead and our beloved live again.

Her wistful, yearning eyes had been granted the most joyful sight that Heaven could have given—the sight of Lovelace Ellsworth sitting at the open window of his room, gazing with a strange, intent look at the setting sun as it sank below the mountain-tops and left the world in shadow.

"God in Heaven, I thank Thee! He lives; my beloved one, we shall be restored to each other!" repeated the girl in an ecstasy of gladness; and her dark-blue eyes clung rapturously to the handsome face, wondering at its pallor and strange, intent look. [152]

"Dear Love, how pale and thin and sad he looks! He has been ill, perhaps, or it is grief for me that has changed him so! It is strange that he never found me when I was such a short distance away; but there are many mysteries to be unraveled yet," she murmured, rising to her feet, and going in haste to a side entrance, where she could easily gain the upper portion of the house without being detected.

As she mounted the stairs, she was thinking so gladly of the joyful reunion with Love, that she did not observe, until they were face to face, a lady coming out of his room. It was Mrs. Ellsworth; and as she met the pale, trembling girl gliding like a shadow in the semi-darkness of the corridor, a long, loud, wailing cry burst from her startled lips, and making an effort to fly from what she took for a veritable ghost, she tripped, and fell prostrate to the floor.

Dainty saw her cruel aunt distinctly, heard the startled cry and the fall; but she never looked back, but ran eagerly to her darling's room.

She tore open the door, and rushed over the threshold, across the room, with outstretched arms.

"Oh, my love, my darling!"

Her young husband was sitting at the window in an easy-chair, with a velvet dressing-gown wrapped about him, and at the sound of her entrance, he turned his face around, and looked at the intruder blankly.

Blankly!—that was the only word that described it.

If Dainty had been the greatest stranger in the world, her young husband could not have turned upon her lovely, agitated face a more calm, unrecognizing stare. [153]

For a moment she stopped, and regarded him pitifully, sobbing:

"Oh, Love! am I so changed you do not know your own little Dainty, your wife? Oh, look at me closely! I have been ill, and lost my beauty for a little while. They had to cut my hair, but, dearest, it will soon grow again as pretty as ever!"

She moved closer, and timidly clasped her arms about his neck.

"Oh, my darling! do not look at me as if I were a stranger! Oh, do not! That cold, stony stare almost breaks my heart! Oh, Love! it is your own little Dainty! I was stolen away from you, and oh! I have passed through such a terrible experience! You have been ill, too, have you not, my dearest one? Oh, how thin and pale you are, but just as handsome as ever!" and she clasped him close in a warm embrace, and showered fond, wifely kisses on his cold, unresponsive lips.

The door opened suddenly, and an intelligent-looking mulatto man came in very softly, as if into a sick room.

Dainty knew him at once as Love's valued personal attendant Franklin.

Her arms dropped from Love's neck, and she blushed as he exclaimed:

"So it's really you, Miss Chase?"

"Why, Franklin, you knew me at once, but your master looks on me as a stranger!" she answered, in surprise that grew boundless as the man returned, sadly:

"Alas! Miss Chase, you and all the world must ever remain strangers to my poor master now!"

The mulatto was a clever, well-educated person, and his words, strange as they sounded, carried the ring of truth. [154]

"What can you mean?" she faltered.

"Miss Chase, where have you been? Have you heard nothing of Mr. Ellsworth's sad condition?" he asked, respectfully.

Still keeping her arm around Love's neck, the young girl answered, gently:

"I was kidnapped the night before my wedding, Franklin, and the next day I was told Mr. Ellsworth had been shot and was dying. Then I was taken very ill, and knew nothing more till I returned here to-day, when I was overjoyed to learn that he was still alive!"

The man looked at her with genuine sadness.

"Ah, Miss Chase! I do not know whether you should be glad or not. Is not this more cruel than death?"

"I do not understand," she faltered, uncomprehendingly; and he answered, with intense sympathy:

"You have spoken to him, and he does not know you—you, the dearest creature on earth to him, Miss Chase! Neither does he recognize any one else, nor remember anything. There is a bullet in his head that the doctors can not extricate, and it has destroyed his mental faculties completely. His health is good, but he has forgotten the past, and lost even the power of speech. He will never be anything, they say, but a harmless idiot."

She cried out with a terrible anger that it was not true, that she could not believe it; he was trying to deceive her and break her heart.

He was usually a quiet, stolid man, but the tears came to his eyes as she knelt on the floor and wound her arms about Love in passionate embraces, and, with tears that might have moved a heart made of stone, called on him to pity her and speak to her, his love, his Dainty, his true wife, whose heart was breaking for one tender word from his dear lips! [155]

CHAPTER XXIX.

AS WE KISS THE DEAD.

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Alas! nor words, nor tears, nor embraces, nor reproaches could move Love Ellsworth from his statue-like repose.

He suffered Dainty's caresses passively, but he did not return them, and his large, beautiful dark eyes dwelt on her face with the gentle calm of an infant whose intellect is not yet awakened.

"You see how it is, Miss Chase, and God knows how sorry I am to see my dear master so,"

Franklin said, sorrowfully, as she desisted at last, and gazed in silent anguish at the mental wreck in the chair.

A new thought came to her, and she exclaimed:

"Where is my mother?"

"She returned to Richmond almost a month ago, Miss Chase."

"Why did she not remain and nurse poor Love?" she groaned.

Franklin hesitated a moment, then returned in a respectful undertone:

"I can not say for a certainty, miss, but it is whispered among the servants that Mrs. Ellsworth sent her away because the young ladies wished it."

"The young ladies?" inquiringly.

"Miss Peyton and Miss Craye, your cousins. Mrs. Ellsworth has adopted them as her joint heiresses since she came into the fortune that my master lost by his failure to marry on his twenty-sixth birthday." [157]

He gave a great start of surprise when the lovely, sad-eyed girl answered quickly:

"He did not lose it, for in the fear of some such treachery as afterward really happened, your master persuaded me to consent to a secret marriage in the middle of July, so that I have really been his wife going on three months."

"It is false!" cried an angry voice; and there in the door-way towered the tall form of Mrs. Ellsworth, pale to the very lips, but with an ominous flash in her dark eyes.

She had recovered from the faintness that had seized her at first sight of the supposed ghost, on being assured by a servant that she had seen Miss Chase in the flesh entering the room of Mr. Ellsworth. As soon as she could command her shaken nerves, she followed Dainty just in time to hear her avowal of her marriage to Love in July.

"It is false!" she cried, furiously; but Dainty faced her bravely, clasping Love's cold, irresponsible hand in her own, exclaiming tenderly:

"He is my husband!"

"Can you prove it?" sneeringly.

Dainty was very pale, and trembling like a wind-blown leaf, but she summoned courage to reply:

"We were married the middle of July at that little church in the woods where we attended a festival one night. It was in the twilight when we were returning from a long drive into the country."

"Ah! there were witnesses, of course?" anxiously.

"No one was present but the minister who united us," Dainty answered.

"His name?" [158]

"I do not remember it."

"Indeed! that is strange. But perhaps you can remember whether there was a license, without which such a marriage would not be legal?" continued Mrs. Ellsworth, still scornfully incredulous.

Dainty answered, dauntlessly:

"Yes, there was a license. Love went to the county seat to procure it just previous to the marriage."

They gazed into each other's eyes, and Mrs. Ellsworth drew a long, shivering breath as she exclaimed, menacingly:

"This sounds very fine, but you can not prove one word of it—not one! It is a plot to wrest a fortune from me, but it will not succeed. It was your falsity in forsaking Love at his wedding-hour that caused all his trouble, and the sight of you is hateful to me. You must leave here at once, and return to your mother at your old home in Richmond, for the roof of Ellsworth shall not shelter you an hour!"

"Madame, after all my wrongs at your hands—" began Dainty, reproachfully; but she was cruelly interrupted:

"Assertion is not proof! Until you can bring proof of all your charges, I decline to admit them. Again, Lovelace Ellsworth is now a pauper dependent on my bounty. Raise but your voice to assert a wife's claim on him, and out he goes to become the wretched inmate of an idiot asylum. On your silence as to this trumped-up charge of a secret marriage, and also of wrongs pretended to be done by my hands, depends the comfort of Lovelace Ellsworth. Now say whether you love yourself better than you do him!"

It was a crucial test; but the girl did not hesitate.

She pressed her lips to Love's pale brow solemnly, as we kiss the dead, murmuring:

"I would sacrifice my very life to purchase any good for him!"

The man Franklin gazed on in keen sympathy for the girl and bitter disdain of the cruel woman, but he did not dare to utter a word lest he should make matters worse.

Mrs. Ellsworth's eyes flashed triumphantly at her easy victory over the broken-hearted girl.

"Very well. You have made a wise decision. You would only come to bitter grief by opposing me," she asserted, loftily; and added: "Now you must go. Here is ten dollars; take it, and go back on the first train to your mother in Richmond."

The girl clung to her husband, sobbing:

"Oh, let me stay and be his slave! I love him so I can not leave him!"

Franklin dared not open his lips, but his blood boiled at the cruel scene that followed, when Mrs. Ellsworth tore the weeping wife from her husband with resolute hands and harsh, cruel words, thrusting her outside the door as she cried:

"Go, now—leave the house at once, or I will send him instantly to an idiot asylum! What! you will not take my money? High airs for a pauper upon my word!"

She slammed the door, shutting the wretched young wife out into the hall, and turned fiercely upon Franklin.

"As you have been a witness to this scene," she cried, "I must also command your silence. Will money purchase it?"

"No, madame," he replied, with secret indignation.

"Then love for your master must be the motive," she cried, with a fierce stamp of the foot. "Do you want me to send him to an idiot asylum, where he can no longer have your faithful care?" [160]

"No, madame, no!" the middle-aged servant replied, trembling with emotion.

"Then you will hold your tongue upon what has just occurred in this room? Do you promise?" she cried, harshly.

"I promise," replied Franklin, sadly.

"Very well. See that you do not violate it on pain of serious results to your master. I am tired of the charge of him anyhow; for who knows how soon his simple idiocy may turn to dangerous insanity? So the least provocation from you would cause me to send him to a pauper asylum for idiots!" she cried, warningly, as she hurried from the room to make sure that none of the officious servants should dare to harbor her persecuted victim.

Dainty had already dragged herself out of the house, passing an open door where Olive and Ela looked out with derisive laughter at her blighted appearance, with the golden curls all shorn away, and the pale face stained with tears, while her faded summer gown and the old-fashioned scarf drawn about her shivering form did not conduce to the elegance of her appearance.

"Ha! ha! she looks like a beggar!" sneered Olive, adding: "Let us follow, and see where she goes for shelter. Of course, she will have shocking tales to tell on us if she can get any one to listen. I should like to prevent her if I could."

"Nothing will shut her mouth but death!" returned Ela, significantly, as, unnoticed by any one, they stole out to track the despairing girl on her wretched exile. [161]

The deep gloom of twilight had now fallen, and Dainty stood irresolute where to go, clinging forlornly to the gate, her wistful, white face turned back to Love's window, her tender heart wrung by the torture of leaving him forever.

"Oh! who could have dreamed of such a strange and cruel fate for my darling? It is indeed worse than death!" she sighed, miserably, thinking how cruel Mrs. Ellsworth had been to drive her away so heartlessly, when she had prayed to her humbly on her knees to let her remain as an humble servant and nurse him.

It seemed like the cruelest irony of fate that she, Love Ellsworth's wife, the real mistress of Ellsworth, should be driven in scorn from its gates, penniless, hopeless, and without a friend, her lips sealed to the truth of her wifedom, lest by speaking she should consign her beloved husband to a more cruel doom than he was already enduring.

Mrs. Ellsworth had carried things with a high hand; but she had been reasonably sure of her position, having investigated Love's story of a secret marriage, and satisfied herself that it would be well-nigh impossible to prove it.

Owing to Love's desire for secrecy, there was no record of the license on the books of the clerk of county court who had issued it. The clerk himself, a feeble, aged man, had died suddenly two months ago—the day previous to Lovelace Ellsworth's birthday.

The minister of the little church where the ceremony had been performed had also died a month previous of a malignant fever contracted in visiting a squalid settlement of shiftless sand diggers. [162]

A terrible fatality seemed to attend poor Dainty; for in all probability these two dead men were the only persons who held the secret of her marriage, and dead men tell no tales.

As the worse than widowed bride clung to the gate, taking that farewell look at her husband's window, she suddenly remembered that she had one true though humble friend in the neighborhood—poor old black mammy.

"I will go to her cabin and stay to-night, and to-morrow I must try to go home to mamma," she sighed, turning toward the dark patch of woods where the lonely negro cabin stood, and followed by relentless fate in the shape of her pitiless rivals, Olive and Ela.

"She is going to old Virginia's cabin, but she does not know that the negroes have all moved away to the station, and that she will find it deserted," whispered Ela. "However, she can shelter herself there for the night, though it will be very cold without a fire."

"Some one ought to build one to keep her warm," Olive returned, with a significance that was not lost on her keen-witted cousin.

CHAPTER XXX. A TERRIBLE DEED.

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John Franklin's manly blood had boiled with resentment at seeing poor Dainty driven away in disgrace from the home of which she was virtually the mistress, for he believed every word of the story she had told Mrs. Ellsworth.

It made his kind heart ache to realize so fully the sad mental plight of his young master, who could sit by in apathy, and suffer such a cruel wrong to be done to his unfortunate young wife.

He gloried in the pride that had made her fling back in the woman's face the offered pittance from her cruel persecutor.

"Yet, poor soul, she looked shabby and penniless. Perhaps she had not the money to pay her fare to Richmond. I wonder if the unfortunate young lady would accept a loan from her husband's servant?" he thought, anxiously.

It pained him to think of her going out into the darkness of the night, friendless and shelterless, knowing how well his master had loved her, and how worthy she was of that love.

He decided that it was his duty to follow her and proffer his services if she needed them, though in so clandestine a manner that wicked Mrs. Ellsworth need not find it out and revenge herself by cruelty to his master.

Leaving Love presently to the care of another attendant, he slipped away through the grounds to the road, wondering which way the unhappy wanderer had gone. [164]

A little incident ended his perplexity.

While pausing under the shade of a tree, gazing anxiously up and down the road, he suddenly saw the cousins Olive and Ela, skulking like criminals out in the dusky woodland path that led to old mammy's cabin; and the light of the rising moon on their faces showed them pallid and scared-looking, as if pursued by threatening fiends. Clasping each other's hands, and panting with excitement, they fled across the road to the gates of Ellsworth, without perceiving that they were detected in something underhand by the lynx eyes of a suspicious watcher.

"They have been up to some mischief, and I will find it out if I can," he thought, darting into the woodland path, and following it with alert eyes until suddenly the darkness was illuminated by the glare of fire, and rushing forward, he discovered old mammy's cabin wrapped in flames.

A startled cry burst from the man's lips as a terrible suspicion drove the bounding blood coldly back upon his heart.

Had the deserted cabin been fired by Olive and Ela?

If so, what had been their motive? Something very important surely, for conscious guilt had looked from their pale faces, had marked their skulking flight from the scene.

If Dainty Chase had gone to the cabin to seek refuge with the old black woman, their motive was not hard to fathom, and as Franklin bounded toward the scene of the fire, it all flashed over his mind like lightning.

The life of Dainty was a menace to Mrs. Ellsworth and her nieces, for if she could prove her marriage to Lovelace Ellsworth on the middle of July, she would wrest from his step-mother the wealth she claimed by reason of his failure to marry before his birthday, and in which she was [165]

making her nieces joint sharers.

Yes, all three of them had a terrible interest in the girl's death; the man realized it fully.

And Mrs. Ellsworth but a little while ago had given him a deep insight into her evil nature.

Perhaps she had sent her nieces—as wicked as herself—to follow poor Dainty and devise means for getting her out of the way.

It was horrible to think of such a crime, but he made haste to verify his suspicions by darting around to an end window not yet wreathed in the leaping flames and peering into the house, though the heat scorched him and the smoke was stifling.

He drew back with a cry of horror and indignation.

Yes, Dainty was there!

On gaining the shelter of the cabin, seeking the protection of the old mammy, whom she counted as her only friend, the girl, in her grief and sorrow and cruel disappointment at finding the place untenanted, had sunk into a heavy swoon on the hard floor.

Doubtless her cruel rivals, following and beholding her piteous plight, had seen their opportunity and taken instant advantage of it.

Roused from her unconsciousness by the crackling flames and stifling smoke, the girl was just rising from the floor, and the despair on her face as she comprehended her terrible environment would haunt John Franklin to his dying day.

The great, sublime pity that rose to flood-tide in the man's tender heart submerged every thought of self in an instant. [166]

No escape seemed possible for Dainty. The inflammable log cabin was surrounded by fire, and she stood in the center of the awful glare like some pale, beautiful martyr at the stake.

Franklin caught up a great boulder from the ground and dashed it again and again against the sash till it was broken in, then, stripping off his coat, muffled his head in it, and sprang like a hero through smoke and flame to the rescue of his master's bride, catching her up in his strong arms, and bearing her, after a fierce conflict with the fire, back through the broken sash to life and safety.

And not a moment too soon, for the roof of the cabin crashed in on the burning walls ere he had staggered three yards from the scene of his heroic deed, and the fierce flames, leaping higher, conveyed to two anxious watchers at Ellsworth the news that they had succeeded in their damnable crime.

Franklin realized that it was best to let them hug that belief to their hearts, so all that he did afterward that night was under the veil of secrecy.

He succeeded in getting an old buggy and conveying Dainty to the station, where he placed her on the midnight train and bought her a ticket for Richmond.

No one but black mammy was let into the secret, and unseen by any one in the gloom of the midnight hour and in the scarcity of travel that night, she was sent on her way to her mother, Franklin saying to her earnestly:

"Let me advise you, Mrs. Ellsworth, to keep close to your mother, and away from the fiendish enemies who are seeking to compass your death. I will take the best care of your husband, and may God send him recovery from his hurt, that he may restore you to your rightful position, and punish the wretches who have wronged you both!" [167]

CHAPTER XXXI. LOST! LOST! LOST!

"Stop! stranger; may I speak with you?—

Ah, yes, you needn't fear—

While I whisper through the grating,

I wouldn't have them hear.

These jailers, if a body

But chance to speak her name,

They roll their eyes so savage,

As if they meant to tame

Some wild beast, and they scare me.

Come nearer, nearer yet;

Come near me till I whisper,

'Have you seen her?—seen Annette?'

"What did they bring me here for?
 I say, I want to go!
 How shall I ever find her
 When I am locked in so?
 They lied to me—
 'Twas once there in the street,
 Where I sat on a doorstep
 To rest my aching feet.
 They say, 'We'll lead you to her,'
 And many times said, 'Come,'
 At last I followed, eager
 To find my little one.
 But when I bid them bring her.
 They answer, 'By and by.'
 Just turn the key, please, won't you,
 And let me slip out sly?"

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One of the most troublesome patients at the Virginia Asylum for the Insane in Staunton was a pretty, pale little woman named Mrs. Chase.

To look at her sitting very quiet—sometimes with her fair little hands meekly folded, and a brooding sorrow in her tearful, deep blue eyes—you would have said she was a most interesting patient, and could not surely give any one trouble.

But the women attendants in her ward could have told you quite a different story.

Mrs. Chase had a suicidal mania, and had to be watched closely all the time to keep her from taking her own life.

These attendants would have explained to you that all insane people have some hobby that they ride industriously all the time.

There was the man who believed himself to be Napoleon reincarnated, and amused everybody with his military toggery and braggadocio.

There was the lady who called herself Queen Victoria, and was never seen without a huge pasteboard crown.

There were the two men who each claimed to be the Christ, and frowned disapproval on the claims of each other.

There was the youth who imagined himself a violin virtuoso, and fiddled all day long, varying his performance by pausing to pass around the hat for pennies, of which he had accumulated, it was said, more than a gallon already.

There was the forsaken bride who was waiting every day for the false lover to return and bear her away on a blissful wedding-tour.

There was the man who believed himself already dead, and solemnly recounted to you the particulars of the horrible death he had died, adding that he was detained from his grave by the delay of the cruel undertakers in taking his measure for the coffin. He had actually been known to slip into the dead-house one day, and lie down in a casket intended for a real corpse, having to have force employed to eject him from his narrow abode.

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Again, there was the man who imagined himself to be a grain of corn, and fled with screams of alarm from the approach of a chicken. These, and scores of others with hobbies, tragic or ridiculous, as the case might be; but not one of them all, said the attendants, needed such care and watching as pale, pretty, meek little Mrs. Chase.

Her hobby was a lost or stolen child.

No one knew whether or not there was any truth in her claim. She had been brought there from Richmond, a friendless stranger, who had been found wandering homeless in the street, raving of a lost child.

Her story was just as likely to be false as true, they said, for lunatics imagined many things. It might be her child had died; for she was always praying for death, that she might find her lost darling again.

It was melancholy madness. The hardest to cure of all, said the doctors, and she had been frustrated in several frantic attempts to end her life. She was so clever and so cunning that they had to watch her constantly; but even the most impatient of the attendants could not give her a cross word, her grief was so pathetic, and she seemed so sorrowfully helpless in her frail, gentle prettiness.

"Have you seen my daughter, my darling little Dainty? She is lost; stolen away from me while I slept," she would say to every strange person she saw, and her pale face would glow as she added, proudly: "She was the prettiest girl in the world. I have often heard people say so. She was as beautiful as a budding rose, with hair like the sunshine, and eyes as blue as the sky. Her little hands were white as lilies, and her feet so tiny and graceful, every one turned to watch her

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as she passed; and was it any wonder she caught such a grand, rich lover? She would have married him if she had not been lost that night. Oh, let me out! let me go and find my darling! You have no right to lock me in here!"

Then she would fly into paroxysms of anger, trying to batter down the walls and escape from what she called her stony prison; and at other times she would pray for death, crying:

"Oh, God! send me death; for surely my darling must be dead, or she would have come back to me long before they locked me up here! They stole her away and killed her, my sweet Dainty, the cruel enemies who hated and envied her so much for her angelic beauty and her noble lover! Oh, who would keep me back from death, when only through its dark gates can I find my child again?"

But they watched her carefully; they allowed her no means of ending the life of which she was so weary; and so the months flew by from September to spring, and it was almost a year since Dainty had left her home so gladly for the country visit that had ended so disastrously, and with such a veil of mystery over her strange fate.

"Where is Annette? Where is she?
Does anybody know?"

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CHAPTER XXXII.

IT WAS THE OVERFLOWING DROP OF SORROW IN THE CUP THAT ALREADY BRIMMED OVER.

"Alone with my hopeless sorrow,
No other mate I know!
I strive to awake tomorrow,
But the dull words will not flow.
I pray—but my prayers are driven
Aside by the angry Heaven,
And weigh me down with woe!"

Young, beautiful, penniless, and alone in the world! Oh, what a cruel fate!

Dainty realized it in all its bitterness when she arrived in Richmond that dull October day, and found the first snow of the season several inches deep on the ground, making her shiver with cold in her thin summer gown and straw hat.

But her heart was warm with the thought of the dear mother she was going to rejoin.

What a glad reunion it would be for both in spite of her bitter troubles, when, clasped in that dear mother's arms, she should lay her weary head on that dear breast, and sob out all her grief to sympathizing ears.

She had a little money in a small purse that Franklin had forced her to take as a loan, and she hired a cab to take her to her old home, where she had not a doubt of still finding her mother.

Alas! what was her horror to find the small house burned to the ground!

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Dismissing the cab, she started on a round of the neighborhood, seeking news of the dear one.

But there were new neighbors in the sparsely settled place, and no one knew anything about the little lady who had kept boarders at the house on the corner.

Half frozen with the bitter cold, she dragged herself to the corner grocery, thinking that Mr. Sparks could surely give her some information.

His stolid, well-fed face was the first familiar one she had met, and she wondered why he wore that broad band of crape about his coat-sleeve.

"Is it really you, Miss Chase? Well, well! you're quite a stranger! Been ill? You don't look as blooming as when you went away in the summer. Well, it was hard on you losing your little mother in that cruel fashion! But death is no respecter of persons. He robbed me of my ailing wife about the same time your mother was called. What! you don't understand? Bless me! the girl's dropped like I'd shot her! Ailsa! Ailsa!" he called in alarm, as he picked up the unconscious girl, and hurried with her to the back of the store, which was also his dwelling.

Then a pretty, brown-eyed girl, sitting with several noisy children, sprang up, and cried in wonder:

"What is the matter?"

"Here's your old neighbor and school-mate, Ailsa, little Dainty Chase. She came into the store, and I was talking to her about the death of my wife and her mother, when she dropped in a sort of fit. See to her, will you, while I run back to my customers?"

Pretty Ailsa Scott hastened to resuscitate her old school-mate, and when she revived, was startled to hear her sob, hysterically: [174]

"I came to find my mother, Ailsa. I have been lost from her for wretched months; but your step-father told me she was dead! Oh, it can not be true! God would not be so cruel!"

Ailsa Scott had passed through the recent loss of her own mother, and she knew what a blow it would be to Dainty when she heard the cruel truth; but there was no escaping it, so she clasped her gentle arms about the stricken girl, saying sadly:

"It makes my heart ache for you, dear Dainty, but it would be useless to deceive you. About the time that mother lay in her last sickness it was rumored that your mother came back here the very day after the house was burned. I did not see her myself, but it was in all the papers that she went suddenly insane, and after wandering wildly about the city all day, calling for you, took poison and died in an alley. I do not know where she is buried, for mother was so very ill, and died the same week. Since then I've had my heart and hands both full with the care of the children, and teaching school, too, for I would not depend on my step-father for a penny. You know"—whispering—"I always hated him, and there wasn't much love lost between us. Indeed, I wouldn't have stayed here a day after mother's death only for my little half-brothers and sisters. He had no relations to help him, and hired help is not very reliable. He keeps a servant, but they tell me she is unkind to the children when I'm at school. If you have no friends to go to, dear, I wish you would stay with me awhile, and look after the little ones while I'm away."

It was a delicate offer of a shelter, for Ailsa's eyes had taken in the poverty of her guest, and Dainty was but too glad of a refuge in which to nurse her deep despair. [175]

When Ailsa informed her step-father questioningly of her offer, he smiled approval, and made Dainty welcome in his simple home, while tender-hearted Ailsa soothed her all she could in the bitterness of her bereavement.

"We are both orphans, dear, and we can sympathize with each other," she said, tenderly, and helped her friend to get some neat mourning gowns, in which she looked so frail and lily-like that she seemed to be fading away like a broken flower.

She tended patiently on the little children and won their love, and the exuberant gratitude of their father, this latter so effusive that it grew irksome to the sorrowful, reserved girl.

"Oh, Ailsa, I do not wish to seem ungrateful, but I dislike the man as much as you do, and his attentions are getting too pointed to be agreeable. I am afraid I shall have to leave you and the dear children, much as I love you," she sighed, in December, after two quiet months in the little house; and her friend rejoined, indignantly:

"I see he is trying to court you, although his wife, my dear mother, has been dead but a few months. Oh, why did she ever marry such a brute? I believe he broke her heart, for it was a strange decline of which she died. He was always flirting with his women customers, and scolded his wife harshly when she objected. He made her bitterly unhappy, the coarse, unfaithful wretch, and that is why I hate him so for my own papa never spoke an unkind word to her up to the day of his death. You will have to repulse him, but not too unkindly to arouse his enmity."

But the crisis came suddenly the next day while Ailsa was at school. Mr. Sparks boldly proposed marriage to the indignant girl. [176]

Her blue eyes flashed disdain upon him, as she cried:

"How can you be so coarse and unfeeling, sir, showing so little respect to the memory of the wife dead but a few months?"

"She is as dead now as she will be in ten years hence!" he replied, with a grin that filled her with disgust; while he added, wheedlingly: "But I know how particular women folks are over these trifles, and I would have waited till spring before I spoke to you on the subject, but the fact is, the neighbors are gossiping about my keeping house with two pretty girls, and neither one any kin to me. So I thought I'd better marry one of them, and shut scandal's mouth. And as for Ailsa, I never liked her. She is always throwing up to me that her pa was a nicer man than I am. But as for you, Dainty, I worship the very ground you walk on, and I'll marry you to-morrow if you'll say the word."

"I can't marry you, sir. I—I—oh I am going right away, Mr. Sparks! I couldn't breathe the same air with a man that was so disrespectful to his first wife's memory as to court another in three months after her death!" the young girl cried, in passionate disgust, arousing such bitter spite that the rejected suitor cast courtesy to the winds, rejoining, hotly:

"Go, then, Miss Pert, and the sooner the better! Shall I call a wagon to take your trunk?" sarcastically.

"You know I have no trunk, Mr. Sparks, but I will pack my valise at once, and perhaps you will let it stay till I can take it away. I must rent a room somewhere first," she murmured.

"No; take it with you, I say. Your clothes might get contaminated breathing the same air with me!" he answered, angrily. [177]

So presently Dainty went away in the teeth of a howling winter storm, without a penny in her purse, or a shelter for her head, while the little ones sobbed out to Ailsa when she returned that bad papa had driven sweet Dainty away.

CHAPTER XXXIII. A NEW HOME.

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Dainty dragged herself slowly along the snowy street, almost exhausted by the weight of the hand-bag; and she wondered pathetically if it might not be best to follow her mother's example, and seek refuge from life's woes by the straight gate of death?

"Dear mother, if I only knew where to find the lonely grave where strangers laid you, I would stretch myself upon it and die!" she sobbed, the tears in her cheeks mixing with the melting snow, as it flew into her pale face, driven by the bleak December gale.

She crept presently into a quiet area-way, and somewhat sheltered from the driving storm, pondered on what she was to do now, without friends and without money, in a cold, suspicious world.

Presently she heard girlish chatter and tittering, and glancing through a window, saw several young girls busy at sewing-machines, directed by an angular spinster whom she took to be a dress-maker.

A sudden temptation seized her, and she rapped timidly on the basement door, bringing the spinster hurriedly to it.

"Do you want a dress made?" she inquired, glancing at Dainty's hand-bag.

"No, madame. I am in search of work. Do you wish another hand to sew?" faltered Dainty.

"Um! yes—I don't know. Bring in your valise, and let us talk it over;" ushering her into a tiny, cozy kitchen, where they could talk in private. [179]

"Now, then, what's your name, and how came you out hunting work in the face of such weather? Tell the truth," she said, suspiciously; and Dainty obeyed.

"I have been employed to help nurse some children, and was discharged to-day. My name is Miss Chase."

"Did you bring a recommendation?" sharply.

"No, ma'am; but I think I can refer you to Miss Ailsa Scott, on this same street. It was her mother's children I was nursing; but the father sent me away."

"I know Mr. Sparks. Why did he send you away?"

"I would rather not tell."

"Then I can not give you work!" curtly.

"Oh, madame, I am ashamed to tell you! The man wanted to marry me, and his poor wife dead but a few months! I refused with scorn, and he drove me away," the girl answered, wearily.

"Humph! I can't see what he wanted with a chit like you for a wife," the spinster returned, tossing her false frizzes disparagingly, and adding: "I do need another hand, but the pay is too much. I can not afford it."

"Oh, madame, I would work for my board awhile, if you will let me stay here!" pleaded Dainty, eagerly; and the woman answered:

"I don't know but that would suit me very well. I live here by myself, all the girls going home in the evenings. You may take off your things, and I'll get some work ready for you. But, mind, I'll call on Ailsa Scott to-night, and unless you have spoken the truth, out you go in the morning."

"I have only spoken the truth, madame," Dainty sighed, as she obeyed the commands, and soon found herself seated among the busy sewing girls, basting away on a ruffle, and thanking God in her heart for even this poor shelter that must be paid for with constant toil. [180]

The girls all seemed to be gay enough, in spite of their poverty; but Dainty, poor, nervous girl, was glad when they went away at sunset, and left her alone with Miss White, as she found the name of her employer to be.

The spinster was not more than forty, and rather good-looking, in spite of her angularity. She asked Dainty many questions about Sparks, betraying quite a lively interest in the widower; and

by and by she dressed herself smartly in a black silk gown and red bonnet, and went off to get Dainty's character from Ailsa Scott, leaving the girl alone in the house, save for some tenants in the upper part.

Dainty was very tired and sad; but she washed the tea-things and put them away, and lay down on the lounge in the sewing-room, with a sigh of relief at the chance to rest.

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CHAPTER XXXIV. THROWN ON THE WORLD.

Poor Dainty was always tired and sad now. She had never been very strong since her illness in the mountains.

Her face was always thin and pale, her blue eyes hollow, with dark circles beneath them, while her breath was short and palpitating. She knew that she was strangely ill, and had a fancy that she was going into a rapid decline.

Ailsa Scott wanted her to see a doctor, but she always refused to do so.

"I want to die! I would rather not take any medicine from the best doctor in the world!" she exclaimed, rebelliously.

She had not told her friend the strange story of her secret marriage, fearing lest the threatened revenge of Mrs. Ellsworth should find her out even this far away; but Ailsa guessed well at some sad secret, and pitied the poor girl with all her gentle heart.

By and by Miss White returned in a very good humor indeed, saying that Miss Scott said everything was all right, and she would call to see her friend on her way from school the next day.

"I saw Mr. Sparks, too, and really, he is the most charming man I ever met," she simpered, adding: "I don't see how you could repulse his addresses, Miss Chase; he is so handsome and agreeable. Then, too, poor man, his sweet little children stand so much in need of a mother that he was excusable for haste, though he ought to have picked an older woman than you." [182]

"I should say that you, Miss White, would be the most suitable woman in the world for him," Dainty ventured, with a faint smile.

"Thank you for the compliment. I wonder if he thinks so, too? He was certainly quite attentive, and I didn't let him guess I knew he was looking for a wife; but I made up my mind to buy my groceries from him in future," smirked the delighted spinster, thinking what a little fool that girl was to refuse such a man.

Ailsa came next day, and was indignant when she heard how her step-father had treated Dainty, while she rejoiced that the girl had found such a refuge, for she believed that Miss White was in the main a very good woman.

"But, oh! Dainty, she has set her cap at Sparks, and I believe her flatteries have made an impression on him that will heal the wounds your scolding gave. Depend on it, that will be a match, and, as I believe she would make a real good step-mother to my little half-brothers and sisters, you and I will rent rooms and live together like sisters after the wedding!" she cried, cheerfully, trying to bring a smile to the pale, lily-like face over which the tears streamed as the girl sighed:

"Oh, Ailsa, you are like an angel to me!"

"I am very sorry," continued Ailsa, "that you have promised to work for your board, for you need a little money as you go along—all girls do—and when I found you were gone without a cent I was nearly crazy. I gave old Sparks such a lecture as he will never forget, and I fairly hugged that primpy old maid when she came to tell me where you were. Now, dear, take this ten dollars from your sister Ailsa, and use it in time of need. No, you shall not refuse it, or you may be sorry for it if Miss White should turn you out in the streets some day as heartlessly as old Sparks did." [183]

She had not the least idea of such a thing happening again, but she wanted to frighten Dainty into taking the gift, and she succeeded, after which she left, promising to see her friend often.

The weeks came and went, and Dainty toiled at her sewing with aching limbs and a heavy heart filled with dire forebodings that she dare not utter aloud to any human being, even gentle Ailsa, and at night her lonely pillow was wet with tears, and her piteous cry was ever:

"Oh, mother, mother, if only you were with me now to pity and help me in my trouble!"

For awhile Miss White was quite kind, for at the bottom of her heart she felt secretly grateful to the girl for having in a way brought about her acquaintance with Sparks—an acquaintance that she prosecuted with much vigor, running in and out daily for trifles from the store, till her broad

flatteries and fondness for the children awakened a warm sentiment in his heart, and he began to pay her such pleasing attentions as calling on Sunday evenings for social chats, Dainty always keeping out of the way, reluctant to meet him again, and quite unaware that in his spite he was doing all he could to turn Miss White's heart against her hapless *protege*.

March came with its bleak winds and occasional hints of spring, but Dainty's heart sank heavier day by day, her cheeks grew more pale, her eyes more heavy, as she drooped over her work shivering, with the thick cape always wrapped about her form, and looking as if death would soon claim her as its own. [184]

They were dark, sad days for Dainty, for the gay young girls, Miss White's assistants, began to shun her, and to look askance at the form always bundled up so closely from the winter cold. Two hands quit work abruptly and never returned, and the three others held private conversations with their employer, after which she came straight to Dainty, saying harshly:

"You wicked girl, you have imposed on me!"

Dainty was putting away the tea-things, and she started so violently that a china cup fell through her thin fingers and crashed upon the floor.

Miss White continued, angrily:

"I took you in as an honest girl and treated you kindly. In return you imposed on me, disgraced my house, and broke up my business!"

"Oh, madame!"

"Two of my best hands have quit me in disgust, and the other three threaten to go unless I turn you away at once. Do you know the reason, pray?"

Crimson with shame, Dainty dropped forlornly before her with down-dropped eyes, speechless with fear, and the woman continued, sharply:

"Take off that cape you've been shrouded in all the winter, pretending to suffer from the cold, and let me see if it is really hiding your disgrace."

"Oh, spare me!"

"Do as I bid you! There! I've dragged it off in spite of you! Oh, for shame—shame! How could you be so wicked with that innocent face?"

"Oh, I am not as bad as you think! I—I—"

"Hush! You can't excuse your disgrace. Mr. Sparks told me all along you were a bad girl, and told me when we became engaged I must send you to the right-about before we were married. But, somehow, I couldn't believe ill of you, till I see it now with my own eyes." [185]

"Oh! may I stay till to-morrow? You will not drive me out into the streets to-night?" imploringly.

"I ought to do it to pay you for cheating me so; but I'm a Christian woman, and, somehow, I pity you, and I can't be hard on you. You may stay to-night; but you must leave in the morning directly after breakfast. There's a hospital in this city for poor girls that's gone astray like you. You can go there, and the good doctor will take you in and let you stay till your child is born. Then you can put it in the foundlings' home and some good people may adopt it."

"Merciful God, have pity!" shrilled over the girl's tortured lips, as she sank on her knees, overcome by the horror of her thoughts.

Her child—Love Ellsworth's lawful heir—to be born in a home for "girls gone astray," and placed in a foundlings' home, to be "adopted by some good people." Had she come to this? She, whose future had promised so radiantly nine brief months ago! A wild prayer to Heaven broke from her pallid lips:

"Oh, God! take us both—the forsaken mother and child—to heaven!"

"It's too late to take on now. Better behaved yourself right at first," the old maid admonished her; adding, soothingly: "Go to bed now, and I'll send to-morrow for the good doctor to come and take you to the lying-in hospital."

But in the gray dawn of the cold morning she found the bed empty, and poor Dainty gone.

CHAPTER XXXV. GRAND COMPANY.

A strange chance, or, perhaps, a kindly Providence, brought Sarah Ann Peters and old black mammy together that spring at the railway station near Ellsworth, where both were then living.

The indefatigable white woman was laid low with la grippe, and her husband, in seeking a maid-of-all-work to fill her place, could find no one to take the situation but the aged Virginia.

As six of the large brood of sons were away at school, mammy undertook "to do for the rest," as she expressed it; and the last of March found her domesticated at the six-roomed frame house on the edge of the woods, a mile from the station.

Here the thrifty Peters family had lived for ten years throughout the winters, removing each spring to the lonely saw-mill in the mountains, where by hard, unremitting toil they succeeded in earning enough money to send their children to good schools in the cold weather.

Already Peters was making his arrangements to remove to the woods in April, when his good wife was stricken with a heavy cold that laid her low during the last three weeks of March; though her sturdy constitution triumphed then, and she sat up the first day of April, a little pale and wasted, but, as she expressed it, "feeling just as stout as ever, but glad to have mammy there awhile yet to take the heft of the work off her tired shoulders."

In her secret heart black mammy felt cruelly hurt at having come down, in her old age, to work for ordinary "po' w'ite trash;" but she had fallen on evil days in this latter end of her pilgrimage. [187]

After the terrible misfortune that had befallen Love Ellsworth, his heartless step-mother had made full use of her power to oppress all who had taken the part of poor Dainty Chase.

For many years mammy, with her son and her daughter-in-law, had inhabited rent free, their cabin on the Ellsworth estate, Love also allowing them the use of a patch of ground for their garden. The negroes having belonged to his ancestors in slavery times, he felt that this kindness was but their honest due.

But no sooner had Mrs. Ellsworth usurped the reins of government than she proceeded to drive away the poor negroes from the cabin. Thereupon mammy's son and his wife removed to the coal mines of Fayette County, and left the old woman to shift for herself.

Though she did her work faithfully for Mrs. Peters, she did not fail to impress on the good woman the superiority of the position from which she had fallen, and the grandeur of the family that had formerly owned her, always adding that "Massa Love wouldn't a let her kem to sech a pass ef he had kep' his mind."

Mrs. Peters, with the kindest heart and warmest sympathies in the world, listened patiently to black mammy's tales, till the loquacious old negress at last confided to her the whole story of her young master's blighted love dream, down to the moment when Franklin had brought Dainty Chase to the station, bought her ticket, and sent her on to her mother in Richmond.

Then the interested Mrs. Peters also had a story to tell, for she had recognized in the heroine of the story the lovely patient she had tended so faithfully, last fall, at the logging camp in the woods. [188]

"And I believe she told the truth to that wicked woman, that she was secretly married to Mr. Ellsworth," she affirmed. "For, Virginy, I'll tell you a secret that hain't never passed my lips before, not even to Peters, and I don't often keep secrets from my good old man. But this is it: I more nor suspected that that pore young chile was in a way to become a mother."

"Lord, have mercy!" ejaculated black mammy, and the tears rolled down her fat, black cheeks.

After that the two women could talk of little else but sweet Dainty and her sorrowful plight—an unacknowledged wife soon to be a mother.

They counted up the months on their fingers, and found that the important event was almost at hand—must happen within the next two weeks—and mammy exclaimed:

"I see it all plain as daylight now! Massa Love was 'fraid sumpin' would happen to 'vent de marriage, so he took his sweetheart off on de sly, an' dey got married; den he sent me home an' fix up dat room nex' to his own fer his bride, so 'at he kin tek keer ob her ebervy night—dat's it. An' den dey bofe feel so easy in dey min's, little finkin' what turrrible fings gwine happen on de birfday. Oh! ain't it de awfules' 'fliction you ebber hear on, Mis' Peters? Dat pore man wif de bullet in his haid, an' his senses gone, an' dat pore wife druv away in poverty, an' dem wretches rollin' in gold dat belongs to Massa Love an' his sweet bride! An' to fink dat I is cheated, too, out o' a hunnerd dollars! fer I done match dat torn piece ob torchon lace to Sheila Kelly's night gownd long ago, an' ef Massa Love was in his senses, I could claim dat big reward." [189]

That night, the last of March, Mrs. Peters confided the whole story to her surprised and sympathizing husband.

"I never heard anything to ekal it!" he declared, indignantly; adding: "I wish sumpin' could be done to git that poor young wife her rights, and I'm willin' to spend time and money helpin' ef I only knew which end to begin at! Them wimmen at Ellsworth ought to be tarred and feathered and rid on a fence rail, I swow! But likely they'll make it hot for any one as tries to bring home their sins to 'em."

The next day he rode over to the station at sunset on his old gray mare Stonewall, for some groceries from the store, and the supper things being cleared away, mammy took her black pipe and sat down by the roadside to smoke, just outside the front gate.

By and by, through the cloud of smoke and the purple haze of twilight, she saw him returning with his bundles, and, sitting behind him on old Stonewall's back was a woman, whom he presently lifted down, exclaiming, cheerfully:

"Git up, mammy. Come out to the gate, Sairy Ann! I've brought you gran' company from the train, and you must spread a feast and rejoice! Come in, and welcome, Mrs. Ellsworth!"

"Oh, mammy! I've come back to you to die!" sobbed Dainty, falling wearily on the old woman's ample breast.

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CHAPTER XXXVI. "ONLY TO SEE YOU, MY DARLING."

Oh, what a welcome Dainty received from the true hearts in that humble home!

They treated her like a queen, but so warm was their devotion, and so eager their interest, they soon drew from her lips all that had happened to her in Richmond.

The women's tears fell copiously, and even Hiram Peters could not help drawing the backs of his horny hands now and then across his kind, moist eyes, while he groaned:

"I swow you had troubles fit to kill you!"

"At the last I could bear my shame and misery no longer. I made up my mind to come back to West Virginia, and try to find some evidence of my marriage, that my child should not be born under a cloud of shame," said Dainty, sorrowfully.

"Poor lamb!" groaned mammy; and the others sighed in concert, for when they had heard all she could tell about her marriage, Mr. Peters was fain to confess that her prospects looked very dark.

"You see, Mrs. Ellsworth, madame," he said, proudly giving her her true name, bringing a flash of pleasure to her eyes, "that old man, the county clerk that must have issued the license, died soon after, and likewise the preacher of that little church in the woods; so, unless you can find out what became of the license, it will be a hard job to prove the marriage."

"I fear so," sobbed Dainty; then she added: "Do you think, mammy, that Mrs. Ellsworth is still [191] unrelenting?"

"Hard as a stone, honey!"

"But perhaps if she knew the truth, that a child is to come of that secret marriage, she might relent and pity it enough to acknowledge me as Love's wife," sighed Dainty, anxiously.

But her listeners all persuaded her that such a thing was impossible. The woman would never acknowledge anything that would cause her to lose her grip on the wealth she was holding by a shameless fraud.

"Honey, don't yo' go nigh them deceitful wretches! Don't yo' even let them know that yo' are alive, or there'll be a new plot set on foot direckly 'ginst yo' sweet life and the one that's comin' too! Hab yo' forgot how the old 'oman shet yo' up in dat dark dungeon till yo' pisened yo'self, and how dem gals tried to burn yo' up in de ole cabin, and would hab 'ceeded, too, but for John Franklin breakin' in de winder and fetchin' yo' out—an' his face an' han's an' hair all scorched drefful!" expostulated mammy.

Among them all they persuaded her that it was better not to try to prove her rights than to lose her life.

"You stay here quietly long o' us, honey, and don't let no one know who you air, and arter your chile comes, you may leave it with me ef you wants, and I'll tek keer of it till the good Lord makes a better way for it. And all of us we'll pray and pray that good luck may come to you," exclaimed Mrs. Peters, piously, while her husband chimed in, fervently:

"You kin 'pend on us to be your firm fren's fer life, ma'am, and you air jist as welcome ter anythin' we got as any one of our nine boys!"

Oh, how their humble kindness went to her wounded heart, encouraging her to cry out, [192] passionately:

"There is one thing I crave more than I ought on earth, and perhaps some one might manage it for me; it is to see my husband's face again!"

A dark cloud seemed suddenly to fall over them all, and she cried in dismay:

"Why do you all look so strange and frightened? Oh, my God! do not tell me he is dead!"

"No, deares', yo' husban' ain't dead!" sighed mammy, and burst into sudden loud sobs, as she added: "Dey done tooken him away dis larst week to New York, honey. Doctor Platt, dat good ole

man, yo' know, and Franklin, his body-servant, as sated yo' from de fire, yo' know. And yo' kain't nebber look on his face no mo', fer Doctor Platt say he was gettin' dang'ous an' might hurt somebuddy, so he 'suated Missis Ellsworth to fasten him up in a 'sylum way off yonder, an' him'll nebber come home no mo'!"

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CHAPTER XXXVII. A WONDERFUL DISCOVERY.

Fortune had indeed seemed to favor Mrs. Ellsworth.

Nearly nine months had passed since her step-son's attempted murder; and though his bodily health seemed good, no change for the better had taken place in his mental condition.

Another very pleasing fact was that Dainty Chase had never turned up again to annoy her with assertions of a secret marriage, to which she could produce no proof but her simple word. She wondered in her secret mind what had become of the girl, for her nieces were too prudent to confess to her the crime by which they supposed their beautiful cousin to have perished.

They suspected that while glad to have the girl out of the way, she might feel squeamish over downright murder.

So they decided that it was just as well not to tell her that they had tracked the hapless girl to the negro cabin, and having seen her fall senseless on the floor, had fired the ramshackle old place in front of both doors and fled.

As the cabin had burned completely to the ground, they supposed that their victim had perished in the flames; but their guilty consciences had never permitted them to venture near the *debris* to see if her charred bones remained a mute witness of their awful deed.

As the winter wore away and no more was heard of Dainty or her mother, they confidently looked on the girl as dead; but if their consciences reproached them for their sin, they allowed no sign of it to appear on their careless faces as they plunged into every gayety offered by their new position. The winter had been an epoch in their hitherto poverty-stricken lives, and they made the most of it, Mrs. Ellsworth giving them a lavish allowance, and permitting them to travel with friends wherever they chose.

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Thus they had had a trip to California in December, and on returning in February had been given glimpses of the gay season in New York and Washington before returning in March to silent, gloomy Ellsworth, where the mistress had remained inflexibly on guard over her step-son, lest the doctors, peradventure, should do something to restore his mind.

"That meddlesome old Doctor Platt keeps on hoping for something to happen. The other physicians have given it up, and say that Love will be an idiot for life. He is sure that if the bullet could be removed, he would be restored; but I will not permit them to cut into the poor boy's head, and perhaps destroy his life as well as his reason," she often complained, until the old doctor gave up all hopes of gaining her consent to the operation that he wished performed.

But he still came to visit Love in a friendly way, although the young man continued in the same state of seeming hopeless idiocy, never improving with the lapse of time, until, in desperation, the old man, with Franklin's assistance, concocted a daring scheme.

He had read with contempt and abhorrence the mind of the woman, and knew that she wished to keep her step-son in his present state, and that no proposition looking to his cure would be entertained by the selfish creature who wished to keep her grip on the young man's property. She would rather see him dead than restored to his rich dower of brains and wealth.

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So when, late in March, she was first informed by Franklin, and afterward by Doctor Platt himself, of a change for the worse in the patient, she was more pleased than sorry.

Love's condition was changing, they said, from simple idiocy to active insanity that would necessitate his removal from Ellsworth to a place of close confinement.

"He may develop at any moment a homicidal mania, and prove terribly dangerous to his attendants. Indeed, Franklin has grown nervous already over some of his more violent moods, and threatens to resign his place," said Doctor Platt.

This was indeed most welcome news for Mrs. Ellsworth. Nothing except Love's death could have pleased her better.

Though she had been fond of him once, his opposition to her will, and his contempt of her two favorite nieces, had turned her lukewarm fondness to active hate.

So it was hard for her to assume a look of concern when it was all she could do to keep from openly rejoicing. She dropped her face in her hands to keep the keen old doctor from openly reading its expression.

"It is a very delicate and peculiar case," continued Doctor Platt. "You can not place him in an idiot asylum, because he is not now an idiot—yet his lunacy is not developed enough to commit him for lunacy. At the same time, he may become violent at any time and—do murder! It is not right to keep him at Ellsworth with such terrible risks attached to his staying. I have a plan, if you choose to consider it. If not, you may consult other physicians."

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"Let me hear your plan first," she answered, affably, in her secret joy.

"Let me take him to a private sanitarium in New York, well known to me as the best place in the United States for a person in his condition. It is a high-priced place, but you can afford it for the sake of the relief of mind you would experience in removing this threatening danger from Ellsworth, and in knowing that his hopelessly incurable insanity had the kindest treatment."

Those two words caught her instant attention.

"You honestly believe him hopelessly insane?" she cried.

"Yes," he replied; saying, inwardly: "God forgive me for lying, but it is in a righteous cause!"

In fact, he was quaking with fear lest she should suspect the motive lying at the bottom of his anxiety to take his patient to New York.

If she had been a well-read woman, he would have been afraid to risk such a plot; but he knew that she scarcely ever scanned the columns of a newspaper.

Otherwise she would have been cognizant of the new scientific discovery, one of the greatest of the nineteenth century triumphs, and most important to the medical cult—the discovery of the wonderful X-ray of light by the famous German savant, Professor Roentgen.

She would have known that by the operation of this X-ray the formerly dense human body could be made transparent enough to be seen through, revealing not only the skeleton with all its delicate mechanism, but the presence of every foreign element, so that already bullets had been located and removed from the bodies of patients who had suffered tortures from them for years. These wonderful facts filled the columns of newspapers and the pages of magazines. The whole world was wild with enthusiasm. It was the greatest and most beneficial discovery of the nineteenth century, they said, and Professor Roentgen's thoughtful brow was laureled with a fame that made him greater than a king.

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Mrs. Ellsworth had never read a line about the X-ray. If you had asked her she would not have understood what you meant.

But every fiber of the intelligent old doctor's body vibrated with joy of the new discovery, and the hope that through its means his patient might be restored to health.

The dream that he dreamed night and day was to carry Lovelace Ellsworth to New York and have the bullet in his head located by means of the wonderful X-ray.

"Once located it might in all probability be removed, and your master restored to himself," he said confidentially to the clever Franklin, who rejoiced exceedingly at this little ray of hope in the darkness of his master's fate.

But realizing the deep interest Mrs. Ellsworth had in preventing Love's restoration to reason, they knew it was useless to tell her of the new discovery with any hope of her consent to having any experiment tried on her step-son.

Nothing remained to them but strategy, and they resorted to its use with flattering success.

Mrs. Ellsworth had had so many triumphs, that she regarded this one as only her due—a reward of her clever plotting, as it were.

The removal of Love to a sanitarium would be a great relief to her mind; and she jumped at the proposition with alacrity, even twitting the old doctor with her superior judgment.

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"I told you all along that you were foolish ever to expect his recovery, and you see I was right."

"The women are always right," he replied, gallantly, in his joy at having gained his point.

So armed with a liberal check from her hand, the old doctor and Franklin journeyed to New York with the patient, in the hope of restoring his wrecked mind and of righting a great wrong.

For, removed from the influence of Mrs. Ellsworth's threat, the faithful servant decided that he would keep silence no longer. He confided to Doctor Platt the pathetic story of Dainty's return to Ellsworth, her claim to be Love's wife, her banishment by her wicked aunt, the wrong that Olive and Ela had attempted, and lastly, how, at the peril of his own life, he had rescued the poor girl from the burning cabin, and sent her away secretly to Richmond.

Doctor Platt listened aghast to these startling disclosures, and said, angrily:

"You should not have been intimidated by that wicked woman's threats, for such crimes as hers and her nieces' should be proclaimed from the house-tops, and punished as they deserve. I would give anything I own if you had brought that worse than widowed bride to me and given me the task of righting her cruel wrongs."

"She is no doubt safe with her mother, and your help now will be as welcome as it would have been last fall," replied Franklin, consolingly. So they postponed the search for the girl, who was presumably safe in Richmond, until after they had taken Lovelace to the New York doctors for treatment.

By the middle of April they met with a reward of their labors and the realization of their hopes in the complete success of the X-ray experiment on Love. [199]

The murderer's bullet had not entered the victim's brain. It was imbedded in the thick part of the skull, and its pressure on the brain had benumbed the intellectual faculties, producing all the phenomena of idiocy.

A very delicate surgical operation removed the cause of trouble, and Lovelace Ellsworth took up life instantly again where he had left it off at the moment when the fatal bullet had pierced his head.

"My friends, I am here to tell you that a foul crime has been perpetrated; but the design of the guilty party will not succeed, thanks to precautions that I took two weeks ago in the fear of this treachery. My precious Dainty has been stolen away in the hope of preventing our marriage this morning, and a false story has been circulated that she has eloped with another. But Mrs. Ellsworth has overreached herself in her eagerness to forward the interests of Miss Peyton and Miss Craye. She will realize this fact when she hears that I was married secretly to Dainty Chase two weeks ago, and—" Here he rolled his large dark eyes around the room, and gave a start of surprise, faltering, "Where are they all—my wedding guests?"

The moment had come when he must learn all the cruel truth.

But they broke it to him as gently and favorably as they could, leaving out all of the worst, to be told when he was strong and well again.

The result was a terrible agitation, coupled with a passionate yearning to go at once in search of his missing bride.

But that was impossible, said the doctors. He must remain quietly at the hospital until the incision they had made in his head healed. [200]

He took counsel with his noble friend, Doctor Platt, and the result was that two personals were sent to the leading newspapers of Virginia and West Virginia. One personal asked for news of the whereabouts of Miss Dainty Chase; the other for information regarding a marriage license issued in July to Lovelace Ellsworth and Dainty Chase. In both cases large rewards were offered, and the address was given fictitiously as "Fidelio, New York City."

CHAPTER XXXVIII. GOOD NEWS.

The two personals caught the eyes of Ailsa Scott the eighteenth day of April, as she was tying up a bundle in a copy of *The Richmond Times* several days old.

Her sad thoughts had been fixed on Dainty; for only to-day Miss White had called to acquaint her with Dainty's flight.

She had also mentioned the girl's bad behavior and delicate condition, blaming Ailsa for having recommended such a girl to her favor.

The young girl's brown eyes flashed with resentment as she answered:

"Miss White, I will not allow you to speak unkindly of my dear friend. She was very unhappy, I know, and, to speak plainly, I suspected her condition some time ago; but I would not wound her feelings by referring to it, hoping that she would see fit to explain matters herself later on. But she is a noble girl, and I have not lost confidence in her by what you tell me, for I believe Dainty was secretly married, and that the truth will come out some day."

"Perhaps you know where she is now? I feel very uneasy over her fate, and am sorry now that I spoke so harshly to the poor girl in my surprise!" exclaimed Miss White, softening under the influence of Ailsa's loving faith.

"Sorrow will not bring her back now. You should have shown a more Christian spirit to the unhappy girl, and perhaps she might have given you her confidence, showing you that she was not as bad as you thought. But I do not know where she is. You know, Miss White, I have had to nurse the dear little children through bad colds, and have not seen Dainty for over two weeks. Perhaps the poor girl thought I had forsaken her, too," added Ailsa, bursting into tears. [202]

Miss White was a weak woman, but not a cruel one. Ailsa's distress moved her to such keen sympathy that she wept too, declaring that if only she could find the sweet, unfortunate child she would make amends for her unkindness.

"If you hear from her you'll let me know, Ailsa, won't you? And I shall tell Mr. Sparks he did wrong to try to turn me against Dainty. She is a good girl, I believe, after all, and I'll stand her friend, even after I'm married, if she will forgive me for last night," she said, before she went away.

Ailsa wept most bitterly, for she feared that it would be long ere she saw Dainty's sweet face again.

"She thinks I have forsaken her, and she will be too proud to let me know where she is," she thought.

Then came the startling discovery of the personals offering a reward for news of Dainty Chase, and of the marriage license that had been granted to her and Love Ellsworth.

Ailsa hunted up the back numbers of the newspapers, and found that the personals had been running more than a week, and that they were inserted in all the city journals.

She thought:

"Fidelio—that means faithful—so it must be some dear friend of Dainty's that wants to find her so badly—perhaps her husband; for I am bound to believe she was secretly married. So I will write to Fidelio, and tell him all I know of the dear girl's fate." [203]

On the same day, almost the same hour, a pretty, sad-faced woman at the insane asylum in Staunton sat reading the same personals in some newspapers the matron had given her that morning.

It was Mrs. Chase, and a great change had come over the sweet little woman. In fact, the doctors and attendants declared that she was quite well of her suicidal mania, and that at the next meeting of the board of directors, on the twentieth of April, her discharge would be asked for as a cured woman. Every one would be sorry to see her go, she was so gentle and refined and helpful now, and the violence of her first sorrow had subsided into patient, uncomplaining resignation.

But the strangest thing about her was that she did not seem to have a friend in the world. No one ever came to see her or wrote to inquire how she was. They wondered where she would go when she was discharged.

One of the new supervisors, a pale, middle-aged woman in widow's weeds, passed through the ward when Mrs. Chase was reading the papers, and found her weeping violently. She stopped, and asked kindly what was the matter.

"Read these personals and I will tell you," was the sobbing reply.

The supervisor, Mrs. Middleton by name, obeyed, and cried out in surprise:

"How very, very strange!"

"Is it not?" cried Mrs. Chase, pathetically. "You see, that girl, Dainty Chase, is my own child. I went crazy about her, they say; but between you and me, Mrs. Middleton, I don't believe I ever was really insane, you know, only just wild and hysterical over my lost child, fearing her cruel enemies had killed her, and if only they had not shut me up in this place, I believe I should have found her long ago. If you had time to listen, I would like to tell you my whole sad story." [204]

"I will take time, for I am more deeply interested than you can possibly guess," said the kind supervisor.

"Did you ever hear anything so sad? And is it any wonder that I temporarily lost my mind and tried to throw away my life?" cried Mrs. Chase; adding: "Is it not strange that the search for Dainty is being revived now? It would almost seem as if Lovelace Ellsworth has recovered the use of his senses."

"Perhaps the bullet in his head has been discovered by the use of that wonderful X-ray we have been reading about in the newspapers. It must be so, for who else could have an interest in that marriage license?" exclaimed the supervisor, excitedly; adding: "I have something wonderful to tell you, Mrs. Chase. I am the widow of the preacher that married your daughter to Lovelace Ellsworth, and I have in my possession the license and the certificate of marriage, given me by my husband to keep until called for. And I also witnessed the marriage ceremony, peeping through the vestry door, as Mr. Middleton said there ought really to be one witness, although the young pair insisted not. But now you see how important it was, for my husband died soon after, and in my grief I forgot all about the secret marriage till recalled to memory of it by this personal. So now I shall write to this Fidelio with my good news, and tell him all about your case too, poor thing!"

Ah, what ineffable joy those two letters of Mrs. Middleton and Ailsa Scott carried to the heart of Fidelio in New York!—joy that his darling still lived, and that the proof of their marriage could be so readily obtained, to confound the woman who thought herself secure in the enjoyment of his wealth.

And who could blame him that he wept like a woman on reading Ailsa's long letter, telling all she knew of Dainty's fate, not concealing the fact that had caused her banishment from the dressmaker's house?

"Dear little wife, soon to be the mother of my child! Oh, heavens! what must she not have suffered in her lonely grief! Oh, we must find her quickly, and take her home to Ellsworth!" he cried, passionately, to his friends, who agreed with him in everything.

Letters were hastily forwarded to Ailsa and Mrs. Middleton, thanking them for their information and saying that "Fidelio," who was ill in New York, hoped to be well enough to travel soon, and would make a personal call on them within the week.

Happiness made his recovery so swift that within a week he was able to leave New York for Richmond, accompanied by Doctor Platt and the faithful Franklin.

He hurried to Ailsa's humble home at once, and the lovely girl wept for joy at the wonderful story he had to tell her about his own and Dainty's trials, that he hoped would soon be happily ended. [206]

"How I thank you for your noble faith in my poor girl, when all the world was against her, I can not express in mere words; but I shall rejoice in my ability to supplement it by a solid reward as soon as I am reinstated in my property," he exclaimed, as he wrung her hand in passionate gratitude.

But Ailsa protested that she wished for no reward beyond the pleasure of continuing her friendship with her dear school-mate and friend.

"You shall come to live at Ellsworth, and be our dear sister, if you will," he exclaimed, generously; and the young girl smiled happily as she answered:

"I shall be very happy to come and spend my vacation with Dainty this summer."

Then they discussed the mystery of Dainty's whereabouts. Ailsa told him she had inquired all around, but could not get any clew at all.

"Sometimes I think she may have returned to West Virginia," she said; but Love shuddered at the idea lest his darling had fallen into some new trap set by her enemies.

After two days in Richmond, he was informed by the private detective he had put on the case that Dainty had indeed left the city—a young girl answering her description having bought a ticket at the Chesapeake and Ohio railway station for West Virginia on the night of the last of March.

"We must go at once! Heaven only knows what new evil has befallen my poor love, thus venturing alone into the lion's den!" Love exclaimed, in wild agitation.

John Franklin was sent to Staunton to see Mrs. Middleton and Mrs. Chase, to get them to join the travelers on their journey, and Doctor Platt and Love followed on the next train. [207]

It was the first of May, a beautiful evening, with the sun just sinking in the west, when they reached the station, and a carriage was quickly procured for the drive to Ellsworth.

Mrs. Chase and Mrs. Middleton had joined them at Staunton, and the mother's heart was thrilled with unspeakable love and tenderness at the story her eager, handsome son-in-law poured into her ears.

It seemed too good to be true that Love was restored to himself again, and that nothing remained but to find Dainty to make the sum of their happiness complete.

It was the one anxiety that brooded darkly over their hearts, the fear that evil had befallen the hapless girl on her return to Ellsworth.

"If they have injured but one hair of my darling's head, they shall answer to the law they have broken," Love said, grimly, as they started from the station toward Ellsworth, with the fixed resolve to tax Mrs. Ellsworth and her nieces at once with their crimes, and demand Dainty at their hands.

Old Doctor Platt was jubilant over the part he had played in restoring Love to his own, and he rubbed his hands in glee as he pictured to himself the consternation of Mrs. Ellsworth, when she should find herself accused and detected in her plot against Love and his persecuted bride.

"Drive fast, Franklin; I'm anxious to see the madame's face when she sees the master of Ellsworth returning to claim his own!" he exclaimed, joyously, just as they came abreast of a large frame house standing close to the road about a mile from the station. [208]

The next moment Love startled them all with a surprised and happy laugh, exclaiming:

"Look! Look! There's my old black mammy sitting there in the door of that house! Listen! She is crooning the old nursery song that charmed me in my babyhood! Let us stop here, Franklin. Perhaps she can tell us something about my wife—who knows?"

Yes, there sat black mammy in a capacious armchair in Mrs. Peters' door-way. Across her knees lay a small white bundle, and she was swaying softly back and forth, while she crooned in a low, loving monotone her favorite nursery lullaby:

"Byo, baby boy, bye—
Byo, li'l boy!
En 'e run ter 'is mammy,
Ter rock 'im in 'er arms—
Mammy's li'l baby boy!

"Who all de time er frettin' in de middle er de day?
Mammy's li'l boy, mammy's li'l boy!
Who all de time er gittin' so sleepy—

"Sho'! what am de matter now, and who am dese folks stoppin' deir kerridge in front o' de gate?" the lullaby ending in these exclamations of surprise.

Lovelace Ellsworth sprang from the carriage and rushed to the gate.

"Mammy, mammy, don't you know me? Your Marse Love?" eagerly.

"Oh, my good Lord in hebbin, am I dreamin', or is it yo'self, Marse Love, a-laffin' an' a-talkin' lak in de dear old days 'fore you was shot?" cried the old negress, shaking with joyful excitement.

"It is Love, sure enough, mammy. You may pinch me if you choose, and you'll find I am your old nursling alive and well. Oh, mammy, I am searching for my Dainty, my sweet, darling wife!" [209]

"T'ank de good Lord for all His mercies! Dis is de day dat I been prayin' fo' so long! Oh, Marse Love, I'll he'p yo' fin' yo' darlin' wife, indeedy I will! But won't you look at my nurse-chile on my knee? Aine he pritty? See him yaller curls fine as silk, and him skin like de crumple rose-leaf, an' him big black eyes like his pappy's? Don't you want ter kiss him fo' his sweet mudder's sake?" laughing.

"Mammy!" he cried in sudden, wild, suspicious excitement, as he bent closely to look at the infant.

"Yes, Marse Love, 'tis your own li'l baby boy borned almost two weeks ago, an' de fines' li'l chap alive! Miss Dainty she come to black mammy, o' course, in her trubble, an' I cheers her up till li'l Marse Lovelace Ellsworth he come to laugh at her wid his pappy's sassy black eyes. Hi! hi! he gone like a shot at de fust call o' her voice!" for Love had dashed past her wildly at a low, startled cry, from the open door of a room just beyond.

He dashed wildly across the threshold, glanced around, and there she lay lovely and pale as a lily among soft white pillows—his lost bride, his adored wife, the tender mother of his beautiful child!

"My darling!" and he was on his knees with his arms about her, and his lips on her face.

For a moment, under the shock of joy, Dainty's senses reeled; but he kissed the life back to her closing eyes and the smiles back to the quivering lips.

"Oh, my darling, my wife, God has given us back to each other for all time and eternity!"

[210]

CHAPTER XL. CONCLUSION.

The bolt of Fate falls sometimes like a flash of lightning from a clear sky.

Thus it came to Mrs. Ellsworth and her scheming nieces in the moment when they felt themselves most secure.

On that golden May evening, when Love Ellsworth found his happiness again, they had been busy laying their plans for a summer campaign.

They decided to take an early trip to Europe, and return in August for a brief tour of the watering-places before the close of the season.

"We will get us some loves of dresses and bonnets while in Paris," cried Ela, while Olive added:

"And some rare jewels. I think I should like some fine rubies best of all."

With a slight sarcasm, Mrs. Ellsworth exclaimed:

"Really, for two young girls who were reared in poverty, you two have developed very extravagant tastes—so extravagant that I could not afford to gratify them if I had not so opportunely come into my step-son's fortune!"

"But, Aunt Judith, we thought you were quite wealthy in your own right," both cried in concert.

"So I was; but for years I have speculated in stocks, and sometimes I made large gains, at others lost heavily. To-day I received notice of a terrible loss by the failure of a bank in Richmond in which the residue of my money was invested. Had I not come into Love's money, I should not now have a thousand dollars to my name!" [211]

"How unfortunate!" cried a ringing, sarcastic voice, and glancing up, all three beheld Lovelace Ellsworth standing before them in his right mind.

He was accompanied by the party that he had brought from the station, and on his arm leaned his drooping bride, pale from illness, but with the light of her joy shining in her great luminous eyes. Black mammy brought up the rear with the lovely infant in her arms.

To Mrs. Ellsworth's consternation all seated themselves as coolly as if they had a right in her elegant parlor, while Olive and Ela strained their eyes in horror at the fair cousin whose ashes they had believed to be lying still beneath the *debris* of the burned cabin.

Lovelace Ellsworth alone remained standing, and turning toward his startled step-mother, he began one of the most scathing arraignments to which any one had ever listened.

He told her in fiery words of all the crimes and cruelties she had practised on himself and Dainty, and how, through God's help, they had escaped all.

In vain were her frightened denials; he laughed them all to scorn.

"When Dainty was immured in that dungeon where you expected her to die, your tool, Sheila Kelly, threw caution to the winds, and betrayed to her in boastful words your agency in her kidnapping. It is not your fault that my wife did not die of the poison you gave her to swallow, but only that the wind and rain revived her when she lay out in the road where you had her placed, believing her dead, with her lips sealed to your part in the martyrdom.

"It is not your fault," he added, turning to Olive and Ela, "that you failed to destroy her when you followed to the cabin where she lay unconscious, and fired it like the remorseless fiends that you are. But for John Franklin, who discovered your crime and saved her sweet life, she must have perished in those flames. But my wife, like the angel she is, forgives you everything, and will not let me prosecute you for your crimes. But you three guilty, shameless ones must leave Ellsworth at dawn, and it is best never to show your faces here again; for in making public the proofs of my marriage with Dainty and the strange interruption of the second ceremony, I shall not hesitate to expose your treachery." [212]

So at dawn they went away—as far as they could on their scanty means—and the veil of a merciful oblivion fell over their future fate as scheming adventuresses to the end of their days.

Love and Dainty did not punish their arch-enemies, but they did not fail to reward all who had befriended them in their days of adversity. Mamma Chase lived with them at Ellsworth, Ailsa Scott spent all her summers there, and Doctor Platt remained the beloved friend of the family to the last day of his life.

THE END.

Transcriber's Note: The following typographical errors present in the original edition have been corrected.

In Chapter I, a comma was added after "added Olive, eagerly", and "tête-à-tête journey" was changed to "tête-à-tête journey".

In Chapter III, "tête-à-tête drive" was changed to "tête-à-tête drive".

In Chapter XVI, "frighten his timid bethrothed" was changed to "frighten his timid betrothed".

In Chapter XX, "eyes flashing with a strang fire" was changed to "eyes flashing with a strange fire".

In Chapter XXI, "Calm, oh. calm" was changed to "Calm, oh, calm".

In Chapter XXIX, "stay tonight, and tomorrow I must try to go home" was changed to "stay to-night, and to-morrow I must try to go home".

In Chapter XXXVIII, "for only today Miss White had called" was changed to "for only to-day Miss White had called".

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK DAINTY'S CRUEL RIVALS; OR, THE FATAL BIRTHDAY ***

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