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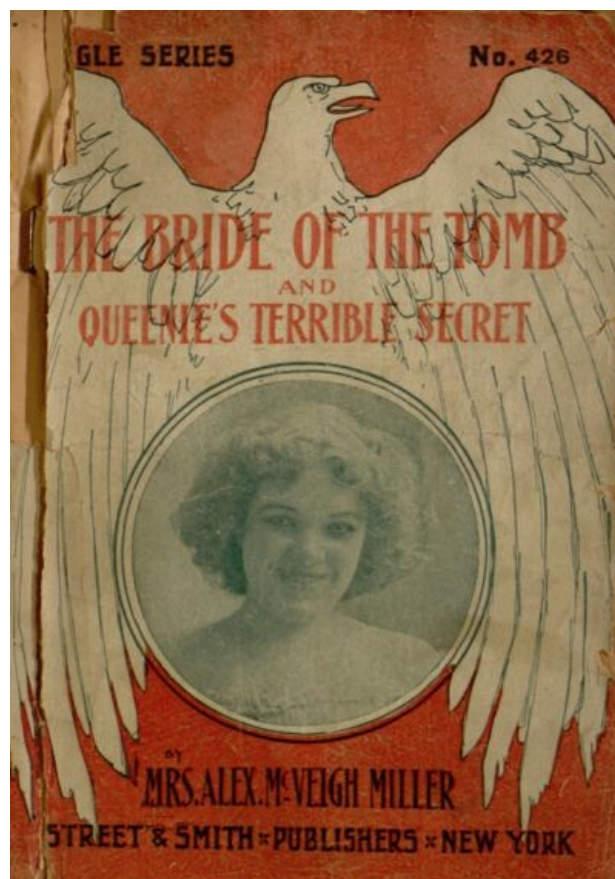
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THE BRIDE OF THE TOMB

AND

QUEENIE'S TERRIBLE SECRET

BY

MRS. ALEX. M^CVEIGH MILLER

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(A Wilful Young Woman)

69—His Perfect Trust

68—The Little Cuban Rebel

67—Gismonda

66—Witch Hazel

65—Won by the Sword

64—Dora Tenney

63—Lawyer Bell from Boston

62—Stella Stirling

61—La Tosca

60—The County Fair

59—Gladys Greye

By Annie Lisle.

By Charles Garvice

By the author of Dr. Jack

By Effie Adelaide Rowlands.

By Mrs. Alex. McVeigh Miller.

By Chas. Darrell.

By Genie Holzmeyer.

By Sutton Vane.

By Charles Garvice

By the author of Dr. Jack

By Francis S. Smith.

By Mrs. Georgie Sheldon

By Charles Garvice

By Warren Edwards.

By J. M. Barrie.

By Charles Garvice

By H. Gratton Donnelly.

By T. W. Hanshew.

By Sutton Vane.

By Mrs. Alex. McVeigh Miller.

By Russ Whytal.

By Bicknell Dudley.

By Mrs. Georgie Sheldon

By J. Perkins Tracy.

By Lucy Randall Comfort.

By Charles Garvice

By Charles Garvice

By Prof. Wm. Henry Peck.

By Edwin Milton Royle.

By Emma Garrison Jones.

By the author of Dr. Jack

By Charles Garvice

By Sylvanus Cobb, Jr.

By Mrs. Georgie Sheldon

From the celebrated play.

By T. P. James.

By Sutton Vane.

By Charles Garvice

By Harriet Sherburne

By the author of Dr. Jack

By Charles Garvice

By a popular author.

By Edna Winfield.

By Victorien Sardou.

By Mrs. Georgie Sheldon

By J. Perkins Tracy.

By Mrs. Alex. McVeigh Miller.

By Robert Lee Tyler.

By Julia Edwards.

By Victorien Sardou.

From the celebrated play

By Bertha M. Clay.

58—Major Matterson of Kentucky

57—Rosamond

56—The Dispatch Bearer

55—Thrice Wedded

54—Cleopatra

53—The Old Homestead

52—Woman Against Woman

51—The Price He Paid

50—Her Ransom

(Paid For)

49—None But the Brave

48—Another Man's Wife

47—The Colonel by Brevet

46—Off with the Old Love

45—A Yale Man

44—That Dowdy

43—Little Coquette Bonnie

42—Another Woman's Husband

41—Her Heart's Desire

(An Innocent Girl)

40—Monsieur Bob

39—The Colonel's Wife

38—The Nabob of Singapore

37—The Heart of Virginia

36—Fedora

35—The Great Mogul

34—Pretty Geraldine

33—Mrs. Bob

32—The Blockade Runner

31—A Siren's Love

30—Baron Sam

29—Theodora

28—Miss Caprice

27—Estelle's Millionaire Lover

26—Captain Tom

25—Little Southern Beauty

24—A Wasted Love

(On Love's Altar)

23—Miss Pauline of New York

22—Elaine

21—A Heart's Idol

20—The Senator's Bride

19—Mr. Lake of Chicago

18—Dr. Jack's Wife

17—Leslie's Loyalty

(His Love So True)

16—The Fatal Card

15—Dr. Jack

14—Violet Lisle

13—The Little Widow

12—Edrie's Legacy

11—The Gypsy's Daughter

10—Little Sunshine

9—The Virginia Heiress

8—Beautiful But Poor

7—Two Keys

6—The Midnight Marriage

5—The Senator's Favorite

By the author of Dr. Jack

By Mrs. Alex. McVeigh Miller.

By Warren Edwards.

By Mrs. Georgie Sheldon

By Victorien Sardou.

By Denman Thompson.

By Effie Adelaide Rowlands.

By E. Werner.

By Charles Garvice

By Robert Lee Tyler.

By Bertha M. Clay.

By the author of Dr. Jack

By Mrs. M. V. Victor.

By Robert Lee Tyler.

By Mrs. Georgie Sheldon

By Mrs. Alex. McVeigh Miller.

By Bertha M. Clay.

By Charles Garvice

By the author of Dr. Jack

By Warren Edwards.

By the author of Dr. Jack

By J. Perkins Tracy.

By Victorien Sardou.

By the author of Dr. Jack

By Mrs. Alex. McVeigh Miller.

By the author of Dr. Jack

By J. Perkins Tracy.

By Robert Lee Tyler.

By the author of Dr. Jack

By Victorien Sardou.

By the author of Dr. Jack

By Julia Edwards.

By the author of Dr. Jack

By Mrs. Alex. McVeigh Miller.

By Charles Garvice

By the author of Dr. Jack

By Charles Garvice

By Bertha M. Clay.

By Mrs. Alex. McVeigh Miller.

By Harry DuBois Milman.

By the author of Dr. Jack

By Charles Garvice

By Haddon Chambers and B. C. Stephenson.

By St. George Rathborne

By Bertha M. Clay.

By Julia Edwards.

By Mrs. Georgie Sheldon

By Bertha M. Clay.

By Francis S. Smith.

By May Agnes Fleming.

By Julia Edwards.

By Mrs. Georgie Sheldon

By A. M. Douglas.

By Mrs. Alex. McVeigh Miller.

4—For a Woman's Honor
3—He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not
2—Ruby's Reward
1—Queen Bess

By Bertha M. Clay.
By Julia Edwards.
By Mrs. Georgie Sheldon
By Mrs. Georgie Sheldon

The Bride of the Tomb
AND
Queenie's Terrible Secret

BY
MRS. ALEX. McVEIGH MILLER

AUTHOR OF
"A Crushed Lily," "Brunette and Blonde," "Nina's Peril," etc.



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The Bride of the Tomb
Queenie's Terrible Secret

THE BRIDE OF THE TOMB;

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OR,

Lancelot Darling's Betrothed.

By MRS. ALEX. McVEIGH MILLER.

CHAPTER I.

Sweet Lily Lawrence had committed *suicide*!

Oh! impossible! A girl so young, so gifted, so lovely, the darling of her father's heart, the idol of her brilliant lover, the heiress of a splendid fortune—what had she to do with the grim king of terrors? Death to her was an enemy to be shunned and dreaded rather than a lover to be courted.

And to-morrow was her bridal day!

Yet there she lay prone on the velvet carpet, with its delicate pattern of myosotis, and the soft light of the June morning shining through the open window on the still form, robed in creamy white satin and priceless lace, the fair hair streaming across the floor, the turquoise blue eyes wide-open with a look of unutterable horror frozen in their upward stare, the small and dimpled

white hand clinching tightly a tiny jeweled dagger whose murderous thrust had left a ghastly, gory, crimson stain on the snowy satin lace above her heart. By that crimson stain death claimed her for his own—the fairest bride the grim monarch ever took to his icy arms.

A thrill of universal horror ran through the great city where she had been known and loved, not more for her beauty and wealth than for her sweet and gentle character. Friends came and went through the portals of Banker Lawrence's splendid brown stone mansion on Fifth avenue for a sight of the beautiful suicide who had been expected to appear so soon as a happy bride. Mr. Lawrence, the bereaved and sorely stricken father, appeared like one dazed with grief and horror. Ada, his younger and only remaining daughter, was confined to her room in strong hysterics, attended by the maids. Mrs. Vance, the beautiful widow of a second cousin of Mrs. Lawrence, a lady who made her home at the banker's, was the only one in the house who retained sufficient calmness to attend to anything at all. It was she who kept back the curious throng of the news-seekers who would fain have invaded the mansion. It was she who talked with sympathizing friends, breaking now and then into a heart-wrung sob, and hiding her eyes in her damp lace handkerchief.

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"Oh, doctor," she cried, as the physician who had been hastily summoned after the shocking discovery, bent over the pale form trying to see if any spark of life remained—"oh, doctor, she is not really dead, is she? Surely our darling Lily is not gone from us forever!"

The physician looked up curiously at the dark, beautiful face of the speaker now convulsed with grief and horror. He bent again over the recumbent form, closely examining the beautiful white features of the girl, touched her wide-open eye-lids, felt her tightly clenched hands carefully, and laid his ear over the still breast whose crimson blood had stiffened the bridal robe above the tender heart so lately bounding with the joyous pulses of youth and hope and perfect happiness.

"I am sorry to say," he answered, rising and looking down with a pale face and trembling hands, "that Miss Lawrence is, indeed, no more. Life has been extinct for hours."

A few hours later a coroner's inquest was held over the remains. Mrs. Vance, Miss Ada Lawrence, and the deceased girl's waiting-maid were the three who had seen Lily Lawrence last in life. Their testimony was accordingly taken.

The maid deposed that on the night on which the fatal event had transpired her mistress had kept her in her room until about eleven o'clock, for the purpose of making some trifling alterations in the fit of the elegant white satin bridal robe.

While thus engaged Miss Ada Lawrence and Mrs. Vance had come in for a chat with Miss Lawrence. Miss Ada, a young school-girl, and fond of finery, had persuaded her sister to don the beautiful dress and veil.

After staying awhile and admiring the loveliness of Miss Lawrence, the maid had been dismissed, her young mistress saying that she would herself remove the dress, having already laid aside the veil and wreath of orange blossoms.

She (the maid) had accordingly bidden the ladies good-night. The next morning, as usual, she had gone at eight o'clock to call her young mistress. She had found the door locked on the inside.

In response to repeated knocks and calls no answer had been elicited, and becoming frightened she had repeated the fact to the family, who were just assembling at breakfast. Mr. Lawrence had caused the door to be forced immediately. On entering they had found Miss Lawrence lying dead upon the floor, arrayed in her bridal dress, and clutching in her right hand a small, jeweled dagger.

She was asked here by the coroner if the dagger had belonged to Miss Lawrence. She answered in the affirmative, saying that Mrs. Vance had presented it to her a few days before as a bridal present, and that it had lain on the dressing-table ever since as an ornament.

Being asked why they had supposed it to be suicide instead of murder, the affectionate girl burst into tears, and replied that her sweet young mistress had not an enemy on earth, so that no one could have murdered her for malice; and that none of her splendid jewelry or bridal presents had been touched, so that no one could have murdered her for gain; and that the natural inference was that Miss Lawrence had taken her own life with her own weapon.

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The young lady had seemed much as usual in her manner when she last saw her, had betrayed no undue agitation of mind and was only anxious about the fit of the bridal robe in which she was to appear on the morrow. The maid was suffered to leave the stand, on which Miss Ada Lawrence, dreadfully nervous and agitated, was led in and took her place.

Her testimony was merely a corroboration of the maid's. She had left the room in Mrs. Vance's company shortly after the maid's dismissal. Both had kissed her good-night and left her standing at the mirror smiling at her lovely reflection. Lily had seemed in good health and spirits. She did not know of any reason for her sister's committing suicide; but as she had no enemies, and nothing had been touched in the room, it was the natural inference. She had not seen her sister again until the next morning, when she lay cold and dead in the middle of her room.

Mrs. Vance gave substantially the same testimony, with the addition that she had heard Miss Lawrence lock her room door after their departure. She knew of no cause that could have driven the young girl to take her own life. For a few months past she had noticed that Lily had strange fits of depression and abstraction. She had thought then that some secret sorrow preyed on the mind of her cousin, but she did not know of what nature. She was suffered to retire, her agitation growing uncontrollable, while many admiring glances followed her graceful form as she swept

from the room.

Dr. Pratt was next called to the stand. He was a tall, dark, sinister-looking man, with restless black eyes and nervous manner. He gave his testimony briefly and to the point.

He was not Mr. Lawrence's family physician. He was riding past the house on his way to visit a patient when he had been suddenly called in by the summons of a domestic who rushed frantically into the street after him. He had gone into Miss Lawrence's room, where he found the family assembled and indulging in the wildest grief. The young bride-elect lay dead upon the floor, grasping a small dagger in her right hand. Upon examination he found that life had been extinct for eight or nine hours. He thought that death must have been instantaneous with the dagger-thrust. From the pose of the body and the position of the right arm and hand, together with the direction of the deadly weapon, all the probabilities pointed to an act of self-destruction.

A few more witnesses were examined, but nothing new was elicited, and the jury retired to consult.

The verdict was given to the effect that "Miss Lawrence came to her death by a dagger-thrust inflicted by her own hand—probably under a temporary aberration of mind."

CHAPTER II.

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Doctor Pratt attended the funeral of Miss Lawrence, looking grave and sad, and dignified as the mournful occasion demanded. His restless eyes took in every detail, noted the grief of the mourners and friends, peered beneath the heavy crape veil of handsome Mrs. Vance, noted the absence of the bereaved bridegroom-elect; he even entered the gloomy vault and stood by the open coffin among the friends who were taking their last look at the pallid features of the beautiful suicide whose golden hair strayed over the white satin pillow, mingling with fragrant rosebuds and lilies.

After the funeral was over he drove to a fashionable street, and stopping at a fine hotel, sent up his card to a person whom he designated as Mr. Colville.

After a brief delay he was shown up to that gentleman's room.

Mr. Colville was a rather handsome but dissipated-looking man, of perhaps forty years. He was dressed in the extreme of fashion, and the elegance of his apparel, his costly diamonds, as well as the luxuriousness of the furniture about him, betokened a man of wealth and ease.

He removed his cigar from his dark mustached lips, and said, with a light laugh:

"Ah, Pratt, what deviltry are you up to now?"

"I have just come from attending a funeral," Doctor Pratt answered sedately, as he seated himself in a satin-cushioned arm-chair.

"A funeral!" Mr. Colville started and grew pale. "Was it that of—of Miss Lawrence?"

"The same," was the calm reply.

"Ah! beautiful Lily—so you are gone to be the bride of death—to be clasped to her icy heart! Well, better so," said Colville, bitterly.

"I wonder at your coldness," said Doctor Pratt, eyeing him keenly. "I thought you loved her to desperation."

"Man, man—I did, I did!" cried out Colville, starting up and pacing the floor wildly, "but what of that? She would not have my love. She laughed it to scorn, and was about to give herself to my haughty rival. Great Heaven! I was nearly crazed by the knowledge. It was a happy madness that armed her hand against her own life! I am glad she is dead. I would rather she were the prey of the worm than given to the arms of another."

"Sit down, sit down," said the physician, shortly. "Calm yourself, or you will fall in a fit as did your horror-struck rival on hearing the dreadful news of her death."

"Fell in a fit, did he?" said Colville, stopping short in his hurried walk. "I wish he had died. But, no! he might have rejoined her then in some better land than this."

"If there be a better land, which I doubt," said Pratt, with a cold sneer.

Colville threw himself down into an arm-chair and looked moodily across at the physician.

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"Well, what have you come after?" he asked, abruptly and testily. "You have put me up to so many devilish schemes that I always expect some villany when I see your satanic countenance."

"I have put my freedom in jeopardy this week for the sake of your happiness," Doctor Pratt answered with assumed indifference, "but if you take such a high tone I can leave with my secret untold."

"A secret!" said Colville, looking up with some interest; "your secrets are always worth hearing, doctor. Let me have it, I beg you."

"This one is worth hearing, any way," said Doctor Pratt grimly, and, rising, he turned the door-key in the lock, after looking out suspiciously into the wide hall. Returning, he drew his chair close to Colville's and continued, calmly: "I cannot afford to give you this secret, Colville, I will

sell it to you for the pretty little sum of ten thousand dollars—a mere bagatelle, that, to a man of your wealth."

"Ten thousand dollars! is the man mad?" muttered Colville. "Why, man alive, there is not a secret under the sun I would pay that much for!"

"Is there not?" smiled the other, and bending a little nearer he whispered in low, impressive accents: "What would you give me, Harold Colville, if I could take Lily Lawrence from her coffin to-night, cheat the grave-worm of its prey, and give her to your arms, warm, living, beautiful—dead to all the world, alive only to you?"

"Great Heaven! the half of my fortune were not too great a price for such a miracle," breathed Colville, excitedly. "But, Pratt, you are raving! Even your skill, great though I own it to be, could not accomplish that, unless you are leagued with the devil, as I have often suspected you are."

"Thanks," said the grim physician, curtly, then interrogated calmly: "So ten thousand dollars would not weigh much in the scale against Lily Lawrence living?"

"Not a feather's weight! I would give it to you freely, gladly, but, Pratt, you cannot do it!"

"I *can* do it! Listen to me, Colville," he whispered breathlessly. "Lily Lawrence lies in her coffin to-night, to all the world dead: but to me she is a living woman, and as such may be resurrected."

"But how—why——"

"Be calm, I will explain all. When her lifeless form was discovered I was hastily called in. I went; I carefully examined the body, which lay, to all appearance, cold and dead. I found an almost imperceptible warmth about her heart, a tinge of color in the palms of her hands, and a vacant stare in the eyes resembling death, but which might be only produced by that rare and strange disease known to medical men as 'catalepsy.' There was a slight flesh-wound about the heart; but the blow had been struck by such a trembling hand that it had failed to penetrate a vital part, and the dreadful shock of the attempted murder (for I do not believe in the sapient jury's verdict of suicide) threw the poor girl into a state of syncope, or catalepsy, so closely resembling death that it deceived all but my professional eyes."

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"Yet you suffered them to entomb a living woman?"

"For your sake, remember, Colville; for as I knelt by the beautiful creature, half stunned by my startling discovery, the thought of you darted into my head like an inspiration. I remembered what you must suffer if she lived to bless your rival with her love. I said to myself—It will be several days, most likely, before she rouses from this trance of death. Let them bury her, and make to themselves other idols. In the meantime I will resurrect her, give her to Colville's eager arms, and earn his eternal gratitude as well as a more substantial fee for myself."

"Pratt, you are a demon!"

"Is that the way you thank me for my friendship?"

"No, oh, no; you have done well—you have done right, and you shall have your reward. But, Heavens! to think of her lying there in her living beauty among the skeletons and the worms—perhaps even now she is waking amid those gloomy shades! Ugh!" he shuddered, and started from the chair.

"No danger, I think," said the dark physician, smiling contemptuously; "I observed her closely this evening, and there were no signs of reviving. Patience, my friend, I bribed the old sexton, I have the key to the vault. In a few hours it will be night, and then we will bear away your drooping Lily to revive beneath the sunshine of your love."

"But where can we take her? If the theft is discovered there will be a hue and cry raised about the body."

"I know of a safe place. You remember the old couple in the suburbs? the same who kept poor Fanny till her ravings ended in her death?"

"Oh, God! do not remind me of such horrible things—let the dead past lie! Yes, I remember!"

"We will take her *there*. I have been to see them, and prepared them for our coming. You will have to pay heavily, of course, but you will not mind that in such a cause. Now, then, will you go with me to the graveyard to-night?"

"I will, and may the devil, who certainly helps you in your evil deeds, doctor, aid us both in this precarious scheme, and restore my living love to my devoted arms!"

"Amen!" breathed Doctor Pratt piously.

CHAPTER III.

It was the day following the funeral of sweet Lily Lawrence—a sunny day, fragrant and bloomy with the wealth of summer. Outside of Mr. Lawrence's stately mansion in the handsome grounds enclosing it, flowers blossomed, the fountain threw up its diamond spray, and birds twittered and chirped.

But within the house all was silence and gloom. Mr. Lawrence was shut up in the library alone

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with his grief; Ada Lawrence lay ill of a low, nervous fever, induced by her poignant sorrow, and Mrs. Vance sat in the drawing-room alone, nervous and ill, and starting at every trivial sound.

The stately-looking widow was very handsome this morning. She wore a dress of thin black grenadine, relieved by creamy old lace at throat and wrists, and delicate ribbons of heliotrope color. Her wavy black hair was braided about her small head like a coronet, and a cluster of heliotrope blossoms nestled in its silken darkness.

A faint roseate bloom tinted her lips and cheeks, and heightened by contrast the restless brightness of her full, dark eyes, and the whiteness of her low brow. She was fully thirty-five years old, but nature and art had combined so gracefully in her make-up that she did not appear twenty-five.

A sudden peal of the door-bell made her spring up suddenly in nervous terror of she scarce knew what. She had hardly reseated herself when an obsequious servant ushered in a tall, exceedingly distinguished-looking young man. It was Lancelot Darling, the betrothed lover of the dead girl.

He was a splendidly handsome and imposing gentleman, but his elegant dress was disordered, his face was pale, almost to the verge of ghastliness, his large, brilliant dark eyes were so wild in their expression of grief that they almost seemed to glare upon the lady who advanced toward him with extended hands.

"Mr. Darling," she murmured in a low tone of surprise and pleasure. "You are better, you are able to be out."

He pressed her hand speechlessly, and tottered to a sofa, falling heavily upon it while his eyes closed for a minute. In a fright at the look of exhaustion on his white face, Mrs. Vance darted from the room, soon returning with a glass of cordial.

She lifted his head on her arm and pressed the goblet to his lips, trembling excessively the while. In a moment he revived, and rising on his elbow looked up while a faint flush mounted to his white forehead.

"Pardon me," he said, in a broken voice. "This is unmanly, I know, but I have been very ill, Mrs. Vance, and I am weak still—and it is hard, oh! so hard to come here like this!" He sat up, pushing the dark locks back from his brow, while a shudder ran through his strong frame.

"Believe me, I sympathize with you, I grieve with you," murmured the lady in silvery tones. "Our poor, lost Lily!" and her face was hidden in her handkerchief while a sob seemed to shake her graceful form.

"They say she died by her own hand," he cried, excitedly. "My God! what mystery is here, Mrs. Vance? What hidden cause drove the girl who was almost my wife to that fearful deed?"

"Did you suspect no cause?" asked she, looking at him sadly.

"None—there could be none. Young, beautiful, loving and beloved, she had no cause for sorrow."

"So it seemed to *you*," she answered, in low, soft tones, looking down as if she could not bear the anguish written on his features; "but strange as it may seem, Lily had some trouble unknown to us all, but which I suspected months ago. She had strange moods of deep depression and abstraction, followed by a feverish, unnatural gaiety. My suspicion of some mysterious trouble weighing on her heart was only confirmed by her sad and tragic death."

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"Of what nature did you suspect her mysterious trouble to be?" asked the young man, looking at her in surprise and anxiety.

"I had nothing but conjecture to build on," said she, reluctantly. "It would be cruelty to harrow your soul with suspicions that may be baseless."

"But I insist on your telling me," said he, with unconscious imperiousness of tone and look.

"I fancied—mind, I only *fancied*," said she, deprecatingly, "that Lily, though betrothed to you, had conceived an unrequited attachment for another, or that perhaps she was the victim of some boarding-school entanglement which threatened to mar her happiness."

"Oh, impossible!" he answered, decisively. "Lily had no silly school-girl entanglements. She told me so. And she loved me alone—loved me as devotedly as I loved her—I am perfectly certain of that. No, Mrs. Vance, you are mistaken. The theory of the jury is the only one I can accept. The fatal deed must have been committed under a temporary aberration of mind."

The sudden entrance of Mr. Lawrence checked the mournful expression that rose to her lips.

As the two men shook hands in silence, each noted the ravages grief had made in the other.

Mr. Lawrence's portly form was bowed feebly, his genial face was seamed with lines of grief and care, while premature silver threads shone amid his chestnut-brown hair.

The ghastly pallor of Lancelot Darling, his wild eyes, his trembling hands, attested how maddening and soul-harrowing was his despair.

"Lance, my poor boy, you have been ill," said the banker, in a gentle tone of sympathy.

"Yes, I have been ill," said Lancelot, brokenly; then almost crushing the banker's hand in his strong, unconscious grasp, he broke out wildly: "Mr. Lawrence, I have come here to beg a favor of you."

"Name it," said Mr. Lawrence, kindly.

"I want the key of your vault. I want to see my Lily's face once more," he answered, in an imploring tone.

"Would it be well? Would it be wise?" asked the other in a tone of surprise and pain.

"I do not know, I do not ask," said Lancelot, impetuously. "I only know that my soul hungers for a sight of my darling's face. Do not refuse me, my friend. Let me see her once more before death has obliterated all her beauty!"

"Better think of her, Lance, as when you last saw her in life and health," said the banker uneasily. "She is already changed. You are too weak to bear the agitation that would ensue if I granted your request."

"You refuse me, then," said the young man in a voice of passionate grief. "She was to have been my wife ere now, yet you will not suffer me to press one last, long kiss on the cold lips of my darling." [Pg 9]

"Oh, do not refuse him," cried Mrs. Vance, gliding forward and laying a persuasive little hand on the banker's arm. "Think of his bleeding heart and blighted hopes. Remember how fondly he loved her. Go with him to the vault, and show him our broken Lily lying asleep in the deep rest she coveted."

Lancelot's heavy, dark eyes flashed a look of gratitude upon the beautiful pleader as she ceased to speak.

The banker paused irresolutely.

"If I thought he could bear it," he murmured.

"I *can* bear it, I *will*!" said Lancelot, firmly. "Only grant my request."

"The sexton has the key of the vault," said Mr. Lawrence, yielding reluctantly. "I will go with you, Lance."

"Let it be at once then. My carriage is at the gate," said the half frenzied young lover, moving off after a slight bow to Mrs. Vance.

Mr. Lawrence followed him, the door was closed, and the handsome widow stood alone in the center of the splendid drawing-room. She took one or two turns up and down the room, her black dress trailing its gloomy folds over the rich carpet.

"Let him go," she said at last, pausing and clenching her delicate hands together. "Let him go! That marble mask of his beautiful love can but disenchant him. I have already dropped a suspicion of her love into his heart. He does not heed it yet, but no matter, it shall take root, it shall grow, it shall bear fruit an hundredfold! He shall turn to me yet. I love him with a love passing everything, and I will stop at nothing till I call him mine!"

She laughed aloud as the thought of her future triumph swept through her heart. It was a strange, eerie laugh—it sounded as if a beautiful fiend had laughed in Hades.

The elegant carriage, with its high stepping, spirited gray horses, bowled rapidly along the busy streets of New York, and at length paused before the beautiful cemetery in which Mr. Lawrence's vault was situated. The banker then stepped into the sexton's house where he called for the key of the vault. The sexton gave it to him with some surprise at the request, and the gentleman returned to Lancelot Darling who was impatiently pacing a graveled path in the "fair Necropolis of the dead."

The banker paused and laid his hand on the young man's arm.

"I have the key, Lance," he said, "but even now I wish I could persuade you not to enter the vault; I dread the effect on your already weak nerves. Remember what a difference there must be between the blooming Lily you last looked upon and the poor, faded flower in yon gloomy stone vault."

"Mr. Lawrence, you do but torture me," said the young man, with a gesture of wild despair. "However she may be changed let me see her. Yet I cannot believe that that beautiful face can be altered so soon. Cruel death would stay his defacing hand when he looked on such loveliness." [Pg 10]

With a sigh of regret the elder man turned and walked on down the shady path. Lancelot followed him, taking no note of the beautiful day and the song of the birds and the fragrance of the rare flowers all around him. Over the low mounds everywhere gentle hands of affection had planted lovely flowers and shrubs, trying to make grim death beautiful. But he heeded them not as he stopped in front of the marble vault, guarded by a marble angel, and followed Mr. Lawrence into its dim recesses.

They walked down the echoing aisle, between rows of moldy, decaying coffins, and paused with beating hearts and labored breath beside a new casket, loaded with wreaths and crosses of fragrant white hot-house flowers.

The murky air of the charnel house was heavy with the scent of tube-roses, violets and pale white roses. With trembling hands they removed these tokens of affection, until the lid of the coffin was disclosed. With a shudder Lancelot read the inscription on the silver plate:

"LILY LAWRENCE.

Mr. Lawrence drew out the silver screws and removed the lid.

"My God!" he cried, as he gazed within.

The costly casket was empty. The white satin cushioning that love had devised to make the bed of death a soft one, held the impress of her form, the pillow was lightly dented where her golden head had lain, but the cold form that rested there yesterday with white hands folded over the quiet heart, with pale lips shut over the woful secret of her death, that loved form was gone from their gaze.

CHAPTER IV.

Go with me, kind reader, to the outskirts of the great city; enter with me an humble house; we pass invisibly inside the locked door, we glide unseen up the staircase, and into a plainly furnished, low-ceiled room. Our acquaintance, Doctor Pratt, is there—also his co-conspirator, Harold Colville, is there. Both are bending anxiously over a low, white bed where a girlish, recumbent form lies extended.

At the foot of the bed stands an old crone with gray elf-locks floating under a tawdry black lace cap. Wrinkled, and bent, and witch-like, with beady black eyes and parchment-like skin, she is frightful to look at as she peers curiously into the beautiful white face lying on the pillow.

"Pratt, you have deceived me," Colville breaks out sternly; "all your restoratives have failed, all your potent art is at fault. Look at that marble face, those breathless lips. It is death, not life, we look upon."

"Bah!" said Doctor Pratt. Rising and going to the young lady's head, he gently turned it on one side: at the same time he changed the position of one arm. *Both retained for a short time their new position* then slowly resumed their former place. He raised her eyelids and they remained open a brief interval, then gently closed again. The beautiful blue eyes they disclosed were neither glassy nor corpse-like, though fixed in a vacant, unnatural stare. The physician resumed his seat and said, calmly:

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"You see, Colville, it is life, not death. I tell you it is that rare, mysterious affection we call *catalepsy*—a state fearfully blending the conditions of life and death—a seeming life in death, or death in life. It is true that all my remedies have failed: but it is equally true that life is not extinct, though the spark may perish from exhaustion if she does not soon revive. It is now four days since the cold steel entered her side and this mysterious unconsciousness fell upon her. But the horrid spell must soon be broken, or death will ensue as a consequence of loss of blood and vitality."

They withdrew a little further from the bed, Pratt still keeping a watchful eye upon the patient, while Colville tried to keep his roving glance away from the death-like face that sent a shudder of fear now and then along his frame. It seemed fearfully like death despite the learned theory of the case which Doctor Pratt was patiently explaining to him.

"You said the first time we talked of this that you believed Miss Lawrence had been murdered," said Colville, suddenly. "Why did you form that opinion despite the contrary evidence?"

"There was no evidence to the contrary," said the dark physician, complacently. "I formed it on the evidence of my own eyes. True, Miss Lawrence's door was locked on the inside; but"—he paused a moment to give effect to his words—"but a heavy, luxuriant honeysuckle vine was trained from the ground up to her window in the second story. The murderer, or murderess, entered her room by the door, turned the key, perpetrated the dreadful deed, and escaped by sliding down the thickly-twisted vine to the ground."

"That is only your theory, doctor, I suppose."

"It is a fact, not theory, monsieur. I furtively examined the vine myself. It was broken in places, bruised in its tender parts, and quantities of leaves and flowers were strewn upon the ground. It plainly showed that a heavy body had slid down upon it and injured it. I wonder that it escaped the dull eyes of the jury."

"You are an astute man, doctor. Who, then, was the assassin of one so young and fair?"

"I do not know, but I half suspected the beautiful woman who lives at Lawrence's—a sort of cousin, I think—a Mrs. Vance by name. Her evidence went a little further than the rest. She asserted that she heard the young lady lock her door that night—she seemed to favor the idea of suicide also by pressing a theory of her own, that Miss Lawrence had a secret trouble—was subject to fits of abstraction and depression. Yes, decidedly, I suspect the beautiful widow."

"What motive could she have had?"

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"That I do not know. I could find out though if I set my wits to work. But I have no interest in knowing."

"I have it," said Colville, suddenly; "I am acquainted with Mrs. Vance. When I used to visit the Lawrences I found out—no matter how—that Mrs. Vance was in love with Lancelot Darling. If she did the deed it was jealousy that goaded her to its commission."

"Very probably," said the doctor.

They had talked on, forgetful or regardless of the old woman who sat at the foot of the bed. She was listening eagerly, with twitching fingers, and muttered inaudibly, "Gold, gold."

"What are you muttering about, old hag?" said Pratt, overhearing her. "None of your jargon now. And don't repeat what we have been saying to your old man. If you do I will send your black soul to its doom sooner than it would go of its own accord! Do you hear me, old witch?"

"Yes, I hear; I will never repeat it, never," whined the old wretch, grinning horribly.

"See that you don't, then," said Colville.

The evening hours wore on to midnight, and the three watchers in the quiet room kept their places, undisturbed by even a breath from the pale form on the bed. The old crone sat wide awake and on the alert: Doctor Pratt leaned back and watched the patient through half-closed lids; Colville dozed in a large arm-chair. Surely there never was a patient who gave so little trouble to the nurses. No querulous complaint came from the pale lips, no restless hands tossed aside the bed-clothes, no fever-parched tongue cried out for the cooling draught of ice-water. Still and pale she lay through the panting summer night, taking no note of time or aught earthly.

Hark! the midnight hour tolled solemnly and sharply. Mysterious hour when crime stalks abroad under shelter of darkness, when disembodied spirits re-visit the haunts of men! Colville started from his uneasy dozing, then settled himself again as the last loud stroke died away in hollow echoes. But he did not sleep again, for a simultaneous cry from the physician and the old woman turned his glance toward the bed. Ah! what was that?

The awful spell of death was *broken*. The patient presented a ghastly appearance. Her large, blue eyes were wide open, and staring an indescribable look of horror at the witch-like face of the old woman. Her lips were slightly apart, and a thin stream of blood was trickling from her mouth and nostrils.

"Begone," said the physician, sharply. "Bring warm water and sponges."

She quickly returned with the necessary articles. Doctor Pratt gently sponged away the blood with warm water so as not to entirely check the bleeding. A long, deep sigh quivered over the patient's lips, and turning her head she looked languidly about her. Doctor Pratt made a sign to Colville and he hastily drew aside out of range of her vision.

"Drink this wine, Lily," said the physician, putting a wine-glass to her lips. She feebly swallowed the contents, then closing her eyes with a languid sigh fell into a deep, refreshing sleep, breathing softly and audibly. He turned to Colville with a triumphant smile.

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"What about my theory *now*?" said he.

Colville was trembling with excitement. He came forward, and looked at the face sleeping calmly on the pillow, its rigid lines softening into natural repose.

"Surely, Pratt, you are in league with the devil," said he, half-fearfully. "An hour ago I could have sworn that it was grim death we looked upon, but now——"

"But now," said Doctor Pratt, "she is doing well—she will soon recover. And then you can set about your wooing."

"Ah!" said Colville, doubtfully. "I wish that your potent art could insure me her love as skillfully as you insured me her life!"

The patient's deep slumber lasted till the rosy dawn of the summer morn began to break over the earth. Then the blue eyes opened with a look of bewilderment in their beautiful depths.

"Where am I?" she languidly interrogated, sweeping her small white hand across her brow.

Colville had gone, but the unwearied physician sitting by the bedside answered, calmly:

"You are in good hands, Miss Lawrence. I am your physician. You have been very ill, and must not agitate yourself by asking questions yet."

CHAPTER V.

"You say I have been very ill?" said Lily, looking up into the dark face bending over her.

"Yes, you have been near to death's door; but indeed you must not talk; you will exhaust yourself."

"But I must talk," said the patient, willfully. "Why am I here? This is not my home," glancing round the poor, ill-furnished room. "Where are my father, my sister, my maid? Oh, God!" and a piercing shriek burst from her lips. "I remember everything—the murderous dagger-thrust, the horrid spell that bound me hand and foot and tongue. I could not speak, I could not move; but I heard them weeping round me; I heard——"

"For Heaven's sake, cease! You will kill yourself indeed, Miss Lawrence!" cried the physician in alarm.

But she waved him off, and sitting upright in bed continued wildly:

"I heard your voice telling them that I was dead. I heard the horrid inquest held over me. I heard the funeral service while I lay in the open coffin, unable to stir, unable to comfort my weeping loved ones. They bore me away. They locked me—me, a living, agonized human creature—into the dreadful vault with the horrible dead for companions. Ah! then, indeed, I became unconscious. I knew no more. Oh! oh! what torture, what agonies I have endured!" cried the girl, waving her white hands over her head and screaming aloud in her terrified recollection of the dreadful agonies she had borne while in her cataleptic state.

"She will kill herself indeed," muttered Pratt, hastily forcing a composing draught between her writhing lips.

She continued to rave wildly until the potent drug took effect on her overwrought system and produced a deep, unnatural slumber.

He went away and left her to the care of the witchlike old woman. She awoke toward evening and found the old woman knitting away by her bedside. The beautiful girl looked at her in wonder and fright.

"Are you a vision from another world or only a fevered phantom of my brain?" she inquired in a weak voice.

The creature only scowled at her in reply, but she rose and brought a bowl of fresh arrowroot and fed the patient, who found it very refreshing after her protracted fasting.

Old Haidee, as she was called, left the room with the empty bowl, and Lily lay still, looking about her with a vague dread creeping into her heart. Had she indeed died in that horrible vault, and was she now in another world inhabited by such hideous beings as the one who had just left her? She shuddered and closed her eyes. The sound of a footstep aroused her. A man was entering the room. It was Harold Colville. He came and stood by the bed-side, looking down at her pale face with passionate tenderness shining in his eyes.

Her white cheeks turned crimson.

"Mr. Colville!" she cried, angrily, "what means this unwarrantable intrusion?"

"Oh, Lily! this from you!" he cried in sorrowful reproach. "Lily, I have saved your life, my darling, and this is my reward; when all others deserted you and left you in your coffin my love could not rest without one more look at your dear face. Yes, the love you spurned in happier days clung to you then and sought you amid the horrors of the dreadful charnel-house. I entered the vault; I opened the coffin; I kissed the lips that were dearer to me dead than those of any living woman. And then I discovered faint signs of life! In my rapture at the discovery I bore you away in my carriage and placed you under the care of a splendid physician. You revived; you lived—yes, dead to all the world beside, you live alone for me, my fair, my peerless Lily!"

He smiled triumphantly, while a look of horror dawned in her eyes.

"You—you will restore me to my friends?" she gasped in breathless agitation.

"Lily, can you ask it? Can I bear to give you up, long and truly as I have loved you? When death, in compassion for my sorrow, has given you up from the very tomb itself to my loving arms could I give you back to your less devoted lover and live my life without you, my peerless darling? Lily, do not ask me for such a sacrifice."

"I am never to see father, sister, friends, again?" asked she, with whitening lips.

"Yes, yes, Lily. Only consent to reward my fidelity with your dear hand, and you shall see them all again."

"I cannot," she moaned, faintly; "I am betrothed to another."

"Death has broken the bond," said he; "your lover has torn you from his heart ere this in angry resentment at your supposed suicide. He believes that you loved another and chose death in preference to a loveless marriage with him. Give yourself to me, Lily, and that will confirm his belief."

"Oh, never, never! I do not love you," she cried, vehemently.

"Love would come in time, darling. Gratitude to the savior of your life would create love. I could make you happy, Lily; I have wealth, position, influence—all the things that woman values most."

"I can never love anyone but Lancelot Darling," she said, while a blush tinged her cheek at the sweet confession.

His brow grew dark as night.

"Speak not the name of my hated rival," he cried, angrily. "I saved your life, not he! Yet this is your gratitude!"

"Oh, indeed I am grateful if indeed you saved my life," she cried. "But ask me for some other reward. Take my eternal gratitude, my undying friendship, take the last penny of my fortune, but spare me my happiness!"

"You rave, Lily," he answered, coldly. "Nothing you have offered me has any value in my eyes except yourself. I will never, never resign you. You are in my power here. To all the world you are dead. You shall remain so until you marry me!"

"I will never, never marry you!" she cried, with passionate defiance.

"We shall see," he answered, angrily; but his words fell on deaf ears. She had fallen back in a

deep swoon. He went out and sent Haidee to assist her while he hurriedly left the house.

The swoon was a deep one. Lily lay quite exhausted after she revived, and was still and speechless for some hours. Doctor Pratt came that night and gave her another sleeping potion. She took it quietly without remark, and slept heavily all night. The sun was high in the heavens next day when old Haidee, sitting by her pillow, started to find those large blue eyes fixed thoughtfully upon her. She ran and brought a nourishing breakfast up-stairs to her patient.

"You are better," said she, in her cracked voice, seeing that Lily ate with an appetite.

"I am stronger," said she, as Haidee removed the tray.

She was quiet a while after the old crone had taken her seat and resumed her knitting. Presently she asked, abruptly:

"What is your name?"

"They call me Haidee," said the old woman, shortly.

"Do you live here alone, Haidee?"

"My old man lives with me," said she.

"You are very poor, I suppose," said Lily, letting her eyes rove over the poorly furnished bedroom. [Pg 16]

"Miserably poor, honey," said old Haidee, while an avaricious light gleamed in her small black eyes.

"Is this place in New York?" asked the patient.

"Thereabouts," answered old Haidee.

"Would you like to earn some money—heaps of shining gold?" asked the girl, timidly.

The old woman's beady eyes sparkled. "Aye, that I would," said she.

"If you will carry a little note to my father for me, I'll give you plenty of money," said Lily, tremblingly.

"Where is your money?" asked Haidee, cautiously.

"I have no money with me," said Lily, "but my father will give you some when you take him this note."

"The pay must be in advance," said Haidee, provokingly, "I can't trust your promise."

Lily looked about her despairingly. There was nothing valuable about her except a diamond ring on her finger. Her eyes fell upon that.

"I will give you my diamond ring if you will carry the note to my father."

"Aye, aye, but your captors would miss it from your finger," said Haidee, watching the sparkling jewel with greedy eyes. "They would suspect you had bribed me, and they would kill old Haidee."

"That is true," murmured the patient, sadly. She lay a little while lost in thought, then her face grew bright.

"I will tell you what I will do," said she. "See, there are five diamonds in my ring. Each one is worth a hundred dollars. I will loosen one of the stones and give it to you if you will help me to escape from here. They will not miss one single stone from the ring, or if they do they will think it had become loosened from the setting and lost. Come, what do you say?"

"It is a risky undertaking, and the reward is small," muttered the old creature.

"My father shall give much more if you help me. Haidee, will you do it?" asked Lily, imploringly.

"Yes, I will," said the old woman, greedily.

"Now?" asked Lily.

"Yes, now, before the doctor or Mr. Colville comes back. My old man can take care of you until I return."

Lily shuddered at the mention of the old man, but hastily begged for writing materials.

There were none to be had except the stub of an old pencil and some light brown wrapping-paper. The old crone brought her these with a muttered apology for her poverty, and sitting up in bed, Lily wrote a few feeble, incoherent lines to her father.

"Dear papa," she wrote, "I am not dead, though you put me in a coffin and locked me in the vault with all the dead and gone Lawrences. I was stolen from the vault, and a doctor brought me to life again. I am kept a prisoner here by Harold Colville, who swears he will not release me until I marry him. I have hired the old woman who takes care of me to take you this letter. You must give her money, papa dear, for her kindness. She will conduct you here where I am. Oh! hasten, papa, and release me from this horrible prison.

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"Your loving daughter,

"LILY."

Taking the old woman's knitting needle she carefully pryed out one of the diamonds from her ring, and putting it with the note into Haidee's hand bade her hasten.

"It is a long way from here. It will take me several hours to go," was the answer.

"I shall count the minutes till you return," said Lily. "God bless you, Haidee, for your goodness to me at this trying time."

The old woman chuckled as she went out, and locked the door after her. At the foot of the stairs she paused and carefully reread the superscription of the letter.

"Number 1800 Fifth avenue," said she, gloatingly. "Ah! the outside of this letter is all I want to see."

She hobbled into her room, set her old man on guard to watch her prisoner, and blithely wended her way cityward.

CHAPTER VI.

"Mrs. Vance, there is an old woman down-stairs says she has brought the laces you wished to see," said a trim little serving maid at Mrs. Vance's door.

Mrs. Vance looked up impatiently from her book.

"I have not ordered any laces at all," said the lady, sharply. "Send the lying old creature away, Agnes."

The trim maid hesitated.

"You ought to look at them, Mrs. Vance," said she, timidly; "such lovely laces I never saw. They are as delicate as sea-foam and very cheap. I expect they are smuggled goods."

"Well, well, let her come up then, but I do not need any of her wares."

Agnes went away and presently reappeared a moment at the door, and ushered in old Haidee with a basket on her arm. The maid then left them together.

"Now, then," said the lady, sharply, "what did you mean by saying I had ordered your laces?"

"Oh! pretty lady, forgive an old woman's lie to the maids for the sake of getting in. I have bargains, lady—lovely laces smuggled through the Custom House without any duty—I can sell them to you much cheaper than the merchants can afford to do."

"Let me see them, then," said the lady, with apparent indifference.

Old Haidee unpacked her wares and exhibited a small but fine assortment of real laces. Her prices were extremely low, and Mrs. Vance, though she pretended indifference, was charmed with their elegance, and the small sum asked by the vender. After a good deal of haggling she selected several yards, and paid for them in gold pieces taken from a silken netted purse through whose interstices gleamed many more pieces of the same kind. Old Haidee's eyes gleamed greedily at the sight.

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"Gold-gold!" she muttered, working her claw-like fingers. "Give me the purse, pretty lady."

Mrs. Vance withdrew a step in amazement.

"Old woman, you are crazy. Go, leave the room this very instant!"

"Give me the gold," still pleaded the miserly old hag.

"I will have you turned out of the house this minute, miserable old beggar!" cried Mrs. Vance, moving toward the bell.

"Stop one moment, lady, I have something to say to you—a secret to tell you. You would not have me tell it before the servants, would you?" said the old woman, in such a meaning tone that Mrs. Vance actually hesitated, with her hand on the bell-rope.

"Say on," said she, haughtily, and thinking to herself that the old lace-vender was insane.

"Bend closer, lady, the walls have ears sometimes. This is a terrible secret," said Haidee, with a solemn air.

Mrs. Vance moved a step nearer, impressed in spite of herself by the eerie, witch-like gestures and sepulchral air of the speaker.

"Lady, a few nights ago a fair young girl was murdered within these stately walls. Ah! you tremble; she trembled too when the jealous woman stole into her room, turned the key in the lock, and struck her down as she stood looking at her sweet reflection in her bridal dress—yes, struck her down with a brutal dagger-thrust in her heart. The wicked murderess stooped to see if her guilty work was done, then escaped down the ladder of vines that climbed up to the window. The jury said that the poor girl committed suicide; but we know better—do we not, beautiful lady?"

"You are a fiend," cried Mrs. Vance, from the chair where she had sunk down, still clutching the heavy purse of gold coins in her cold hand. "You lie! no one murdered her—she died by her own hand."

"Lady, I shall not tell my secret to any one but you," said Haidee, with a low and fiend-like laugh. "Now, will you give me the gold?"

"Never! You have come here to blackmail me! you wish to frighten me by trumped up suspicion; I will not buy your silence!" cried Mrs. Vance, passionately.

"Very well, lady, I will go to Mr. Lawrence, I will go to Mr. Darling, I will tell them what I have told you," said the lace-vender, rising to leave.

"Stay—who knows this lying tale besides yourself?"

"No one, lady. I, Haidee Leveret, am the only witness of your crime, and you can buy my silence with that purse of gold," said the old crone, sepulchrally.

"Take it, then," said Mrs. Vance, flinging it down at her feet "and keep the secret till your dying day! you need not return to blackmail me again. That is all the gold I have. I am a poor woman. I can get no more to give you!"

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The old woman gathered up the purse of coins, hid it in her bosom, and trotted out, mouthing and mumbling to herself. Mrs. Vance fell down upon the floor writhing in terror. "My sin has found me out," she cried, wringing her white hands helplessly. "Oh, Lancelot, Lancelot, it was all for you!"

"A lucky day," said old Haidee to herself as she trotted down the street. "A fine piece of work, and well paid for! A purse of gold and a diamond! Well, well!"

She stopped and took poor Lily's note from her pocket where it had lain concealed, and tearing it into minute fragments threw it into the street. A gentleman passing by observed the action curiously. It was Mr. Lawrence. Ah! if he had but known whose hand had written the note whose coarse, brown fragments lay under his feet, if he had but turned and followed that hideous old witch, what months of sorrow might have been spared him. But he did not know, and he went on to his home, bowed and heart-broken, while old Haidee trotted quickly past, crooning a low tune in the pride of her gratified avarice and cunning.

As she went into the door of her home, Doctor Pratt came in suddenly after her.

"Now where have you been, Haidee?" he asked, suspiciously.

"Only to market, doctor," said she, trembling, sidling past him with the basket on her arm.

He found his patient restless and excited. She was tossing uneasily from side to side of the bed, and her cheeks were flushed and feverish. He took the small hand, and found the pulse bounding rapidly beneath his touch.

"This will not do," said he, "you must not excite yourself unduly."

The door opened, admitting Haidee with a bowl of fresh arrowroot. Lily looked wistfully beyond her, but she was quite alone. She saw in Haidee's cautious, negative shake of the head that her mission had failed. She fell back, crushed with her disappointment.

"Come, take your nourishment," said Pratt, kindly.

She shook her head. A choking sensation arose in her throat, and she could not swallow. She determined to make one appeal to this grim-looking man.

"Doctor," she said, clasping her hands imploringly, "I appeal to your honor, to your generosity, to your humanity, to restore me to my home and father!"

Doctor Pratt shook his head decisively.

"It is impossible for me to do that," he answered; "you are in the power of Mr. Colville; I am merely employed by him to attend you in your illness. You must make your appeal to him."

"He is a villain, a designing wretch!" she broke out, indignantly. "I will make no appeal to him. But, doctor, if you will go and tell my father where to find me, I will give you five thousand dollars the day I am liberated from this prison-house."

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He laughed and drew a newspaper from his pocket. Putting it in her hands, he directed her attention to a marked paragraph. She read it with streaming eyes. It ran simply:

"Much sympathy has been excited for the Lawrence family in the painful discovery that the body of Miss Lily Lawrence has been stolen from the vault of her father. The well-known wealth of the great banker makes it seem probable that the foul deed was committed with a view to a heavy ransom. It will be seen in our reward column that Mr. Lawrence offers ten thousand dollars for the return of the corpse."

"So your father offers more for the repose of your dead body than you do for your living one," he said, laughing. "No, Miss Lawrence, I cannot accept your munificent bribe. My duty to Mr. Colville forbids. And *au revoir*. I must be going. I leave you some medicine and will see you again to-morrow. Take the best care of her, Haidee."

He went away, and they heard the hall door clang behind him. Lily turned to her silent attendant.

"Haidee, you did not go," she murmured, in a reproachful tone.

"Oh! yes, I did, miss, but your father was not there," readily answered the treacherous old woman.

"Oh! then you left the note for him, and also your address?" said Lily in a more hopeful tone.

"Aye, that I did, miss," said old Haidee, lying glibly; "I gave it to a very pretty lady."

"It was my sister Ada, then," said Lily.

"No, miss; your sister lies ill of a fever. I gave it to a lady called Mrs. Vance," lied Haidee, watching the patient's face keenly.

A startling change swept over the girl's white features. Fear, terror, resentment—all were blended in that look.

"Oh!" she cried, "then indeed I have no hope of release! She will not give the letter to my father. She is my murderess—she tried to kill me. She will come here and make her fatal work sure! Watch for her, Haidee—do not allow her to enter here. She will kill me, indeed she will kill me!"

"Oh, me, honey, I am so sorry that I gave her the note," said Haidee, artfully; "but do not be afraid, she shall not come here to finish her devil's work—no, not she, my poor deary."

Alas! alas! poor Lily! Doctor Pratt's opiates could not bring oblivion of her troubles that night. She raved and tossed through the long and weary night, while Haidee, thoroughly alarmed, was very glad to see the physician's face quite early the next morning.

CHAPTER VII.

"Come home and dine with me, Lance," said Mr. Lawrence, meeting Lancelot Darling amid the bustle and stir of Wall street.

Poor Lance had been strolling carelessly up and down with a care-worn, wretched look upon his handsome face. Time went very slowly with him now. He turned about and, shaking hands with his friend, walked on by his side.

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"Is there any news?" he asked, his mind reverting instantly to the painful event which occupied all his waking thoughts.

"None," answered the banker, sadly. "Some of the sharpest detectives in the city are trying to trace it, but as yet there is not the faintest clew."

He sighed and Lancelot echoed the sigh. Both walked silently on. At length the banker signaled a car and, entering it, they became at once the cynosure of all the eyes within it. Their recent terrible affliction was so well known that sympathy shone on them from every eye. But little was said to them even by the friends they encountered. The mute trouble of their faces seemed to repel the mere trivialities of conversation, and no one wished to speak of the mournful tragedy whose impress was written so legibly on the faces of both the sufferers.

"You are looking very ill," Mrs. Vance said, in a gentle tone of sympathy, when the banker had left the guest in the drawing-room while he went up to see Ada, whose illness had not as yet taken any favorable turn.

"I am quite well, thank you," he answered, absently, and with an unconscious, heart-wrung sigh. He was looking about him sadly, seeing in fancy the graceful, girlish form that had so often flitted through this grand room. She saw the turn his mind had taken, and instantly diverted it to the present.

"Has anything been heard from our poor Lily yet?" she asked, in low, mournful tones.

"Nothing, nothing. Oh! Mrs. Vance, this suspense is very hard to bear," said he, impetuously, won by the gentle sympathy in her face and voice to an outburst he had not intended. "It is almost killing me!"

"Poor Lance," said she, in a broken voice; "your features show the traces of your great suffering. It is hard for us all to bear, but harder still for you."

Her delicate hand fluttered down upon his own with a pressure of mute sympathy, while she buried her face in her handkerchief, sobbing softly.

"I should not have brought my gloomy face here to sadden you still more—forgive me for my reckless outburst," said he, pained by the sight of her womanly grief, which always goes to a man's heart.

"Do not regret it," she answered, through her sobs. "Let me grieve with you, poor boy, in your trouble. Believe me, sympathy is very sweet."

"Thank you," he answered, gently. "Ah! this indeed is a house of mourning. Is Ada any better to-day, Mrs. Vance?"

"I am sorry to say she is not," answered the lady, making a pretence of drying her eyes, which, however, had not been wet by a single tear. "She has a low, intermittent fever, which does not as yet yield at all to the physician's treatment. God grant we are not to lose our lovely Ada, too. Ah! that would indeed be a sad consequence of poor Lily's rash suicide."

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He shuddered through all his strong young frame at that concluding word.

"Oh, God!" he groaned, "the mystery of it! Suicide! Suicide! If God had taken her from us, I could learn to say, 'It is well'—but that she should weary of us all, that she should rush out of this life that I thought to make so fair and beautiful to her in our united future! I cannot understand it—it

is horrible, maddening!"

Musingly she murmured over a few lines from Tom Hood's mournful poem, "The Bridge of Sighs:"

"Mad from Life's history,
Swift to Death's mystery,
Glad to be hurled
Anywhere, anywhere, out of the world!"

The words seemed to madden him. Impatiently he strode up and down the floor.

"She never loved me as I loved her!" he broke out, passionately. "I could not have done aught to grieve her so. If earth had been a desert, it must still have been Paradise to me while she walked upon it. Oh! Lily, Lily, you were very cruel!"

"Do not grieve so, I beseech you," said the widow's gentle voice. Timidly she took his hand and led him to a seat. "You will make yourself ill. We cannot afford to lose you, too. You were so near becoming one of the family that you seem almost to take the place of our dear one who has left us."

"You think me almost a madman," said he, remorsefully. "I startle you with my wild words. I should not have come here."

"Yes, you should," she answered, kindly. "You should come oftener than you do and let me sympathize with you in your trouble. Who can grieve with you so well as I who knew and loved your dear one? Promise to come every day, dear Lance, and let us share our trouble together."

"I will try," he answered, moved by her gentle friendliness, and thinking as he looked up that she was a very handsome woman. Not with the beauty of his lost Lily. *Her* angelic, blonde fairness typified the highest beauty to him. But handsome with a certain queenliness that was very winning. How dark and soft her eyes were—how beautiful the sweep of the long, dark lashes. And her cheeks—how rich and soft was the color that glowed upon them and deepened to crimson tints upon her full lips. And when that dark, bright face glowed with tenderness and feeling how very fascinating it became. When she took on herself the *role* of comforter how softly she could pour the oil of healing on the troubled waves of feeling. She had Lance soothed and quieted before Mr. Lawrence came down, with a pale and troubled face, from Ada's sick room.

Dinner went off rather soberly and solemnly. The array of silver and cut-glass was dazzling, the edibles costly and dainty, but Lance scarcely made a pretence of eating. Mr. Lawrence merely trifled with the viands, and Mrs. Vance was the only one whose appetite was equal to the demands of the occasion. Conversation lagged, though the beautiful widow tried to keep it up with all the consummate art of which she was mistress. But the gentlemen did not second her efforts, and she was relieved when the formal ceremony was over and they went out to smoke their cigars.

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"I will go in and see Ada a little," thought she. "The nurse says the fever is not infectious."

She tripped lightly up the steps and into the room where poor Ada lay tossing in her burning fever. She was very much like her sister in appearance, but the luxurious chamber where she lay was in great contrast with that in which poor suffering Lily was now immured. True, Lily had all the comforts her sickness needed, but here the capricious eyes of an invalid found everything to charm and soothe the weary eye. Here delicate curtains of silk and lace shut out the too dazzling light of day; here dainty white hangings delighted the eye with their coolness and purity. Here and there were set vases of freshly-cut flowers filling the air with sweetness, and rare and costly paintings looked down from the softly tinted walls.

An expression of annoyance swept over the girl's fair, ingenuous face as Mrs. Vance bent airily over her and touched her feverish brow with her delicately rouged lips.

"You should not kiss me," said she, pettishly, "this fever may be infectious."

"The doctor said it was not infectious, my dear," murmured the lady sweetly. "I asked him myself this morning."

"Oh! you did, eh? I suppose wild horses could not have dragged you in here to see me if it had been," said Ada, sarcastically.

"Is there anything I can do for you, my love?" asked Mrs. Vance, gracefully ignoring the spoiled girl's incivility.

"Nothing—only do not talk to me—talking hurts my head," replied the invalid, turning her face away.

"Ah, then, if I only disturb you I will take my leave," said the handsome widow, tripping out of the room.

"You were rather rude, my dear," said the nurse, surprised at her gentle patient's sudden petulance.

"I don't care," said Ada vehemently, "I hate that woman! I cannot tell why it is, but I have hated her ever since she came here to live, nearly two years ago. She knows I do not like her, but she affects unconsciousness of it. Keep the door locked, nurse, and do not let her come in here again—tell her I am too ill to see anyone. When she kissed me just now I felt as if a great slimy snake had crawled over me—ugh!" she said, shuddering at the recollection.

CHAPTER VIII.

The great agitation of poor imprisoned Lily Lawrence culminated in a severe fit of illness, and Doctor Pratt found need for all his skill before convalescence set in again. Mr. Colville prudently kept himself in the background now, so she was not troubled by the sight of the villain's face for several weeks. Haidee proved herself a careful and efficient nurse, and in three weeks' time poor Lily rose from her sick-bed pale, weak and weary, her girlish heart filled with heaviness and despair. She had again and again entreated old Haidee to go to her father, but in vain. The old woman stubbornly turned a deaf ear to all her entreaties. The old crone's husband Lily had not yet seen, though she frequently heard his gruff and brutal tones in the next room to hers, which appeared to be his sleeping-apartment.

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She was sitting up one day in the great arm-chair puzzling her brain over some plan of escape. She looked very lovely still, though wasted by illness and sorrow. Haidee had provided her with a neat blue wrapper, and her fairness was almost dazzling by contrast with its becoming hue. Her rich golden hair was gathered in a loose coil at the back of her graceful little head, showing the whiteness of her neck, and the rosy tinting of her small, shell-like ears. A fancy seized her to look out of the window which was always covered with thick curtains. It was warm and sultry and she longed for a breath of the sweet and balmy air outside her gloomy-looking room.

Rising with feeble steps she went to the window, and pulled aside the curtain.

Horrors! the window was barred with great, heavy iron bars!

Some vague, indefinite plan of escape through that window had been forming in her mind. She almost screamed in her despair as she saw the futility of her plan.

"Hateful prison-bars!" said she, angrily, and clenching one in her small hand she shook it with angry violence. To her surprise the rotten wood-work yielded, and the bar fell from its place and remained in her hand. Very cautiously she looked through the aperture just formed.

She saw that she was in an old and weather-beaten house set in the midst of a large garden whose overgrown shrubs and bushes had grown wild and tangled, and over-run the paths. There was not another house within half a mile of this one. She was far out on the suburbs, she comprehended at once.

A noise below startled her from her reconnoissance. Hastily fitting the heavy bar back to its place, she dropped the curtains and tottered back to her seat, assuming an air of indifference and weariness.

The door opened and Harold Colville entered.

"Good-evening, Miss Lawrence," said he, coolly; "I trust you find yourself improving."

Lily vouchsafed him no answer save a look of scorn and contempt.

"Come—come, fair lady," said he, seating himself near her, "have you no kinder greeting for your devoted admirer?"

"Leave the room, if you please," said she, while the indignant crimson suffused her cheeks. "I have nothing to say to you, sir!"

"Nothing? surely it were wiser, Lily, to try to make terms with me than to bandy angry words. Remember you are in my power. I love you, and I want your love in return. But, proud girl, beware how you change my love into hate."

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"Mr. Colville," said she, "it is cruel, it is unmanly thus to persecute a defenseless girl. I beseech you, restore me to my home and my father. Think of my poor father, my suffering sister. There are other women who will love you, women who have not given away their hearts as I have done."

"There is but one woman on earth to me, Lily, and I have sworn to make her my own. You cannot move me by all you say—as well try to topple a mountain from its base as to move me from my firm will. Better, far better were it for you, Lily Lawrence, to waive all this useless pleading, make yourself as charming as you well know how to do, and become my wife. If you still persist in refusing there may be worse things in store for you."

She could not misunderstand the insulting meaning of his angry speech. The hot blood flushed into her face, then receded and left her pale as death. In bitter shame at his rudeness she bowed her face in her hands.

"You understand me," said he with a low, malignant laugh; "so much the better! Now listen to reason, Lily. I love you, and you are in my power! you are dead to the world, dead to the father who reared you, the sister who loved you, the man you would have wedded. Consent to marry me, and within an hour after I call you my wife you shall see your friends again, and tell them the romantic story of my love, and how it saved your life; you can tell them that such devotion won you to reward my fidelity with your hand. All this I offer you in good faith and honor, and give you time for decision. But refuse—and—well, you know you are still in my power!"

She rose and stood confronting him in all the pride and dignity of outraged and insulted purity. She was rarely, peerlessly beautiful with that scarlet tide staining her cheeks, that lightning flash in the violet eyes.

"Villain, coward, dog!" she cried, in the white heat of passionate resentment, "how dare you

threaten me thus? Know that I defy you! I spurn you! I will never be your wife! I will die first, do you hear me? I will die by my own hand rather than be so disgraced."

"Rave on, my beauty," he answered, laughing tauntingly. "Flap your pretty wings against your prison bars, my little bird, you will only ruffle your feathers in vain. By Jove, you only make me more determined! I never saw you so beautiful, so utterly fascinating! I did not think you had so queenly a spirit, my fair one! you would make your fortune on the tragic stage!"

"Oh! go, go," she gasped, lifting her hand with a wild gesture toward the door, "go, leave me, unless you wish to see me dying!"

He paused irresolute an instant; then her flashing eye and dauntless air cowed his craven spirit into submission. With a slight bow he turned and went out of the door.

Face downward on the bed, Lily wept and sobbed unrestrainedly. She was determined, if release did not come ere long, to die by her own hand. "Better than dishonor," thought she with another burst of anguished tears.

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She looked about her for some instrument to secrete in case she should be driven to the last stronghold of honor. There was nothing to secure. Old Haidee had made sure of that. "Well," she thought, "if there is nothing else I can strangle myself with my handkerchief."

The hours wore on to twilight. Old Haidee brought her supper, grumbled because she did not eat it, and scowlingly withdrew. Lily was left alone with her sad thoughts for companions. She went to the window, pulled aside the curtain, and looked out. The twilight had faded, a few pale stars glimmered in the cloudy sky, a crescent moon gave forth a weak and watery light. A wild thought darted into her mind. "Oh! if I could escape through these broken bars. Ah! why not?"

She stood still and listened. Familiar sounds from the adjoining room informed her that the Leverets were retiring. She crouched down and waited perhaps half an hour. Then a dual chorus of snores announced that her lynx-eyed guardians slept.

Breathlessly she stole to the window and removed the iron bar. It left an aperture large enough to admit her slight form. She tried the other bars, but they seemed more firmly fixed than the first one she had tried. They resisted her strongest efforts.

"If I only had a strong rope," she thought to herself, "I could secure it to these bars and slide down it to the ground."

She leaned her head through the aperture and looked down to see how far she would have to descend. The distance appeared to be about thirty feet.

"If I only had a rope," she thought again, "I could certainly gain my freedom—freedom! that means home again, papa, Ada, Lancelot!"

She sat down, her heart beating wildly at the thought. They believed her dead. She pictured their wild, incredulous joy at first when she burst in among them, their own living darling. What a story she would have to tell, and how swiftly the vengeance of papa and Lancelot would descend on Mrs. Vance and Harold Colville. Her breath came quick and fast, her courage mounted high within her.

"I must escape," she murmured with passionate vehemence; "surely there must be some way out of this horrible prison."

She thought of all the stories she had heard and read of the escape of prisoners—she remembered that she had read of one man who had torn his bed-clothes into strips and made a rope of them by which he descended from the window. Why could not she do the same?

Cautiously, so as not to awaken the sleepers in the next room, she removed the bed-covers. There were not many, for the sultry summer weather precluded the possibility of their use, but there were two strong linen sheets.

"These would do, I think," she murmured to herself. "I am so light it would not need a very strong rope to bear my weight. I will tear these sheets into four long strips each. That will make eight strips. I will tie them together in knots, fasten the rope thus formed to a bar, and lower myself from the window. If the rope is not long enough I must jump the remainder of the distance. Then, free from this dreadful prison, I must trust in Providence to find the way home."

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She set to work diligently. She was obliged to be very cautious for fear the sound of her work should penetrate the ears of her jailers. She had nothing with which to cut the cloth, and it was strong and difficult to tear. But by dint of hard labor with teeth and fingers she at length accomplished it, and set to work tying the slips of linen together.

It took some time to make these knots secure. When that was done she secured the end of her impromptu rope to the lowest bar of the window, and looked out to see how far the end escaped the ground. Joy, joy! it was only about ten feet.

"I can easily jump that distance," she thought, with a thrill of triumph at her success.

She looked about for some wrapping to put over her thin blue dress. A long dark cloak with hood attached hung conveniently against the wall.

"They must have put that around me when I was brought here," she said, "so I will wear it to go away in," and, taking it down, she rolled it into a compact bundle and threw it out of the window.

Nothing now remained but to follow the bundle. She stood still a moment with streaming eyes raised to Heaven while with clasped hands she invoked the divine mercy and protection on her

perilous undertaking. Then shuddering, she climbed into the window, forced her body through the narrow opening, and, catching to the rope, swung herself downward.

Hark! there was a swish in the shrubbery in the garden below as if some heavy body had dashed through them. Her heart leaped into her throat, her clasp on the rope grew unconsciously looser, and she slipped much lower; so low that she heard distinctly on the ground beneath a deep, low, hurried breathing.

In an agony of dread and fear she clung tightly to the rope and waited for some demonstration from below. Some unexpected peril had intervened between her and freedom.

Hush! Hark! Suddenly, as if all Hades had broken loose, there rose a fearful, blood-curdling sound on the soft warm air of the summer night. Louder and deeper still it grew, and Lily, hanging there by the clasp of her frail little hands, midway between the window and the ground, knew that it was the cruel, hungry, relentless baying of a deep-mouthed blood-hound.

A scream of terror burst from her lips as she heard the dangerous creature at work beneath her wreaking its vengeance on the cloak she had thrown down—tearing it and rending it with fangs and paws. Thus, she thought, with a gasp of agony, the terrible beast would soon be rending her warm, living body.

Its vengeance sated on the cloak, the blood-hound began to make hungry leaps into the air towards Lily's body, at the same time uttering murderous yelps that froze the blood in the poor young creature's veins. She felt herself growing weak and faint, and knew that she could hold on but a few minutes longer ere she must faint and fall into the devouring jaws of the blood-thirsty animal. Oh! God, she thought, what a horrible death, to be torn limb from limb by that hungry brute! Papa and Lancelot would never know all she had suffered.

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She had escaped death by steel, death by living entombment, to be rent in twain by this awful blood-hound!

Suddenly, with a cry of rage, a night-capped head was thrust out of a window above. The Leverets had been awakened by the noise, and now hastened to the rescue. Lily heard them coming and tried to hold on yet a little longer; but her strength was spent, her bruised hands relaxed their hold, and with a shriek of horror she was hurled downward into the hungry jaws that were waiting for her. She heard the wild, prolonged howl of joy given by the dog, felt its hot breath on her face, then unconsciousness supervened and she knew no more.

At that moment when her death would have been but the work of an instant, a powerful hand grasped the dog's collar and dragged him, howling and yelping away to his kennel, while old Haidee raised the unconscious girl carefully up and looked at her limp form in the moonlight.

"Is she dead?" muttered the old witch. "Has the hound killed her? Here, Peter," as the old man came back from fastening the dog into his kennel, "carry the girl up-stairs—I believe the dog has killed her."

They carried her back and laid her down upon the bed whose coverings she had stripped and rent with such high hope an hour ago.

White and cold she lay there as if indeed life had been driven from its beautiful citadel forever. Old Haidee carefully examined her face and limbs. There was no sign of any wound from the animal's fangs.

"He has not bitten her. If she be dead, it is sheer fright that has killed her," said she. "Peter, you ugly brute, stand aside. If she were to revive, the sight of you would be enough to frighten her to death!"

Peter removed his homely countenance to one side, while old Haidee pursued her task of bringing the unconscious girl out of her swoon. Cold water, camphor, burnt feathers and ammonia were successively tried by the old crone before faint breath began to flutter again over the pale lips. Her eyes opened and she looked up in bewilderment.

"Where am I?" she moaned. "What is the matter—oh! what is that?"

Her wandering gaze had fastened on old Peter Leveret, and she regarded him with looks of horror. And no wonder, for old Peter was hump-backed and deformed, and had a countenance so wicked it resembled that of a brute more than a human being. A shock of bristly, unkempt red hair surmounted his visage, and his straggling beard was of the same fiery hue. He leered maliciously at her looks of terror.

"Pshaw! that is only my old man, miss," said Haidee, shortly. "You need not put on so many airs at sight of him, for I do assure you that if he had not pulled old Nero off you just in the very nick of time, the hound would have torn you to pieces long before this."

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"I thank you," said Lily, timidly, forcing herself to look gently at the repulsive old creature. "Oh, where did the dreadful dog come from?"

"We keeps it chained up all day in the garden, and at night we lets him loose to purvent you from escaping, miss," answered old Peter, doggedly.

"Strange that I never heard him before," mused Lily, reflectively.

"He never had occasion to make himself heard before," said Haidee, grimly.

Lily shuddered and remained silent.

"Pray, miss," said old Peter, who had been examining the window curiously, "how did you get the

iron bar out of this here window? You don't look strong enough to have wrenched it out."

"The woodwork was rotten," she answered, quietly. "I pulled the bar out at the first effort."

"Peter," said old Haidee, "go into the third room from this and see if the bars are strong in that window."

Old Peter hobbled out on his errand, and Haidee said, shortly:

"I did not think you would try to give us the slip, miss, or I would have warned you long ago about old Nero. There is no use trying to escape from here—you are as secure in this house as if you were in your grave. Grave perils await you the moment you step over this threshold. Old Nero was but a foretaste of what you may meet with, so I advise you to marry Mr. Colville, and content yourself."

"I will never, never marry him, Haidee," said the young girl, sadly, yet dauntlessly. "And you need not try to frighten me from trying to escape, for I shall use every endeavor to that end. I can but die, and death is preferable to what I must endure in this house."

She lay back and closed her eyes wearily.

Peter Leveret entered and reported the bars as strong and tight in the third room.

"You may sit here by the patient, then, while I go and prepare that room for her reception," said his wife.

"You will not put her in *that* room," said Peter, with vague surprise and doubt.

"Yes, in that very room—there is no other where the windows are barred. She must occupy that until we can get this window fixed. Nothing will hurt her. I dare say she is not afraid of ghosts," said Haidee, grimly, as she passed out.

She was absent half an hour or more. Lily lay still with closed eyes all the while, dreading to see again the villanous countenance of old Peter, for hideous as Haidee had appeared to her startled eyes, her aspect was beauty in comparison with that of her husband. It was with feelings of relief, therefore, that Lily welcomed her return.

"Come," said the old crone, shortly, "I will conduct you to a more secure apartment, miss."

She led Lily along a dark passage, thrust her rudely into a dimly-lighted room, and locked the door upon her.

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CHAPTER IX.

Thus rudely disposed of, Lily stood still a moment in the center of the floor whither the old woman's rude push had landed her, and looked about her with a swelling heart full of grief and indignation.

She found herself in a meagerly furnished, low-ceiled room, very similar to the one she had just quitted. The single window was barred with iron strongly and securely fitted in. The low, white bed had a very refreshing look to her worn and agitated frame, and throwing herself upon it, dressed as she was, Lily fell into a deep and weary slumber, broken now and then by a sob that welled up from her heart.

It was probably midnight when she was awakened by the peal of thunder overhead, and the patter of heavy rain upon the roof. A violent summer storm was in progress, and Lily lay still awhile and listened in awe to the raging elements warring furiously together. In a temporary lull of the storm, she fancied she heard groans of pain arising from beneath the floor, and sprang up in bed, trembling violently. She listened again, but the sound was not repeated, and the girl smiled as she said to herself:

"It was only my nervous fancy, giving a human voice to the winds and rain. There can be no one in this old house save my cruel jailers and myself."

She laid her head down again upon the pillow, and as the ominous sounds were not repeated, and the wild thunder-storm decreased in violence, she fell asleep and did not wake until the sun was high in the summer heavens.

Haidee, entering with her breakfast and fresh water for her ablutions, scowled at her suspiciously.

"Did you sleep well?" interrogated she.

"Very well," answered Lily, coldly and briefly.

"Did nothing disturb you through the night?" said the old witch, watching the young girl keenly from beneath her shaggy, over-hanging eyebrows.

"Thunder awakened me," replied Lily, calmly, "and once, in a pause of the storm, it seemed to me I heard a human voice groaning; but I became satisfied afterward that it was only the wind in the trees."

"Most likely," said Haidee. "I'm glad you were not frightened. But they do say this room is haunted. A woman died in here, and they do say she walks about and wrings her hands and groans. I know nothing about it myself, but I will own that I have heard strange sounds here."

The long, lonely day wore on while she sat absorbed in her painful thoughts. Colville, with "malice prepense," had denied her the solace of books, work, or music, thinking that the unutterable weariness and stagnation of her life would drive her sooner into his eager arms.

Time passed on leaden footsteps to the impatient young creature whose life hitherto had held every pleasure that love and wealth combined could lavish on its beautiful idol. [Pg 31]

Noon brought Haidee and her dinner. Wearied by the length of the sultry day and her own vexing thoughts, Lily scarcely tasted the food brought her.

"Take it away," she said, indifferently, "I have no appetite, Haidee."

Haidee obeyed in silence, and left her walking up and down the floor in passionate impatience. Now and then she shuddered with fear at remembering her escape of the previous night.

"I shall have to die," she thought, despairingly. "There is no hope of escape from this house. But, oh! may it not be by such a dreadful method as that."

Her meditations were suddenly interrupted by a horrible sound. It was the far-off clank of a heavy chain mingled with the anguished wail of an unearthly voice. It broke so suddenly on the stillness that Lily started in affright, the very hairs on her head seeming to stand erect in her over-mastering horror.

She had never been a believer in the supernatural, but what was that, she asked herself, with a wildly beating heart. The sounds continued, muffled by distance, yet distinctly horrible and realistic. They seemed to rise from the floor beneath her feet. She covered her ears with her hands, but the sounds penetrated to her whirling brain in spite of her efforts not to hear—dreadful sounds of woe from the suffering lips of some human or inhuman creature. All the while the heavy chain seemed clanking in unison with the voice.

Was Haidee's ghost-story true after all, Lily asked herself, in doubt and bewilderment. No, she would not believe it. Only the narrow-minded and superstitious believed in such things. Suddenly the solution of the mystery broke on her mind like the light of an inspiration. She understood Haidee's anxiety that she should believe in the unearthly nature of the sound she was likely to hear.

"It is nothing supernatural," she said to herself, firmly. "I am not the only prisoner in this house. Some poor being, more wretchedly treated even than myself, perhaps driven to madness, as they will probably drive me, is confined in some loathsome dungeon below me, and Haidee does not wish me to know it."

"Poor soul, poor soul!" murmured Lily in divine pity and compassion for the unknown prisoner.

As she sat musing sadly her eyes fell absently on the carpet beneath her feet. It had evidently been laid down the night before in a great hurry, for it was unevenly spread, and was not tacked down. There was no carpet in the room she had occupied before. Why had old Haidee been so particular about placing one here?

"It is rather strange," she thought to herself. "Haidee had something to conceal. I will look under that carpet."

She glanced toward the key-hole, fearing that argus eyes might be watching her. No one was there. She rolled up a piece of wrapping paper that lay carelessly upon the floor and pushed it into the opening. [Pg 32]

"Now I will see what that carpet hides," said the brave girl to herself.

She advanced to the corner of the room and slowly turned back the corners of the gay flowered carpet as far as the middle. She was rewarded by more than she expected. The carpet had been drawn over a trap-door in the center of the room. It had recently been used, too, thought the girl, for it was free from dust and a small crevice appeared at one end. She inserted her fingers in the opening thus found, and cautiously pushed against it. The door slid back under the flooring lightly and easily, and disclosed below Lily's room a long and narrow winding stairway. It looked gloomy and dark, as if the footsteps of the wicked alone trod over its hidden way, and with a shudder Lily pushed the door back into its place, carefully replaced the carpet, removed the paper from the key-hole, and sat down with a wildly-beating heart and trembling limbs.

"That stairway evidently leads to the dungeon of that poor chained prisoner," was her inward comment. "Who can it be that Haidee has immured there? Perhaps another victim of Dr. Pratt and Harold Colville. Oh! God, that such infamous villany should go unpunished beneath the sky of heaven!"

She walked to the iron-barred window, and looked out through the grating.

The sun was shining in the blue heavens—the tangled old garden, refreshed by the storm of the previous night, was a wilderness of bloom. Untrimmed, the roses spread their wild, loving arms over the ground, or climbed heavenward by whatever frail support they could reach. Vines broken down from their frames blossomed luxuriantly on the ground, and ran across the winding path. A high stone wall ran around the whole place, shutting out all the bloom and sweetness from the curious gaze of any who might chance to pass. Poor Lily inhaled the fragrant air that rose to her window with a heart-wrung sigh. What sunshine and sweetness and beauty were outside of her horrible prison—what grief, what desolation, perhaps even madness, within.

The fresh pure air infused new courage into her fainting heart; the memory of those mournful, anguished wails became less dreadful as her courage rose.

"I will go down that winding stairway to-night," was the resolve taking shape in her mind. "I will try and find that poor soul imprisoned beneath me. Ah! can I, dare I? Who knows what awful shape of idiocy or madness may affright me thence? No matter; after enduring the dread companionship of the dead in the charnel house, I can bear that chained creature also."

The day wore on. Twilight came with its dusky shadows and passed. Old Haidee entered with supper and a freshly trimmed lamp. Lily could scarcely eat, she was so excited by the thought of her projected night adventure.

"I suppose you are trying to starve yourself to death, miss," said she grimly; "I shall send word to Dr. Pratt and he will give you some stuff to stimulate your appetite."

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Lily made no reply.

"I suppose you'll not try to escape to-night," continued Haidee maliciously. "If you do old Nero will be on the watch for you. He never sleeps at night."

"I will make my next attempt at daylight then," replied Lily coolly.

"You'll not find another loose bar," retorted the old woman angrily, as she went out with the scarcely touched dishes.

Lily waited a long while in perfect silence for the sound of the old people going up-stairs. At length she heard their harsh footsteps creaking up the stairs. As she had expected old Haidee's course was straight towards her room. She sprang into bed, drew the covers up to her chin, and feigned slumber. The key grated in the lock and the old woman's fiendish visage peered in.

"Ah! there you are safe in your nest, pretty bird," croaked she; "well, happy dreams to you." So saying, she turned the key again and went away, satisfied that her charge was safe for that night.

CHAPTER X.

Lily lay perfectly still, but quite sleepless for more than two hours. During that time she heard several groans from below, accompanied by the ominous clank of the chain. At length, as the cries grew louder and more frequent, she determined at all hazards to seek the poor, suffering creature.

She rose and removed the carpet, slid back the trap-door, and gazed down into the gloomy pit below. All was blackness and darkness, but the harsh, wailing sounds arose more distinctly than before. She took up the lamp in her hand, and with an irrepressible shudder, began to descend the winding stair. Presently she stood at the foot of the stairs in a narrow passage-way.

At the further end was a door. Trembling so that she could scarcely hold the lamp, Lily advanced and tried the handle. It yielded to her touch and swung open. She found herself in an empty, dismal room, its walls festooned with cobwebs, its cold flooring formed of solid stone.

As she looked about by the dim light of the lamp she saw another door, and resolutely advancing she caught the knob and swung it open. Another instant and she had stepped across the threshold and stood in the presence of the mystery.

It was an empty, cobwebbed room like the first, its only furniture consisting of a narrow cot-bed. Close beside it an iron staple was driven into the stone floor. A long and heavy iron chain was fastened to this staple. At its opposite end it was linked to a strong leathern belt wound about the frame of a poor creature lying at full length on the bed and wasted to a living *skeleton!*

In all her speculations regarding the mysterious prisoner, Lily had not imagined aught as dreadful as the reality. There lay the poor frame upon the bed, its tattered dress scarce covering its bony knees, its claw-like hands twisted wildly together. The limbs presented the appearance of bones with parchment-like skin drawn tightly over them.

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Masses of long, black hair, tangled and unkempt, strayed over the coarse pillow, and fierce, dark eyes, sunken and dim, peered from their hollow orbits in a face shriveled simply to skin and bone, the cheeks fallen in, the temples hollow, the purple lips drawn away from the glistening white teeth. This dreadful creature stopped its frenzied cries at Lily's entrance, and crouching into a frightened heap wailed out submissively:

"I will hush, I will hush! Do not beat me again!"

"Poor creature, I will not harm you," answered Lily, gently.

She stood in the center of the room, holding the lamp in her shaking hand, its light streaming over her lovely face and golden hair. The poor creature turned suddenly at the sound of her compassionate voice and looked at her with an expression of awe in her great, hollow eyes.

"Are you an angel?" she asked, abruptly.

"No, poor soul; I am a wronged and unhappy prisoner like yourself!"

"Another one of *his* victims?" queried the living skeleton, sitting up on the cot and folding her emaciated arms around her skinny knees.

Lily came forward and seated herself on the foot of the bed, and set her lamp on the floor.

"Of whom are you speaking?" asked she.

"Of Harold Colville, to be sure," said the poor woman, shuddering as the name writhed over her blanched lips. "Has he married you, too, eh?"

"God forbid," ejaculated her visitor with a strong shiver of disgust. "I am a poor girl whom he is trying to force into a marriage with him. He has stolen me away from my friends and is keeping me locked up here until I consent to be his wife. But I will never, never do so!" she cried, passionately.

"You do not love him?" said the poor frame beside her.

"No, I hate him! But who are you?" asked Lily, her interest deepening in the poor creature whose mind it was evident still burned clearly in her wrecked frame.

"I am Fanny Colville," was the answer, in a low and bitter tone. "I am Harold Colville's lawful wife—I was married to him four years ago."

"Is it possible?" cried Lily, with a violent start. "Then why are you here?"

"My husband wearied of me," said poor Fanny, her dark eyes burning like coals. "He stole me away from my friends, too, lady, but I went willingly because I loved him—yes, I loved him then! He married me and I hid away the certificate the good minister gave me. We traveled for a year or so, and lived very happily. Then he wearied of me and brought me here. He told me our marriage ceremony was a farce—that we had not been lawfully married—he demanded the certificate the minister had given me. But I was not a fool, I knew he lied to me, and I would not give up the paper for the sake of the little child that was soon coming to me. I kept it hidden away, and he raved and swore at me, then went away and left me. He hired the Leverets to kill me and the child also when my hour should arrive. The day came—my child was born—a healthy, living boy. They took it away from me and said that it died. I knew they had killed it. But they were not merciful enough to kill me. They drove me mad with their cruelty. I became a raving, dangerous maniac for awhile, and they chained me down here like a dog. Here I have remained nearly two years, fed on a scanty supply of bread and water. You see what they give for a week's subsistence," said she, pointing to a half-eaten loaf of bread and a jug of water, both upon the floor.

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Lily looked and shuddered.

"Does your husband ever come to see you?" she inquired.

"No, no; he thinks me dead—he paid old Peter Leveret to murder me. But they are slowly starving me to death instead of thrusting a knife into my heart. And I am so strong, it takes me a long while to die!"

She paused a moment, catching her breath painfully, then continued:

"Dreadful deeds have been committed here—murder's red right hand has been lifted often. Look down into that pit, lady."

She pointed to a trap-door near the iron staple.

Lily pushed it aside and looked down, but saw only thick darkness, while a noisome smell rushed out of the pit. She closed it hurriedly.

"I see nothing," she said, "but darkness."

"Because it is night," said Fanny Colville. "You should come when it is daylight, lady. You would see horrible, grinning skeletons then. I look at them sometimes. They are the only companions I have."

"Poor Fanny, I wish you could escape out of this horrible place. Would you like to do so?"

"Oh! so much," said the living skeleton, clasping her bony hands. "I have dear friends far away from here whom I love so much. They know nothing of my whereabouts. How gladly they would welcome me back."

"My case is the same," said Lily, mournfully. "I have tried to escape, but was near losing my life through falling into the clutches of the blood-hound they keep here. But I am going to try again, Fanny, and I will try to help you out of your prison also. I will come and see you again," said she, taking up her lamp and turning to go.

"Do not go yet, sweet lady," cried the prisoner, imploringly; "I love to look at you and hear you speak. I have not heard a kind word for more than two years until you came in like an angel to-night."

"I must go now," replied Lily, gently. "I am afraid old Haidee will miss me and trace me here. Keep up a brave heart—I will come again to-morrow night if nothing happens. Good-night, now, Fanny."

"Good-night, miss," said the unfortunate creature, seizing Lily's hand and kissing it. "I am happier for your coming, and I shall expect you again to-morrow night!"

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The young girl took up her lamp and went away, leaving the poor creature alone in her dreadful solitude once more. But hope, like a brightly beaming star, had penetrated that gloomy dungeon and beamed into Fanny Colville's lacerated heart. She lay awake all night, thinking feverishly of the beautiful girl who had visited her, and building bright air-castles on the slight hint of escape she had thrown out.

And Lily, too, tossed on a feverish bed which gentle slumber refused to visit with its benign influence. Fear, horror and indignation filled her heart against Harold Colville and the Leverets,

mixed with deep sorrow and pity for the injured Fanny. She understood now the depth of villainy of which her would-be suitor was capable, and the wickedness of Haidee and Peter appeared more dreadful than before. No wonder Haidee found her tossing on a bed of pain the next morning, racked by a nervous headache. Colville called to see her, but went away when he heard she was ill, and sent Doctor Pratt instead, who prescribed a sedative and left her sleeping heavily and profoundly.

CHAPTER XI.

Late in the evening she awoke, feeling rested and refreshed by her long sleep. Her headache was quite gone, and Haidee found her sitting in the arm-chair when she came in with supper.

She drank a cup of tea, ate a few mouthfuls of food, and declared herself much better. Old Haidee, however, brought in her knitting and pertinaciously sat out the evening with her, with the intention, no doubt, of listening for sounds from below and marking their effect on her captive. But no sound, no groans, broke the stillness. Fanny Colville, in the new hope that had dawned upon her, had refrained all day from the groans and cries that usually gave vent to her despair. She was impatiently waiting for the return of her visitor of the night before.

Haidee had not visited the poor chained captive since the night she had incarcerated Lily in her new lodging. In fact, there was no entrance to the dungeon except through the trap-door in this room. Haidee had taken her a week's rations that night, and scowlingly bade her to abstain from her noise or it would be worse for her. She now concluded that the captive had obeyed her mandate, or that death had at last removed her out of her power. It was with a feeling of relief at the last thought that she left Lily's room, telling her with a malicious grin that old Nero was loose in the garden as usual.

It was almost midnight before Lily ventured to seek poor Fanny Colville again. Long before she descended the stairs she could hear the sound of the rusty chain as the poor woman tossed restlessly on her bed of pain. Her wild eyes lighted glaringly at the young girl's entrance.

"I thought you were not coming," she said pathetically.

"I dared not come earlier," Lily answered, relating the cause of her detention.

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"Old Haidee is a fiend," said Fanny, briefly and comprehensively.

"I have been revolving in my mind a plan of escape for us both," said Lily, proceeding to detail it to her eager listener.

But Fanny sighed and looked down at her skeleton limbs and the heavy chain.

"That would do for you, but not for me," she said; "I am too weak. It is a long way from here to the city. We have no money—we have to walk several miles to your father's house. You see I know the distance—I came here in daylight. I can tell *you* the way to go, but my wasted limbs would not carry me a mile. I should only fall by the way, and be a hindrance to you."

Lily sighed as her clear-headed companion thus presented the difficulties in their way.

"I had forgotten your exceeding weakness in the ardor of my hopes," said she.

"Besides," continued Fanny, "look at this chain. We have nothing with which to cut the leather or file the iron. I cannot get away from this staple."

"Can I, then, do nothing to help you, my poor creature?" cried Lily, in great distress as she saw how futile was the plan she had proposed.

"Of course there is," answered Fanny, hopefully. "The plan you spoke of is quite feasible for you. Put it into operation as soon as possible. I feel almost assured of your success. Then as soon as you have told your story to your father, tell him mine also, and entreat him to send a force of police out here to arrest the Leverets and liberate me."

"Certainly, I could do that," said Lily, brightening, "that would be the better plan after all—but still I cannot bear to leave you here alone, poor soul, in your wretchedness. Who can tell what may happen ere relief can reach you? Perhaps this slow starvation may finish its dreadful work upon you."

"Never fear," was the hopeful reply. "I have subsisted like this for two long years, yet I feel the flame of life still brightly burning in my wasted frame. And, think you, I cannot endure a few more days' confinement when you have given me such hope to feed upon?"

Her eyes were brightly burning in her wasted face, and her parched lips tried to smile. She took her visitor's little white hand caressingly between her own bony members and looked at it in fond admiration.

"You are a beautiful girl," she said. "Ah, would you believe that I was once a pretty girl, and that I am young still—but little older than you, perhaps, for I am only twenty, though, trouble and starvation have made me prematurely old!"

Lily looked the astonishment she felt, for indeed that poor face with all the curves and lines of flesh stricken out of it by the sharp pangs of starvation, had indeed no mark to discern whether she were young or old. True, the matted locks of black hair were too thick for those of age, but

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they were thickly streaked with silver threads. Harold Colville's wretched victim retained now no trace of either youth or beauty.

Lily remained with her several hours, feeling all the while that she ran a great risk in remaining, yet still unwilling to leave the unhappy woman who showed such pitiful pleasure in seeing once more the friendly face of a human being. But she was forced to go at length, having listened to the story of Fanny's life, and exchanged a like friendly confidence.

"I may not see you again, Fanny," she said, "for I may make the attempt to-morrow. It must be made in the day-time, you know, when Nero is chained up. But you may rest assured that if I succeed in escaping I shall lose no time in having you liberated, and your guilty captors brought to punishment."

"May God help you," said the prisoner, fervently. "I will pray for your success."

And with a sigh she kissed the white hands and looked lovingly after the slight form as it glided away.

Lily went back to her room half apprehensive that the old witch might be waiting for her there. But all was safe; the room was vacant of all but her own sweet presence. She disrobed herself, extinguished the lamp, and lying down upon the bed fell into a light slumber, broken by many fitful and strangely-troubled dreams.

She awakened only when the summer sun was shining high in the heavens. Haidee was waiting with her breakfast, and seemed even more petulant than usual.

"It seems to me you require more sleep than anyone I ever saw," she said, tartly. "After sleeping all day yesterday, you cannot even get awake for your breakfast this morning."

"I dare say you would sleep heavily yourself, Haidee, if you had been drugged as I was yesterday," retorted the young girl, good-humoredly. "And really, I am feeling ill and weary this morning. This warm weather and close confinement begin to tell on my health sadly. Perhaps I may escape you yet through the welcome gates of death."

"No danger of that," was the quick reply. "Youth and health can bear much more than you have had to stand yet, my fine lady."

She went out and did not return until noon. Her prisoner lay dressed upon the bed with flushed and burning cheeks and strangely glittering eyes.

"Haidee," she said, "I cannot eat my dinner. I am feeling very strangely. I have a dreadful feeling here." She pressed her hand upon her heart and seemed to gasp for breath. "Go, send for the doctor as quickly as possible. Perhaps I am about to die!"

Haidee looked at her in doubt a moment. The suffering aspect of the captive reassured her. She was evidently ill.

"I will send at once for Doctor Pratt," said she, leaving the room in haste, but not forgetting to lock the door.

"I have sent old Peter for the doctor," said she, returning "but it may be several hours before he returns. It is a long way to the city." [Pg 39]

"Sit down and stay with me, then, Haidee. I am afraid to remain alone when I feel so strangely."

Ten, fifteen minutes elapsed, then the patient said, faintly:

"Haidee, for the love of Heaven, try and get me a glass of wine! Perhaps it may relieve this wild fluttering and palpitation of my heart!"

Again Haidee went out, locking the door as before. The patient sprang up and stood waiting when the witch returned. The key grated, the door swung open—but at that instant Haidee received a dexterous push that sent her sprawling into the middle of the room, the wine glass crashing on the floor. Before she could rise, Lily sprang past her, into the hall, slammed and locked the door, removed the key and ran wildly down the stairs.

The outer door was fastened, but the key was in the lock. As she paused to remove it, she could hear the old woman's frenzied shrieks of anger and despair on realizing her situation. She flung the door open, flew down the path, pushed open the heavy iron gate, and ran wildly down the lonely country road, the afternoon sun beating hotly down on her unprotected head, the dust flying thick and fast beneath the rapid pit-a-pat of her small, slippared feet.

CHAPTER XII.

She was free, she was free! that happy thought beat time in Lily's heart to her wildly rushing feet. She was outside of that horrible prison, old Haidee was locked in, and could not pursue her, old Peter could not return for several hours. She had that much time in advance of them. Only a few miles lay between her and her loved home. Surely, surely, with the start she had she could distance her enemies and reach the haven of rest for which she yearned and prayed.

She ran on and on, her brain reeling, her heart beating almost to suffocation, the perspiration running down her face in streams.

Sheer exhaustion at last caused her to slacken her pace and look behind her at the lonely stretch of road over which her flying feet had swiftly carried her. The old house in which she had passed such awful hours was out of sight; a turn in the road had hidden it from view. No baleful pursuer was on her track yet. She turned and looked before her. A long stretch of country road, dotted here and there with poor-looking houses, lay ahead. She wet her handkerchief in a rill that trickled by the side of the road, bound it about her throbbing head, and set forward again, steadily, but at a less swinging pace than she had used before. Exhausted nature could not hold out at the rapid rate with which she had begun.

On and on she went through the blistering sunshine. Her head ached, the hot road burnt her feet, the warm wind blew the dust into her strained and weary eyes. No matter—she did not heed these trifling things. She was free! That was the glad refrain to which her bounding heart kept time. She was so happy she could not realize her great physical weakness and weariness.

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It seemed to her at last that hours had passed since she had set forth on her journey, carefully following some directions Fanny Colville had given her. The houses and lots began to stand nearer together. She was getting nearer to the great city. She began to be afraid that she would meet old Peter Leveret returning to his home after his errand to Doctor Pratt.

At last she came to a little house standing apart from the others. She peeped in and saw an elderly woman sitting at the open door sewing on a coarse garment, and singing blithely at her task. She opened the gate and went up to her.

"Will you let me come in and rest, and have a drink of water?" said she, gently. "I am very tired!"

The woman looked up in surprise. God knows what she thought of the poor girl standing there bareheaded and dusty, in her blue morning dress, looking so drooping and weary, but she moved aside and said kindly:

"Yes! dear heart, come in and rest, and have a bit and a sup—you look as if you needed all three."

The kind words and gentle smile went to the lonely girl's heart. Tears started into her eyes as she took the offered glass of water and drained it thirstily.

"I thank you, I do not wish anything to eat," she answered wearily, "but if you will give me an old bonnet I will be glad—I have no bonnet, you see—and an old dress, for I do not wish to go into the city with this morning-dress—I will pay you well, indeed I will. See, I will give you my diamond ring."

The woman started in surprise as her strange visitant turned the costly ring upon her finger.

"Here is some strange mystery," she thought within herself. "The girl is running away, mayhap, and wants a disguise."

She went to a closet, and brought out an old straw hat and thick veil, and a long, light sack somewhat worn.

"I will not take your ring, my dear," she said kindly. "You may take these things, though, and welcome. Maybe I am doing wrong in helping you to run away, but then again I may be doing you a great kindness. You look very forlorn, my poor dear."

Lily went to work in a dazed kind of way putting on the long sack over her dress and the hat on her head. This done she wound the thick veil tightly over her face and turned to go.

"I thank you for your kindness, my good woman," she said. "I will come back here some time and reward you richly, I will indeed. Now I am going. If anybody comes here to ask about me be sure and tell them I have not been here. Do not let them know——"

Whatever else she was going to say died unuttered on her pale lips. Exhausted nature was giving away. She threw up her hands wildly, staggered forward a step, and fell fainting on the floor.

"Poor soul," said the good woman, kneeling down on the floor, and loosening the hat and veil from her head, "she is dead tired-out."

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She straightened Lily out upon the floor, and dashed cold water into her white face, but with no success. The swoon was a deep one, and it was fully an hour before the girl was sufficiently revived to be lifted up by the woman's strong arms and laid upon a clean white bed.

"A beauty and no mistake," thought the warm-hearted creature, smoothing back the damp, golden ringlets from the marble white brow on the pillow.

Lily's large, blue eyes opened and looked up at her in amaze.

"Am I sick? Have I been here long?" she inquired, struggling up to a sitting posture and looking out through the window anxiously. "Why, the sun is setting," said she, turning her bewildered face on her kind attendant.

"Yes, you fainted and were a long time coming to," was the answer: "you have been here more than an hour."

Lily slipped down from the bed and began to put on her hat and veil with trembling hands.

"I must be going," she said; "I have far to go yet, and it is growing so late."

Before the astonished woman could remonstrate, she was out of the house, going slowly on her way. She was so weak she could not walk very fast. Her impetuous will alone sustained her dragging footsteps. Thick twilight had fallen before she entered the busy, bustling city. Sorely frightened at finding herself alone in the gathering darkness, yet afraid that the glare of the

gaslights would reveal her shrinking form to her pursuers, she shrank along in the friendly shadows, drawing back nervously from the hurrying forms that brushed past her, and trembling at every footstep behind her. But in spite of her nervousness she at length entered the elegant street where her father resided.

All was gaiety and life in the brilliant houses as she hurried past them. The light from the drawing-rooms streamed out upon her shrinking form.

Wild and entrancing strains of music filled the night air. Long lines of carriages were drawn up in front of some of the houses whose owners were holding balls and receptions. She knew them all; they were all friends of hers: but she flitted past them like a spirit, pausing not in her frightened yet happy course until she stood before the windows of her father's handsome mansion.

These windows were lighted, too, but not so brightly as some; music, too, stole through them, but it was soft and subdued. Death had been there so recently they had not the heart to be gay, she thought.

Wild with her joy she threw off her disguising hat and veil and running up the broad, marble steps rang the bell. It was opened by the stately old servitor whom she had been accustomed to from childhood. But instead of welcoming her home, the gray-haired old man fled wildly down the hall after one glance into her lovely white face.

"He takes me for a ghost," she thought, laughing and running after him down the wide hall till she reached the drawing-room door which stood open for coolness that sultry night. [Pg 42]

She stopped in the doorway, framed like a picture in the hall gaslights, and looked into the room.

They were all there before her—her dear ones! The piano stood in the center of the room, its back towards her, with Mrs. Vance on the music-stool, directly facing her. Her white hands strayed over the pearl keys, and Lancelot Darling stood beside her, and turned the leaves of her music.

A low divan was drawn near them, and Ada rested upon it, looking very fair and ethereal in her deep mourning dress. Her father sat beside her looking very grave and sad.

"Papa, papa!" cried poor Lily in a choking voice.

The passionate cry, low as it was, was distinctly heard by the quartette. They all looked up and saw her standing there in the light with her wild, white face and streaming golden hair.

CHAPTER XIII.

The group in the drawing-room gazed at Lily for a moment in mingled awe and consternation, but suddenly, before word or sound broke the trance of silence, the beautiful picture was wholly blotted out and obliterated by a blackness of darkness that filled and flooded the wide hall.

Then the sound of women's screams filled the grand drawing-room.

"Lily, Lily!" screamed Ada, throwing herself into her father's arms, while Mrs. Vance fell writhing upon the floor, shrieking in abject terror.

Lancelot Darling paused a moment to extricate himself from the clinging hands of the kneeling woman, then bounded out into the hall.

Darkness met him only as he ran excitedly up and down its length. There was no one there. The front door, standing wide open, attracted his attention. He went out on the porch and looked up and down. Just then Mr. Lawrence came out and joined in the search. There was no one passing. They went in and found Willis, the aged servitor, who had returned to his post, and was lighting up the gas again.

"Willis, what is the meaning of this?" he asked, sharply. "The hall door open, the gas out, and you absent from your post!"

"On my soul, Mr. Lawrence. I could not help it! I saw a ghost," said the man, looking about him in visible trepidation.

"Explain yourself," said his master, sternly.

"I went to answer the door-bell," said Willis, trembling, "and when I opened the door there stood a ghost, all in white, looking at me and smiling. I was so frightened I let go the door-handle and ran away; I beg your pardon for neglecting my duty, sir, and leaving the door ajar," concluded the man, humbly.

"What sort of a ghost did you see?" asked Mr. Darling. [Pg 43]

The man's eyes grew large and wild.

"Perhaps I ought not to tell you," said he, "but, begging your pardon, Mr. Lawrence, and yours, Mr. Darling, it was the spirit of our poor lost Miss Lily!"

Mr. Lawrence grew pale as he looked at the man.

"Come, Lance; come, Willis," he said, "we will search the house from top to bottom. There is some mystery here which we may penetrate."

They looked into every room and closet, they neglected no hiding place from garret to cellar, but no one, either ghost or being, was discovered. Mr. Lawrence went up to Ada's room to see if she were recovering from her agitation.

She was lying in bed pale, but very quiet, attended by her maid. He sent the girl away, and told his daughter what Willis had seen, and how vainly they had searched the house.

"Papa, what do you think?" asked she, in low, awe-struck tones. "Was it, indeed, as the man asserts, the restless spirit of my sister? It was like her, only paler and more shadowy, as a spirit well might be."

"Ada, I do not know what to think," said her father in low, moved tones, "I am lost in a maze of doubt and conjecture. Can it be that my daughter's soul cannot rest while her poor desecrated body remains uncoffined?"

"It may be so," said Ada, weeping. "What a mournful tone was in that voice as it breathed your name!"

He started up, pacing the floor in wild agitation.

"I must go down to Lance," he said. "We will go and see the detective again to-night, and learn if any clue has been found. We must find her body if skill and money combined can accomplish it; I cannot bear for her restless soul to be seeking its body at my hands!"

Mrs. Vance had retired to her room in a state of abject terror.

She believed that she had seen and heard the veritable spirit of the girl she had murdered, instigated thereto by jealousy.

Her bold and venturesome spirit had never yet felt the promptings of remorse for her dreadful deed. She rejoiced that Lily was dead, and that the shameful stigma of suicide lay upon her memory; though she was the daily witness of the bereaved family's sorrow, though she saw that Lancelot Darling was aged as if ten years had passed over his head in the past few weeks, still she felt no grief for her sin, and kept on her resolute way, swearing in her secret soul to win the young man whom she passionately adored, and whose wealth and position made him the most eligible *parti* in the whole city. Love and ambition alike spurred her on to the attainment of her cherished object.

But the dreadful revelation of old Haidee had struck a lightning flash of terror to her guilty soul.

She had believed herself secure in her sin; she had thought it known only to herself of all the world, and the knowledge that her secret belonged to another had almost crazed her with the fear of its betrayal. She regretted that she had not followed the old witch home that day and struck another secret blow that would have sealed the old woman's lips forever.

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She who had struck down so ruthlessly the fair and blooming life of Lily Lawrence would have felt no compunction in ending prematurely the old and sin-blasted existence of Haidee Leveret. All that she lacked was the chance.

Now another scathing monition had been hurled against her guilty conscience. In the hour when old Haidee's continued silence and absence had begun to inspire her with confidence again, when the wooing tones had brought Lancelot Darling to her side, when she could almost feel his breath upon her cheek as he bent to turn the pages of her music—in that supreme hour the image of the woman she hated had risen to blast her sight, and to come between her and the love she sought. It was horrible, it was maddening.

She sought her solitary apartment and flung herself face downward on the bed, afraid to lift her heavy eyes lest they should be blasted by the sight of the restless spirit which her guilty hand had driven forth a wanderer from the fair citadel it once inhabited.

"Do the dead walk?" she said to herself, in fearful agitation, "do they revisit the haunts of life and love? Do they ever return and denounce their murderers? Oh! God, why do I ask myself these fruitless questions? Do I not know? Have I not looked upon the face of the dead this night? Ah! what if she had pointed a ghostly finger at me, and said before them all, 'Thou art my murderess!'"

Shivering as if with the ague she buried her head in the bed-clothes.

A sudden rap at the door caused her to start violently.

"Enter," said she, almost inaudibly.

It was only one of the neat housemaids. She looked concerned at the ghastly white face the widow lifted on her entrance.

"Are you ill, Mrs. Vance?" she inquired.

"No—yes—that is, my head aches badly," was the confused answer.

The maid had heard the story of the ghostly visitor from Willis, and rightly attributed the agitation of the lady to that cause.

She did not allude to it, however, as Mrs. Vance did not. She simply said:

"I found this trinket in the hall as I was passing through it, Mrs. Vance. I have shown it to Miss Lawrence, but she does not know anything about it, so I came to ask if it belonged to you?"

She held the piece of gold in her hand. Mrs. Vance arose and examined it by the light.

It was the broken half of a golden locket such as gentlemen wear on their watch-chains. It was of costly workmanship, richly chased, with a delicate monogram set in minute diamonds. The intertwined letters were "H. C."

"It does not belong to me, Mary," answered Mrs. Vance. "It has probably broken off from some gentleman's watch-chain, and dropped as he was passing through the hall. But I do not know to whom it can belong. We have had no visitors to-day, and indeed I cannot recollect any acquaintance we have with the initials, 'H. C.' What do you intend to do with it?"

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"I shall ask Mr. Lawrence to take charge of it as soon as he returns," replied Mary. "It may be that he can find the owner. It is quite valuable, is it not, ma'am?"

"Yes, it has some value, Mary—the monogram is set with real diamonds, though they are very small. It evidently belongs to a person of some means," said Mrs. Vance, returning the trinket to Mary's hand.

The trim little maid said a polite good-night and tripped away with the jewel carefully wrapped in a handkerchief. Mrs. Vance, with her thoughts turned into a new channel, sat musing thoughtfully over the little incident. The longer she thought it over the more mysterious it appeared.

"To whom can it belong?" said she to herself. "No gentlemen at all have called here to-day. Can it have any connection with our mysterious visitation to-night?"

CHAPTER XIV.

Mr. Lawrence detailed to the special detective, Mr. Shelton, the particulars of his daughter's appearance that evening. He was listened to with the closest attention.

When he had concluded his story, the detective said, respectfully:

"I am a very practical man, Mr. Lawrence, and my profession only makes me more so. When I am brought in contact with a mystery I invariably suspect crime. And I must tell you that I do not believe in the visionary nature of the girl you saw in your hall this evening. I am not a believer in the supernatural."

"What then, is your opinion of the phenomenon?" inquired Mr. Lawrence.

"That it was no phenomenon at all," answered Mr. Shelton, smiling. "It was palpably an attempt at robbery. Some girl with a resemblance to your lost daughter was employed to frighten off the man at the door, while her accomplices entered the hall, turned off the light and perpetrated a burglary."

"But there was nothing stolen," objected Mr. Lawrence. "The house was searched immediately, for I had an idea rather similar to yours at first. But nothing had been taken nor was there any person concealed in the house."

The detective smiled blandly in the comfortable knowledge of his own superior wisdom.

"The thieves were only frightened off that time," said he; "they will come again, feeling secure in the belief that the girl played the ghost to perfection. The next time do not be frightened but make an instant effort to capture her, and she can soon be forced to reveal her accomplices."

"You have learned nothing yet about the grave-robbers?" asked Mr. Lawrence, dismissing the first subject, thinking it quite possible that Mr. Shelton's exposition of the case was a very correct one.

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"I have found the first link in the chain," said the detective brightening up.

"You have?" said the banker, gladly.

"It is a very slight clew, though," said Mr. Shelton. "I would not have you build your hopes on it, Mr. Lawrence, for it may not lead to anything. The case is a very mysterious one, and so far has completely baffled thorough investigation."

"But that you have discovered anything at all is an earnest of hope," said the banker. "Slight things lead to great discoveries sometimes. Will you give us the benefit of your discovery?"

"It must be held in the strictest confidence," said Mr. Shelton, looking from Mr. Lawrence to Mr. Darling, who had sat quite silent throughout the interview. "Of course you know that if suffered to get abroad it would put the guilty party on their guard."

Both gentlemen promised that they would preserve inviolable secrecy.

"Briefly, then, I have learned that the sexton was bribed to lend out the key of your vault the night of the funeral, Mr. Lawrence."

"The villain!" said Mr. Lawrence, hotly.

"Softly," said the detective; "he is not so bad as you think. His error lay in the possession of a soft heart unfortunately abetted by a soft head."

"I fail to catch your meaning," said the banker.

"I mean," said the detective, "that poor old man had no thought or dream of abetting a robbery."

His consent was most reluctantly forced from him by the sighs and protestations of a pretended lover, who only desired that he might be permitted to look once more on the beloved face of the dead. The sighing Romeo prevailed over the old man's scruples with his frantic appeals and obtained the key, rewarding the sexton with all a lover's generosity. It was returned to him in a short while, and so implicit was his faith in the romantic lover that he never even looked in the vault to see if all was secure. The shocking discovery made the following day by Mr. Darling and yourself so appalled him with its possibilities of harm to himself, that he feared to reveal the fact of his unconscious complicity in the theft."

"Yet he revealed it to you," said Mr. Lawrence.

"The detectives are a shrewd lot for worming secrets out of people," said Shelton, with one of his non-committal smiles. "I used much *finesse* with the old man before I made my discovery. I suppose I may feel safe in supposing that you will not molest him at the present critical time? Much depends on secrecy."

"The case is in your hands—rest assured I shall not make any disastrous move in it," returned Mr. Lawrence, reassuringly.

"One thing further," said Mr. Shelton. "I learned that the man who enacted the hypocritical *role* of the despairing lover was tall and dark, but have not succeeded in identifying him yet. That is the meager extent of my information at present."

"I hope and trust it may soon lead to an entire elucidation of the mystery," said the banker, rising to leave. [Pg 47]

"I will report all discoveries tending that way immediately, sir," answered the detective, bowing his visitors out of the office.

"How are you impressed with Mr. Shelton's powers as a detective, Lance?" asked Mr. Lawrence as they walked on a few blocks before hailing a car.

"I believe he is an able man, but—I am not prepared to subscribe to his theory of the event which happened to-night," was the somewhat hesitating reply of the young man.

"You are not? What, then, is your opinion?" asked the banker, in some surprise.

"Mr. Lawrence, I believe that it was really and truly our lost Lily whom we beheld to-night," said Lancelot, earnestly.

"Really and truly our Lily! Come, Lance, you talk wildly. Has your affliction turned your brain, poor boy? Recollect that Lily is dead."

"I know—I know. Who could realize that fact more forcibly than I do? But, my dear friend, I did not mean that it was Lily in the flesh. What I meant was that Lily's spirit, the better part of her which is imperishable, really and truly appeared to us to-night," said the young man, who was of a very impressive and imaginative cast of mind.

Mr. Lawrence regarded him curiously.

"But why should you persist in this belief, Lance, when the clever Mr. Shelton has so clearly shown us the fallacy of the idea?"

"He has not shown us the fallacy of the idea at all," answered Lancelot Darling earnestly, as before. "He has only given us his practical theory regarding it."

"Have you any conjecture regarding her object in so appearing to us—if, indeed, you take the right view of the matter, Lance?" asked the banker, impressed by the serious manner of his young friend.

"I have not thought of it, Mr. Lawrence. I have no distinct or tangible impression at all except this one, which is indelibly fixed on my mind. I believe that the pure, white soul of Lily Lawrence looked out visibly upon us to-night from the eyes of the girl whom we saw in the hall. I cannot be mistaken. My soul leaped forth to meet hers as it could not have done for any other woman, mortal or immortal," replied the loyal lover earnestly.

"Well, here is my car," said the banker, hastening to signal it.

"Good-night, sir," said Lance, turning a corner and going down the street toward his hotel to pass the weary night in restless tossing and sleeplessness, while visions of his beautiful lost love haunted his feverish brain until he was well-nigh driven to madness.

Mr. Lawrence went back to the detective next day with the costly broken jewel that Mary, the housemaid, had found in the hall. He explained to Mr. Shelton that no gentleman had called at the house the day previous except Mr. Darling, who said he had never seen it before. [Pg 48]

"This confirms my view of the case," said Mr. Shelton, triumphantly "Did I not say that the girl had one or more accomplices? This was probably dropped by the man in his hurried flight. Yet it would seem to have belonged to a person of taste and wealth. Such a one would not be engaged in burglary. The mystery only deepens."

"But may not this be a clue by which to discover the perpetrators of the dastardly act?" inquired the banker.

"It ought to do so," said the detective, frankly.

He remained lost in thought a few moments then inquired:

"Have you any acquaintance who can claim these initials, Mr. Lawrence?"

"Let me think. My circle of acquaintance is large, but I cannot recall anyone claiming H. C. as his monogram. My memory may not serve me correctly, though."

"Perhaps your card-receiver may do better, Mr. Lawrence. Will you examine that and let me know?"

"Certainly. Suppose you accompany me, and let us find out at once? I do not feel disposed to let this vexing matter rest."

"With pleasure, as I have a leisure hour at my disposal."

They returned to the house together and entered at once upon their quest.

It was not long before their labors were rewarded with success. The detective looked up with a small square of pasteboard in his hand, from which he read aloud triumphantly.

"Harold Colville!"

"'H. C.' Harold Colville!" exclaimed the banker. "Why, really I had forgotten Mr. Colville."

"He visits here then, of course," said the detective.

"He did—at one time—frequently. Latterly he has discontinued his visits. Indeed, it has been four or five months since he called upon us."

"Had he any reason for the cessation of his visits?"

"Yes," said the banker, promptly. "He was a suitor for the hand of my daughter, Lily. She rejected him—being already engaged to Mr. Darling."

"I have seen Mr. Colville," said Shelton. "He is a man of wealth and leisure—dissipated and fast, I have heard."

"You have been correctly informed," was the reply.

"Indeed?" said Mr. Shelton. He laid the card back as he spoke, and rose to take leave.

"Does this discovery throw any light on the mystery?" said the other.

"I will be frank with you, Mr. Lawrence. It does not. The case seems complicated at present, but it is my business to unravel the crooked skein, and I hope to do so. You will suffer me to retain this bit of jewelry for the present. I wish to see if Mr. Colville can furnish the missing half."

"You suspect him, then—" said the banker, breaking off his sentence because perplexed how to end it.

"I suspect him of nothing at present," was the reply. "This trinket may have been stolen from him and lost by another, I have that to find out. If it be proved that Mr. Colville lost this locket in your hall last night, my theory of a projected theft will not hold water. A gentleman of his wealth and position would not need to descend to that phase of crime. Some other object must have actuated him."

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He paused, drawing on his gloves.

"There is one thing more," he resumed. "Keep this mutual discovery we have made a dead secret until I give you leave to reveal it. Do not even mention it to your daughter or to Mr. Darling. He does not believe the theory I advanced last night. I read it in his expressive features. He thinks he really saw a spirit. Let him think so still; I am gathering the tangled ends of a fearful mystery in my hands. But if human skill can unravel it I will not fail to do so. Good-day, Mr. Lawrence."

He tripped airily away down the street with the air and manner of a well-bred gentleman. Few who saw the well-dressed man swinging his natty little cane so jauntily and wearing that supremely indifferent air would have supposed him to be the most daring and accomplished detective in the State of New York. So thought Mr. Lawrence as he watched him walk away.

CHAPTER XV.

The rage of old Haidee Leveret at finding herself duped and outwitted by such a weak girl as Lily Lawrence was frightful to witness and impossible to describe. She raved, she stormed, she tore her scanty gray locks and blasphemed in the most frightful and blood-curdling terms.

In vain she tried the door-handle, in vain she shook the iron bars in the window. They resisted her most vigorous efforts.

In her terrible rage she fell to breaking and tearing everything in her room that could be destroyed. She threw down the dishes containing Lily's untasted dinner and shivered them into fragments. She tore off the bed-covers and rent them in pieces in the height of her insane fury. If Lily had fallen into her cruel hands just then she would have killed her remorselessly.

At length, having sated her rage momentarily by wreaking it on those poor inanimate things, she began to quiet down somewhat and to consider the situation.

The enemy had worsted her, that was self-evident. Stratagem had succeeded against brute force and power.

Lily Lawrence had freed herself from captivity, and there was no one to pursue her and bring her

back. Old Peter was not likely to return for several hours. If Lily's strength held out she would be safe in her home ere the old man could get back to town and carry the tidings to Doctor Pratt and Harold Colville.

Harold Colville had promised the old couple a most extravagant reward for the safe-keeping of his beautiful prisoner.

Not only did the loss of this trouble the old crone's mind, but also the fact that Lily would betray them all into the hands of the police and that exposure and punishment would follow on the discovery of the nefarious works which she and her husband had wrought for years. A species of abject terror filled her quaking frame at the thought. She thought of the miserly accumulations of her wicked life secreted beneath the roof of the old house, and dreaded lest her greedy eyes should never again be permitted to gloat over that golden hoard.

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In the hight of these woful cogitations her thoughts suddenly recurred to the prisoner in the gloomy dungeon beneath her.

Poor Fanny Colville, whose hearing had been strained all day to detect the faintest sound from above, had been a frightened listener to old Haidee's fearful explosion of wrath.

She knew by the violence of the witch's rage that Lily had succeeded in her stratagem and effected her escape. The knowledge filled her with joy, even while she feared that rage would instigate Haidee to yet further cruelties against herself. The desire for life was yet strong in the breast of the poor starving creature, and she shrank in terror while she thought it was probable that old Haidee would kill her in her frantic desire to wreak vengeance upon something. Even while she shivered over her fear she heard the heavy footsteps lumbering down the stairs toward the dungeon.

"What! are you not dead yet, you she-devil?" was the fierce salutation that greeted her ears.

Her enemy advanced, and seizing hold of her crouching body as it lay upon the bed, shook it with the fury of a wild-cat until it seemed as if the poor bones must rattle. "What do you mean by living in this way? Must I kill you at last with my own hands?"

"Spare me," moaned the poor victim between her chattering teeth, "spare me yet a little longer, I am so young, and life is so sweet!"

"Sweet, you fool!" cried the old hag, desisting from sheer weariness, and letting go of the poor skeleton to glare fiercely at her. "What! Life is sweet, chained in a dungeon, in rags, on a crust of bread and a sup of water?"

"Yes, oh, yes!" faltered the poor creature, hoping to gain a little time so that deliverance from her bonds might come.

"Live then, you worm!" cried the old witch, throwing life at her poor victim with a curse. "Live as long as you can since you find it such a luxury!"

The shivering heap of rags and bones did not answer. Stamping about the floor, glaring at the frightened Fanny, her mood changed. She said retrospectively:

"After all you are not such a devil as she! You have not the spirit in your poor, crushed, beaten body! You have never even tried to escape from me and bring me to punishment! Why should I tread on you when you will not even turn like the worm? No, live, live! Never fear but you shall have your crust of bread and sup of water while Haidee remains here to bring it to you."

So saying she went out again, and Fanny wept tears of joy at her departure. But a little while now, she thought gladly, and Lily would be at home. Then to-morrow at the farthest her own deliverance would arrive. She thought of the loved ones she had never expected to see again, of the dear old mother and father in their old home in the country, and the affectionate girl's tears flowed like rain for very joy at the blissful hope of reunion.

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Alas! poor Fanny!

It seemed many hours to Haidee before her husband and Doctor Pratt returned. It was very near sunset, for Doctor Pratt had been absent visiting a patient, and Peter had been forced to await his return.

When at last they came and knocked at the door she had to inform them, with a curse for every word, of Lily's escape. Then they were compelled to force the door open, for the brave girl had taken the key with her and thrown it away in the road.

As soon as Doctor Pratt heard her story he sprang into the buggy and drove into the city with furious haste in search of Colville. It was late before he found him, so that Lily was almost home before he learned the story.

"I suppose it is all up with us now," said Colville, after swearing an oath or two. "And we had better be getting away from town before we are arrested. I suppose she is at home by now."

"There is only one chance in ten that she is not," was the reply. "Her excessive weakness may have caused her to fall by the way. It seems impossible that one so debilitated by sickness should take so long a walk without resting."

"You think there is a chance of her recapture, then?" inquired Colville eagerly.

"There may be," was the cautious reply. "You see, if she is yet on the road we can watch for her near her home; and as it is getting dark it would be very easy to seize her and put her into a waiting-carriage. After that there would be no difficulty. Chloroform would stifle her screams

while we drove back to Leveret's with her."

"But the carriage driver, doctor. Might he not betray us?"

"I will drive my own carriage," answered Pratt. "We will stop near the corner of Mr. Lawrence's house. You will then get out and watch for her. If she should appear you will hastily throw a cloak over her head and carry her to the carriage."

"Well planned, doctor! Let us be going at once. Every moment is precious in this extremity."

"We must first purchase a bottle of chloroform, a sponge, and a long, water-proof cloak in which to envelope her form," said the doctor, recollecting precautions which Colville in his impetuosity was about forgetting.

These purchases were hastily made, and the two worthies stepped into the doctor's light carriage and drove rapidly away on their mission of evil.

They were not a minute too soon. As the carriage stopped at the corner a slight form hurried past, plainly visible in the light of the street-lamp.

"It is she!" said Pratt in a hasty whisper. He recognized her graceful form in spite of the disguising veil and sack.

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Colville was stung to madness by the sight.

"I will have her," he declared with a terrible oath, "if I have to tear her from the arms of her lover!"

He sprang out and followed her. She had gone up the steps and rung the bell. Just as he came opposite the steps he saw old Willis open the door, and witnessed his headlong flight from the supposed spirit of his young mistress. As she glided into the house he ran lightly up the steps and followed her. She heard the footsteps of her pursuer and faintly moaned:

"Papa! papa!"

But in that moment, ere assistance could reach her, the gaslights were turned out by a steady hand; she was plucked backward by the skirt of her dress, and fell into Colville's arms, so muffled by the heavy cloak he threw over her that she could not breathe. Hardly clogged by the light burden in his arms he ran through the hall and down the steps before Lancelot Darling reached the door. It was but the work of a moment to reach the carriage and give his captive into the doctor's ready arms. He then sprang in himself and drove rapidly away with their beautiful captive.

CHAPTER XVI.

Lily awakened from the temporary stupor induced by chloroform and found herself a prisoner again in the old familiar room. She was lying on the bed, and Doctor Pratt, grim, and satanic-looking as usual, sat by the side.

Harold Colville was also an occupant of the room, and Haidee Leveret, from the foot of the bed, gave her a fiendish scowl in answer to the glance she cast upon her.

"How do you feel after your journey this evening?" inquired the physician, with a sarcastic smile.

A glance of scorn from Lily's eyes fell upon him. She did not vouchsafe him any reply.

"I think you must begin to realize by this time that it is quite impossible for you to escape from us," continued Doctor Pratt. "You have now made two attempts which have resulted in nothing except to make us more vigilant than before in keeping you safely secured. Hereafter you will be doubly guarded by Haidee and Peter. He will accompany her and stand outside the room door whenever she has any business within. You are aware that the window is too heavily and strongly barred for you to tamper with it. You now see that there is no possible chance for you to make a third attempt to elude us."

There was no reply. Lily still regarded him with a flashing gaze full of scorn and contempt; but the villain went on, in no-wise disconcerted by her anger:

"It seems to me, Miss Lawrence, that your best and wisest course would be to thankfully accept Mr. Colville's proposals of marriage. Surely that cannot be such a terrible thing to do. There are many ladies who would be proud of the honor which he seeks to force upon you. Your former home is forever lost to you; you are as one dead to your family. They have seen you laid away in the tomb. If you went to them now they would not believe that you belonged to them; they would scout your story as impossible and yourself as an impostor. There remains, therefore, but one possible chance of restoration to your friends and to liberty, and that is to appear before them in the character of Mrs. Harold Colville."

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"Mr. Colville has already had an answer to his proposals," answered Lily, firmly. "I will die before I accept liberty on these terms!"

"Do not allow any scruples in regard to Mr. Darling to influence your decision," interrupted Colville, speaking for the first time, "for I can assure you, on the honor of a gentleman, Miss Lawrence, that he has transferred his fickle affections to the wily widow who tried to murder you in order that she might steal into his heart and win his hand and fortune."

"It is false; Lancelot has not forgotten me so soon," cried Lily, warmly.

But though she defended her lover's loyalty so bravely, there flashed over her mind a remembrance of the scene she had momentarily witnessed last night—Mrs. Vance at the grand piano, playing and singing softly, her lover—her handsome, kingly Lancelot—bending over her as he turned the pages of her music.

She had thought nothing of it then; but in the light of Harold Colville's bold assertion it seemed to her terribly significant.

"I do not wonder that my assertion taxes your credulity," returned Colville, with a maddening smile. "It seemed almost beyond belief when it first came to my knowledge. Not yet three months from your supposed death, I can scarcely understand how the man who lacked but a few hours of being your husband could console himself with the smiles of another so soon. But he is young and impressible, and I grant you she is rarely beautiful, and gifted with consummate art."

"I can add my testimony to Mr. Colville's assertion," said Doctor Pratt. "Your lover has, indeed, been beguiled into forgetfulness of his grief by the fascination of the charming widow. They are now acknowledged lovers!"

"I do not believe it," answered Lily, proudly. "Do you think I would take your word, Harold Colville, or yours, Doctor Pratt, for the truth? You have proved yourselves villains, and I do not place the least confidence in your assertions. You tell me these things believing I will the more readily yield to your wishes. But you are mistaken—sadly mistaken! I tell you now that if Lancelot Darling should marry Mrs. Vance to-morrow it would not make any difference in my rejection of a villain's suit!"

Both the worthies glared at her with fierce wrath.

"So be it," said Colville, angrily. "But remember, you will remain a prisoner until you accede to my wishes, no matter how long you hold out. Haidee, you need not provide so sumptuously for so contumacious a captive. Let bread and water be her portion until her rebellious spirit is broken. I will see her again in a month's time. Come, doctor; come, Haidee; let us leave her to the pleasures of solitary contemplation."

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All three retired; the door, which had been provided with another key, was securely locked, and she was left again in her loneliness and bitter sorrow.

Weak and weary with her long journey and unbroken fast she lay still, her limbs aching with fatigue and her heart almost broken with sorrow.

Her momentary glimpse of her dear ones had filled her heart with a wild flood of new tenderness for them. She had come back to them from the dead, and she felt that they would have been filled with the deepest joy in receiving her again.

She had been so cruelly torn from them in the very moment when they first caught sight of her! She wondered what they would think.

"Perhaps they will share old Willis' delusion that it was a spirit," thought she, with a flood of tears.

She had almost forgotten Fanny in the bitter anguish of being retaken thus in the very moment of impending re-union with her family.

But presently she heard the clank of the poor captive's chain, as she turned restlessly on her hard bed, and caught the sound of her groans.

"Poor Fanny," she thought, "how will she bear this sad disappointment when she hoped so much from my escape!"

Weak and trembling she rose from the bed, and taking the lamp in her hand staggeringly descended the stairs in quest of her poor companion in captivity and sorrow.

Fanny lay extended on the cot, moaning piteously. She cried out in surprise and terror, fearing that Haidee had returned to threaten and abuse her. But she soon saw that it was the sweet face of the captive girl that beamed upon her.

"My God, Miss Lawrence, is it you?" she said. "I thought, I hoped that you had escaped!"

Lily threw herself down upon the hard stone floor and wept piteously. The trial was hard upon herself, as affecting her own individual welfare.

Now the burden of this poor creature's sorrow added to the weight of her own made it almost insupportable. It was some time before she could summon sufficient calmness to relate her mournful story to the suffering creature.

"It is all over," she said in conclusion. "There is no hope of escape from our prison, and death is before us."

Fanny lay still, moaning now and then in pain. She made no attempt to rise, and at last Lily noticed the fact.

"What is the matter with you, my poor soul?" said she. "Are you worse? Are you unable to rise?"

"I cannot raise my head," answered the poor girl patiently, "my poor bones have been shaken and beaten terribly by old Haidee. I am very stiff and sore."

As well as she could she related the story of old Haidee's rage at her captive's escape, her descent into the dungeon and her wild onslaught on her starving captive. Lily wept at the recital

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of Fanny's sufferings.

"She was wreaking her rage at my escape, upon you, poor Fanny," said she. "Oh! God, why dost thou allow the wicked thus to triumph over the weak and the innocent?"

"Are you much hurt? Do you think you can survive it?" she asked presently in anxious tones.

"I don't know. I am very sore at present. There seems very little life left in me. Perhaps it would be better if I should die," said the poor creature despondently. The little spark of hope awakened in her breast by Lily's escape was dead now, and despair had claimed her for its own. Lily knelt by the cot and felt her hands. They were cold and clammy, and chilly dews stood upon the wasted brow. Lily started. Could this be death that was stealing over the poor captive? She feared it was, but she was afraid to linger longer lest old Haidee should find her out. She rose reluctantly.

"I wish I could stay with you, Fanny," said she. "It seems hard to leave you suffering thus alone. But if old Haidee should find me, she might kill you for fear I should betray her. So it seems that I must go. Good-night."

Lily took the poor, wasted hand and pressing it gently, went away, fearing that the few sands of life remaining to Harold Colville's injured wife were fast running out.

CHAPTER XVII.

About a month subsequent to the events which have been related in the last chapter, Mrs. Vance and Ada Lawrence sat alone in the drawing-room of their splendid home. Ada had been reading, but the volume seemed to have little interest, for it had fallen from her hands to the floor, and she was reclining on a luxurious divan, looking bored and sad, while now and then a low sigh rippled across her coral lips.

She was very lovely, being a pure blonde with red and white complexion and hair of golden tint. Her face looked flower-like in its delicacy, gleaming out from the somber folds of her mourning dress.

Mrs. Vance, sitting opposite, absorbed in a voluminous billow of crimson crochet work, looked over at her, and started as if she had only just begun to realize the girl's exceeding fairness.

"How pretty she is," she thought apprehensively, "and how startling her likeness to her dead sister! Good Heavens! what if Lance should see the resemblance as plainly as I do, and fall in love with her for Lily's sake."

The thought which now presented itself for the first time was startling in its probability. She began to think that it was time for Ada to be going back to school. It was dangerous to keep that fair flower-face in Lancelot Darling's vicinity.

"Ada," said she, abruptly, "how old are you?"

"Sixteen," answered the girl sleepily, without lifting her drooping, golden-brown lashes.

"Almost old enough to come out in society," said the lady. "You will have to hurry and finish your education—you mean to graduate, of course. When are you going back to school?"

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"I do not expect to go back at all," was the startling reply.

"Not go back," said Mrs. Vance, affecting extreme astonishment.

"Papa is so lonely now that Lily is gone," said Ada, choking back a sob, "that I have not the heart to leave him. I will stay with him and comfort him."

"But, my dear—you so young, so unformed in your manners—surely you will not sacrifice yourself thus! Let me advise you to go back to college another year at least," urged Mrs. Vance.

A little annoyed at her persistence, Ada sat up and looked across at her.

"Mrs. Vance," said she, coldly, "do you happen to know that if I took your advice and returned to my boarding-school this house could no longer be a home for you?"

"Why not?" asked the lady, a little fluttered.

"Do you not see?" said Ada, pointedly. "You are not related to papa at all. You are a young and handsome woman. If you and he were living here alone together, with no one but the servants, people would couple your names unpleasantly. So you comprehend that it is better for me to stay and play propriety."

"Ada, I do not believe you care whether I have a shelter over my head or not," said the widow, stung into anger by the pointed speech of the girl.

"I should be sorry to see any one houseless," answered Ada, calmly; "but to own the truth, Mrs. Vance, I must say that I am sorry that the same roof has to shelter us both. I do not like you, and I am honest enough to tell you so!"

"Because I am poor and you are rich," said Mrs. Vance, affecting to weep.

"It is not that," said the young girl. "It is not that you are no relation to papa, except by marriage, and that you forced yourself here and claimed a support when you might have earned one for yourself, as many another widow has done. No, it is not for these things, Mrs. Vance, for I might

still like you in spite of them, though I might pity your lack of true independence. But I dislike you because I believe you are a false, deceitful, unprincipled woman, scheming for some secret end of your own."

"What have I ever done to you, Ada, that you should denounce me thus?" sobbed the widow.

"Nothing—you would not dare to, for my papa would turn you out of the house if you did," replied the girl, spiritedly. "But do you think, Mrs. Vance, I cannot see your present drift? Do you think I do not see how shamelessly you are courting Lance Darling, and trying to win him from poor Lily who has been dead these four months scarcely?"

"Perhaps you want him for yourself," Mrs. Vance was beginning to say sarcastically, when they were interrupted by a slight rap on the door.

"Enter," called out Ada.

It was a servant with a message for the widow.

"There's an old woman out in the hall, Mrs. Vance, who says she has brought the samples of lace you desired." [Pg 57]

Ada, who was watching her curiously, wondered why the angry woman grew so ghastly white under her rouge at the reception of so commonplace a visitor.

"Say that I am coming," said the widow to the domestic.

In a moment she arose with a muttered apology and followed him into the hall. Old Haidee stood there patiently waiting with her basket of laces on her arm.

"Bring the laces up to my apartment," said the lady, with as indifferent an air as she could assume.

When they were once safe within the locked room, Mrs. Vance turned furiously on the old lace-vender.

"Did I not tell you not to come here again?" she said. "I have nothing else to give you."

"Oh, Mrs. Vance, don't say that," whined the old crone, piteously; "I did not mean to come back, I did not indeed, but I am so poor and the gold you gave me is all gone."

"Liar! there was enough to last you a year," said Mrs. Vance, angrily.

"Oh, no, ma'am—not with my old man down with the rheumatism, and all my starving children around me. The money all went for medicine, food and clothes. It melted away like the new-fallen snow," whined Haidee. "So I said to myself, I will go back, I will tell the kind lady how poor I am and she will give me more money."

"I told you I had no more to give," almost shrieked Mrs. Vance in her desperation. "The money I gave you was presented to me by Mr. Lawrence, and he expected it would last me a long while. I am a poor woman, living here on the rich man's bounty, and I have nothing more for you—absolutely nothing!"

"Oh! but the pretty lady is mistaken," said Haidee, doggedly. "She has money, or if not she has jewels."

"Would you rob me of my few jewels, you base old wretch?"

"Necessity knows no law," retorted the old creature, grinning hideously. "I must have help for my sick husband and starving children. If you will not help me I must go to Mr. Lawrence or to Mr. Darling."

These sly words had their intended effect of frightening Mrs. Vance into compliance.

She went to her jewel box and began hurriedly to toss over its glittering contents.

"Here," she said, turning round with a handsome brooch in her hand, "will this satisfy your cupidity?"

But old Haidee's eyes roved greedily over the sparkling gems in the casket. She shook her head.

"I could not sell it for a quarter of its value," said she. "It would not relieve my necessities. Add some other trifle to it, lady—that bracelet for instance."

The bracelet was a very handsome one in the form of a serpent with glistening emerald eyes. With a groan Mrs. Vance put it into the greedy, working fingers.

"You will strip me of every valuable I possess," she said, "and then when I have nothing else to give you will betray me to my enemies, for the sake of gaining a reward from them." [Pg 58]

"Lady, you do me cruel injustice," was the hypocrite's meek reply. "I will never betray you while you so generously divide your all with me."

"But if you keep coming with such demands as this I shall soon have nothing to divide with you," said Mrs. Vance.

"Aye, but the rich man will soon supply you with more gold," said the harpy, cunningly, as she turned to take leave.

"It will be a good while before I get any more money from Mr. Lawrence, so you need not be in a hurry to return for it," said the widow, letting her unwelcome visitor out of the door, and shaking her fist after her departing form.

As soon as her heavy footsteps ceased lumbering on the stairs, she hurriedly changed her house-dress for a walking costume of plain material and simple make. She then put on a small, black hat, tied over her face a thick, dark veil, and descended the steps, letting herself quietly out at the front door.

Once in the street, she paused and glanced hurriedly up and down. No one was in sight but the crooked form of the old lace-vender going slowly along a few blocks ahead of her.

Mrs. Vance set out to follow the old woman, walking briskly a few squares until she came within half a block of her. She then slackened her pace and went on more slowly, keeping herself invisible, but never losing sight of her prey.

"I will track the beast to its lair," she said to herself, "and then we will have our reckoning out."

Mrs. Vance hurried on at a steady pace, keeping her enemy fairly in sight, but aiming to keep too far in the background to be recognized herself. She had a long walk ahead of her, but she did not mind it, for her excitement was so great that she was insensible to bodily fatigue. She was filled with a raging anger against Ada Lawrence, whose pure, true instincts had so clearly fathomed her meanness and littleness of spirit. Added to this was her hatred of old Haidee Leveret, mixed with an abject fear of the old woman's power against her in the possession of her guilty secret. As she turned corner after corner, and traversed street after street, her mind was busy revolving vague schemes by which to rid herself of the greedy and dangerous old creature who began to hang upon her shoulders heavily as a veritable Sinbad.

At length she began to see that she was coming out upon the outskirts of the city. Old Haidee, a little ahead of her, kept on at a swinging pace, hastening her footsteps as she found herself nearing home. Mrs. Vance kept on steadily too, feeling determined to find out the old woman's home if she had any.

At last they reached the gloomy old stone house, with its high, forbidding stone wall. Even Mrs. Vance, courageous as she felt herself to be, was conscious of a pang resembling fear as she contemplated the place. But when Haidee was entering the gate she felt a firm touch on her shoulder, and turned to meet the smiling gaze of the beautiful widow.

"You see I have overtaken you," was her smooth salutation.

"You have followed me!" exclaimed Haidee, with a savage scowl of rage and surprise [Pg 59] commingled.

"Yes," said Mrs. Vance coolly.

"Woman, woman! are you not afraid?" cried the old witch, pulling her visitor in and letting the heavy gate fall shut between them and the outer world. "Have you no dread of my vengeance? Remember, a word from me can consign you at any moment to the prison cell. Yet you dare to incur my wrath!"

"I did not follow you to provoke you to anger," said Mrs. Vance, deprecatingly. "Two motives prompted me to discover your residence. First, I desired to see your sick husband and starving children in the hope that I might do something to benefit them. And secondly, if you intend to make periodical calls on me for hush-money it is better that I should come here and bring it than for you to call on me. Your frequent visits on the slight pretext of your laces will not continue to deceive anyone, and may draw down suspicion upon me. Already Miss Lawrence suspects me of something. She has plainly told me so. So I repeat what I have already said—that it is much safer for me to come here than for you to go there."

"Come in, then, do," said Haidee, with a grim politeness that showed she was not much imposed on by the lady's profuse explanations. "Come in, and I will introduce you to my family. If you are really anxious to benefit us you shall have the opportunity."

She walked on down the grass-grown patch as she spoke and knocked at the house door. There was the sound of a key grating in the lock; then the door swung open and disclosed old Peter Leveret standing on the threshold.

Mrs. Vance, who kept close behind Haidee, started back with a cry of fear as his huge, misshapen body and bristling red hair met her gaze.

"That is my old man," said the lace vender, coolly. "I see you do not like his looks. Well, he is not handsome, certainly; but he is very useful in *other* ways."

Her malicious emphasis on the last words sent a shudder of fear through the veins of the visitor, but she did not betray her alarm. She followed the couple quietly into their rude and poorly furnished sitting-room and sat down in the chair old Haidee placed for her. Old Peter retired from their company at an almost imperceptible sign from his wife, and left the two together.

"Well, you have seen my husband," said the hostess, coolly. "You perceive he is a very miserable object—one calculated to strike fear into the heart of a fine lady with such delicate nerves as your own. My children, I am sorry to say, are not at home to-day. They would have remained if they had anticipated the honor of your visit; but they are all out begging, as I have been."

Old Haidee had thrown off the tone of whining meekness which she often adopted with Mrs. Vance and showed herself now cool, impudent and crafty. Mrs. Vance noted this change with alarm. She began to think she had perhaps erred in risking her head in the lion's den. She now said in a tone of meekness calculated to allay the spirit of defiance she had raised in the old witch:

"One word, Haidee, as I think you told me your name was—does that old man, your husband, share the secret you hold against me?"

"I told you once," was the answer, "that the secret belongs to me alone."

"Yes, but as a man and his wife are one," said Mrs. Vance, cajolingly, "perhaps you would not count him as anyone but yourself—but you see it would make much difference to me. So I ask you again, does he know that secret?"

"And I decline to answer that question," answered the old witch craftily.

Truth to tell, old Peter was not aware of the secret which his wife assumed to hold against Mrs. Vance, for Haidee, in her miserly avarice, had wished to share its golden fruits alone; but the cunning old creature saw in the anxiety of the lady a menace of danger to herself, and thought it as well to encourage Mrs. Vance's doubts in that direction.

"I decline to answer that question," she repeated, with a fearful scowl.

"I may as well go then," said the visitor, rising. She was too much frightened at the loneliness of the house and the murderous looks of its inhabitants to remain longer. "But, Haidee, I wish you to understand plainly that you are not to enter the house of Mr. Lawrence again. If you must have more hush-money from me, you can send me a line through the post-office, and I will come here myself and bring you what I can raise. Will you promise to do this?"

"I will promise to do as you say if you will keep your word," was the sullen answer, "but if you fail to come with the money within twenty-four hours after I write you, rest assured I shall come after it at the grand house."

"I will not fail you," was the firm answer, "and now unfasten the door and let me go."

"How do you know that I will let you go?" asked Haidee, tauntingly. "This is a fine old house in which to hold you prisoner—it has old stone dungeons, iron-barred windows."

Mrs. Vance shuddered, but she answered in as fearless a tone as possible:

"You have no interest in making a prisoner of me, for in that case you would get no profit out of your secret. You will not kill the goose that lays the golden eggs."

"No, no," chuckled Haidee, "but perhaps you are laying some plan against me—you wish to have me arrested."

"It is not likely. My safety depends on yours—no, no, you need fear nothing from me. Come, come, it grows late. I am very thirsty. Give me a drink of water and let me go."

The water was procured, and the visitor drank and departed.

She walked hastily over the lonely road, passed the scattered houses, and then hailing an empty hack that was passing, entered it and was driven rapidly homeward, her thoughts, if possible, being more gloomy than before, for now the dread of old Peter Leveret was added to her fears of his wife.

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She had started out to follow old Haidee with black murder in her heart. She had not believed in the story of the sick husband and children, but had expected to find the old crone alone.

Heaven knows what would have happened if she had; but instead she found the strong, hideous old man, whose leering looks had struck terror to her heart, and she now believed that he also was cognizant of the fatal secret which was fraught with such danger to her.

Her thoughts and feelings were anything but enviable ones as she walked up the steps of the brown-stone palace she called her home.

As she passed through the hall she saw the drawing-room door ajar, and heard voices. She tiptoed to the door and peeped cautiously in.

Lancelot Darling was there, his handsome head bowed over the couch where Ada half reclined, listening to a poem which Lancelot was reading aloud. They looked cozy, comfortable, and supremely contented to the jealous eyes that glared steadily upon them.

She made no sign, however, but went on to her room, with a tempest in her heart which, however, did not prevent her from subsequently descending to the drawing-room, where she set herself to work by every beguiling art of which she was mistress, to wile away the unconscious young man from the side of the beautiful Ada.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Haidee Leveret had scarcely returned from locking the door after her despairing visitor when she was confronted by her husband.

Old Peter's eyes snapped viciously, his hideous old face was flushed crimson, and his shock of bristly red hair stood erect with indignation.

"Now, then, madam," said he, with a snort of rage, "I have caught you at your sly tricks, have I?"

"What is the matter with you, old man?" inquired his spouse, affecting serene unconsciousness.

"Oh, you may well ask!" snapped her liege lord. "You haven't been and gone and discovered a

mine of wealth and worked it yourself in secret, denying your poor honest old husband a share in the profits—oh, no, you have not!"

"Shut up your nonsense," said Haidee, witheringly.

"You haven't got a secret against a great lady," pursued old Peter, disregarding her adjuration. "A great lady who follows you home to lavish gold upon you, and who wants to know if poor old Peter shares the secret with you, that she may bestow some of her wealth upon him. You have not got your pockets full of gold at this moment—oh, no, no, no!"

"You have been eavesdropping, you devil," cried his wife in a rage.

"Well, what if I have?" snapped he. "When a woman has secrets from her husband—a kind, faithful old man like you have got, Haidee—it is his right to find out all he can by hook or by crook. I have a mind to search your pockets this minute, and see what hoards of wealth you have hidden there now."

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"Have done with your foolishness, old man," said Haidee, with an uneasy consciousness of the costly golden brooch and bracelet, lying *perdu* in her pocket that minute.

"Will you turn your pocket inside out then, and let me see if it is empty?" asked her husband threateningly.

"No, I won't," was the sullen response.

Inflamed with rage and cupidity the old man advanced fiercely upon her, intending to carry out his threat.

But the virago was ready for him. As he was about to pinion her arms down to prevent her resistance, she suddenly thrust her hands into his hair, and clutched its bushy red masses tightly in her long and claw-like fingers.

This done, with a quick and dexterous movement she flourished her arms and brought her husband down groveling on his knees before her.

"So you will pick my pocket, will you, you old villain!" she cried triumphantly.

But she cried victory a moment too soon. As she spoke the words old Peter made a furious lunge forward with his immense head and succeeded in throwing her backward upon the floor, where she lay kicking furiously and waving her hands, in which were tangled great bunches of fiery hair.

The old man immediately followed up his signal success by planting his knees on her chest, and rifling her pocket of its costly contents, while the vanquished wife sent forth wailing cries of rage and grief at the spoliation of her property.

"Oh! yes," cried the old man, holding aloft these spoils of war with one hand, while he vigorously pummelled his wife with the other. "Oh! yes, you have already stripped the woman of her money, and have now commenced on her jewels! Where have you hidden the pile of money? Tell me this minute, before I kill you!"

Receiving no answer but a loud curse he began to rain blows thick and fast on the head and shoulders of his powerless victim, and there is no telling how this conjugal war might have ended had not a loud and continued knocking on the door startled the furious belligerents.

"Get up," shrieked the vanquished, rejoicing at this diversion in her favor. "Get up and open the door! Someone has been knocking these ten minutes past."

Old Peter obeyed this mandate reluctantly, shambling off and carefully pocketing the jewels as he went, while Haidee rose and straightened her disordered dress, and picked up her cap, which had been torn off in the furious *melee*.

"Now, then," said Doctor Pratt, entering, attended by Harold Colville, "what is the matter here? I never heard such a furious racket in my life! Have you two been fighting?"

"Only having a friendly knock-about by way of exercise, sir," answered old Peter, with a hideous grin at his conquered opponent, who had received a black eye and a swollen face for her portion of the friendly contest, while he himself had not escaped scatheless, as he bore several bloody scratches on his face, and sundry bites on his large red hands that testified to the efficacy of her teeth and finger nails.

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"What was the cause of your quarrel?" inquired Mr. Colville, curiously.

"It was of no moment," answered Haidee, with a warning glance at her old man; but Peter's fighting blood was up and he did not heed her caution. He proceeded to explain by way of revenge on his angry spouse.

"It was all along of a fine lady, doctor, that Haidee is holding a secret against, and getting lots of money from on account of it, which she refuses to share, either the money or the secret, with her poor old husband."

"Who is the lady, and what secret have you got against her?" inquired Doctor Pratt, looking sternly at her.

"It is no concern of yours, doctor," was the sullen reply.

"Her name was Mrs. Vance," said Peter, taking a malicious joy in circumventing old Haidee.

"Good Heavens," said Doctor Pratt, remembering how incautiously he had talked to Colville about

the widow in Haidee's presence. "Why, you she-devil, is it possible you have been trading upon the suspicions you heard me breathe about the woman?"

The old witch would not answer, but Peter, taking on himself the role of spokesman, replied for her:

"I can't tell you where she got suspicions or her information, sir, but she has certainly made a good bit by her knowledge, for she has gathered in all the lady's money, and now begins to strip her of her jewels. Fine ladies don't part with things like these until all their money has gone the same gait," said he, holding up the brooch and the jeweled serpent whose emerald eyes glared like living ones.

"It's a lie—I've only had money of her once," said old Haidee fiercely. "She is a poor woman, and has nothing to pay with."

"How did you gain your information, Peter, if, as you say, your wife would not share her secret with you?" inquired Doctor Pratt, trembling with rage against Haidee.

"The lady followed her home to-day to make arrangements for coming here the next time to pay another installment of hush-money. Haidee had been going there on some pretext of peddling lace, I think, but the lady was afraid to have her come to her house again, and promised to meet her here."

"My God!" said the physician, growing white with fear and rage. "Mrs. Vance here—in this house only to-day. Haidee, you shall repent this!"

"I have not betrayed any of your secrets, doctor—I was only making a little money for myself, and no harm done," said the old witch, beginning to grow apologetic.

"No matter, you must never go there again, nor suffer her to come here. If you do I swear I will murder you! Do you understand me?" [Pg 64]

"Yes, sir," was the sulky answer.

"And you promise to do as I bid you?"

"I promise."

"Very well, then. See that you keep your word. And you, Peter, let me know if she dares to disobey my injunction. And let the matter rest also yourself. If either of you approach Mrs. Vance again, I swear you shall pay a heavy penalty for your temerity!"

"Your prisoner, Haidee—is she safe?" inquired Harold Colville, growing impatient of the delay.

"She is, sir," was the answer.

"The key then—we wish to visit her," said Colville; whereupon he and Doctor Pratt both arose and made their way to Lily's room.

CHAPTER XIX.

Lily Lawrence sat alone in the same room in which she had first been incarcerated when in her cataleptic state she had been brought to this house of captivity. Peter Leveret had made the window secure again, and she had been removed here the day after her recapture in her father's hall by Colville.

Consequently she had had no means of ascertaining whether or not the miserable wife of Colville still survived.

She thought it more than likely that the poor creature was dead and beyond all suffering which the vindictive spirit of old Haidee might still inflict upon her while a spark of life remained in her body.

A profound sympathy and regret for poor Fanny's wretched fate, mixed up with Lily's deep solicitude for herself, added to the melancholy air which began to overshadow her like a cloud.

It is a month since we have seen her and she has changed greatly since that time.

Her jailers have strictly carried out Colville's injunction to allow her nothing but bread and water, and the result is plainly seen in an added frailty of face and form.

As she sits in the old arm-chair with her small head thrown wearily back, she looks almost too transparently pale and pure for an inhabitant of earth.

The blue veins show plainly as they wander beneath the white skin, the blue eyes look larger and darker by contrast with the purple shadows beneath them, the once rounded cheeks are thin and hollow.

Even the lips, once so rosy and smiling with their arch dimpled corners, have taken on an expression of pain and endurance pitiful to see in one so young and fair.

The small white hands, growing thin and weak, are listlessly folded across her lap, while she looks wearily at the smouldering ashes of a fire that had been kindled on the hearth that morning, for the September mornings are chilly and the girl's enfeebled frame feels cold keenly.

Thus the two confederates found her when, after a premonitory rap, they unlocked the door and [Pg 65]

entered. She looked up and her white face blanched still whiter at their presence, but beyond that she took no notice save in a fixed and slightly scornful curl of the lip.

"I trust that I find you well, Miss Lawrence," said her suitor, with an air of devotion.

"Is it possible I should feel well after subsisting for a month on bread and water?" asked the girl, in a languid voice of unutterable contempt.

"Lily, forgive me, but you force me to adopt these stringent measures. It is my love that drives me thus to extremes in hope of forcing your consent at last. Oh! why will you not relent and make yourself comfortable, and me the happiest of men?" cried Colville, imploringly, as he tried to take her hand in his own. But she drew it away with a gesture of contempt and repugnance to his touch and he desisted. Dr. Pratt withdrew to the window and appeared to ignore the conversation.

"Lily," continued Colville, seeing that she made no motion of replying, "you have now had a month for contemplation and sober reflection. Surely you have profited by the thoughts that must have assailed you in that time. Do you now consent to become my wife?"

"Mr. Colville, I have not changed my mind at all," replied Lily, coldly and firmly.

"But come, now, my dear girl," urged Colville, who had been persuaded by Dr. Pratt to try a little kind persuasion instead of such violent threatenings; "come, now, my dear girl, why should you persist in your first ill-considered rejection of my suit? Look at the matter calmly and dispassionately, and weigh all the advantages in my favor. I am not a bad-looking man, nor an old man. I have a splendid income and I love you to distraction. I would spend all my life in making you happy. This is your one chance of happiness. On the other hand there is nothing but captivity and starvation. Were it not better to become my wife?"

"No!" answered Lily, firmly.

"You are very candid, at least, if not very flattering," said Colville, bitterly.

Lily regarded him sadly and calmly. She could pity him when he showed some sign of feeling. She only hated and feared him when he descended to abuse and threatening.

"Mr. Colville," said she, in her soft, flute-like voice, "I am very sorry for you if you love me as you say you do. I pity you from my heart, but if I yielded to your wish and became your wife I could bring you no happiness. I do not love you, and I should hate you then for the means you used to win me. Oh! believe me, your persistence is unwise and foolish. Let me go away from here, I beg you, to my home and my friends. I will not betray your complicity in my abduction. I will suffer you and your friend there to invent whatever plausible tale you please, and I will try to palm it off on my friends for the truth. See, I bear you no malice for the cruelty and injustice I have suffered at your hands. I am willing to forgive you everything if you will but restore my freedom!"

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"You waste your breath in such appeals, Lily—I will never let you go!" said Colville, inflexibly.

"Oh! I beseech you do not kill me with such refusals," cried Lily, wildly. She slipped from her chair and knelt before him, clasping her fragile white hands in an agony of appeal, and lifting her wan, white face imploringly. "See, I kneel to you. My spirit is broken, my pride is humbled in the dust; I am starving, dying here. I beg you for the poor boon of my liberty and life!"

He stood still with folded arms regarding her as she knelt, while a cold and cruel smile curled the corners of his thin lips. Her pitiful appeal made no impression on him; he was not moved by the sight of her fragile face and hands, wasted into pallor and wanness through his cruelty. His answer fell on her quivering nerves as cruelly as the lash cuts into human flesh.

"Kneel, if it relieves your feelings, but do not suppose that your humility can weaken my resolution, which is as fixed as adamant. And hear me now, proud girl, and remember that I mean what I say. I shall yet give you time to change your mind. I am merciful to you because I love you. But if time does not weaken your perversity, so surely as I live I will make you repent your obstinacy. The time will come when you will kneel to me more prayerfully than you now do, and implore me to marry you and save your honor!"

"Never!" she cried, springing to her feet and waving her white hands aloft like some beautiful, inspired prophetess. "Never! Before that day comes I will die by my own hand! And, Harold Colville, while you exult in your wickedness, remember that there is a God above who punishes the guilty for their evil deeds. Nemesis shall yet overtake you—it is written!"

"Come, come, Miss Lawrence, you overrate your strength by this senseless ranting," said Doctor Pratt, coming forward and reseating her with gentle force. "Remember, you are very weak. You have never fully recovered from the effects of your wound and your subsequent fast during the cataleptic state that succeeded it. Illness and deprivation have sapped your strength and dimmed your beauty until there will soon be nothing left of the fairness that now holds Mr. Colville's heart. Believe me, your wisest course is to yield now, marry Mr. Colville, and set about the restoration of your health by travel, recreation and generous living. A few more months of this reckless obstinacy will break down your constitution irrevocably."

"I thank you for that assurance," she answered, exultingly. "Perhaps death will come to me of his own accord, and save me from the sin of taking my own life and sending my soul, trembling and uncalled, before its dread Creator!"

"You do not mean what you say, Miss Lawrence. You are too young and lovely to welcome death. Life holds many attractions for you even as the wife of the despised Mr. Colville."

"I do not think so," she answered, briefly.

"Well, well, your mind will change perhaps; and in that laudable desire we will take leave of you for awhile," said the doctor, turning off with a sardonic bow. [Pg 67]

"And do me the favor of never returning," said Lily, angrily. "You can never change my decision, and if I am doomed to wear out the remnant of my days here, let me at least be spared the sight of your hated faces again!"

"You ask too much," said Colville, airily. "Captives are not permitted to make their own conditions, or select their visitors. Adieu, obdurate fair one."

His gaze lingered on her a moment, noting her beauty and grace which still shone pre-eminent, though her beautiful coloring was all faded and gone, and she looked like a picture looked at by moonlight alone with all the bright tints of daylight invisible. Loving her for her beauty, and hating her for her scorn, he went away, but carried the picture in his heart, at once a joy and a torment, for his conscience could not but reproach him for the change that was so sadly visible in her fragile, drooping form.

Lily remained sitting motionless in her chair, lost in painful revery, until twilight filled the room with shadows. The room grew chilly, and she shivered now and then in her thin dress, but she never stirred until old Haidee entered with a light and supper, the latter consisting of a scanty portion of dry bread and a pitcher of water. Lily cast a glance of loathing upon the food and turned away. Her weak appetite could not relish the dry bread, and it often was taken away untasted.

"Haidee, I wish you would light a fire," said she, shivering in the chilly atmosphere. "The night is cool, and I am very thinly clad."

"There will be no fire to-night," said Haidee, curtly. "If you are cold go to bed and cover up under the bed-clothes."

"At least bring me a shawl to wrap about my shoulders," pleaded the girl.

"Not a rag," retorted the old woman, whose sharp temper was even more acid than usual to-night on account of her rencontre that evening.

"Does Mr. Colville wish me to suffer from cold as well as hunger?" inquired Lily, bitterly.

"I wish it whether he does or not!" answered Haidee, viciously.

"What noise was that I heard this evening?" inquired Lily, looking curiously at the old woman. "I was very much frightened by a succession of screams and oaths as if people were fighting—ah, and now that I look at you, Haidee, I see that there is something the matter with your face."

"Old Peter whipped me, if you must know the truth," snapped the witch.

"Whipped you!" said Lily, with an incredulous look; "oh, no, he would not whip his wife, would he?"

"Yes, he would, and did," retorted Haidee, with a grim sort of smile, as if she took a certain sort of pride in Peter's ferocity. "Oh, we think nothing of a rough-and-tumble fight now and then. Sometimes I get the better of him, sometimes he overpowers me, but it's often an even thing. Old Peter is a ferocious one, I can tell you. If you had knocked him down as you did me the time you escaped, he would have killed you when they brought you back." [Pg 68]

Lily shuddered at this intimation of Peter's cruelty.

"Haidee, I did not mean to hurt you that day," said she, earnestly. "I would not hurt the meanest thing that lives if I could help it. I only pushed you to throw you off your balance, so that I might get away."

"You had better eat your supper," said Haidee, not caring to recall that day, for she still harbored a furious resentment against the girl on the score of it, and often felt tempted to wreak revenge upon her. "You had better eat your supper, for old Peter will be angry with you if you keep him waiting outside the door so long."

"Take the bread away. I cannot eat any to-night," answered Lily, with a hopeless sigh.

CHAPTER XX.

The autumn sunlight fell goldenly on the handsome face and form of Lancelot Darling as he stood on the broad marble steps of the grand hotel where he boarded, his glance roving carelessly up and down the crowded street.

Our hero was that *rara avis* whose species is almost extinct at the present day—a young man of wealth and fashion, yet totally unspoiled by the flattery and adulation of the world.

Carefully raised by judicious parents, whom he had unhappily lost by death in the dawn of manhood, he had been shielded from many temptations that would have assailed one less carefully guarded than this only and beloved child of fond and doting parental care.

Enjoying the possession of an almost princely fortune, which precluded the need of work, one would have thought him liable to be whirled into the maelstrom of vice and dissipation, and

engulfed in its fatal whirlpool forever.

But such was not the case. He was only twenty-three when he met and loved the beautiful Lily Lawrence, and her love had been to him a talisman and safeguard against evil.

Even now, amid the total wreck of all his hopes, and the despair that filled his own being, he was no less the pure-hearted man and perfect gentleman than when the happiness of Lily's love had crowned his life with bliss.

As he stood there on the marble steps he did not note the many admiring glances that fell on him from passers-by—the appreciative looks of women whose gaze lingered on the tall, elegant figure and handsome face, nor the approving nod of men who, while they made no endeavor to reach his lofty standard, could yet admire him as a gentleman "*sans peur et sans reproche*."

While he stood thus abstracted a boy approached, and placing in his hand a delicate envelope, scented with heliotrope, turned away.

Lancelot turned the envelope in his hand for a moment in some surprise, for the writing was unfamiliar. In a moment he tore it open, however, and read these few lines on the perfumed sheet:

"MY DEAR FRIEND:—I enclose a list of some new songs which I wish to try. Will you do me the favor to select them for me, and bring them up this afternoon?"

"Yours faithfully,

"ETHEL VANCE."

This was a bold move on the part of the fascinating widow. She knew perfectly well that she could have sent the boy to a music store and secured the songs at less trouble than by entrusting the commission to Lancelot Darling.

The young man was aware of the fact also; but in the integrity of his own heart he suspected no art in her, and made an excuse for her in his mind.

"How tender-hearted she is," he thought. "She knows how wretched and forlorn I am, and charitably devises schemes for drawing me away from my gloomy retrospections, and cheering me with her gentle society."

Thus thinking Lancelot turned away and proceeded to execute the widow's commission. And punctually he appeared at Mr. Lawrence's drawing-room that afternoon.

The artful woman was alone, and rose to greet him with a beaming smile of welcome.

She had laid aside her usual dress of half mourning, and appeared in a becoming costume of costly black velvet and cream-colored brocade, profusely trimmed with rich lace. Diamonds twinkled in her ears and on her breast, and a bunch of vivid scarlet roses was fastened in the jetty braids of her beautiful hair.

"It is *so* kind of you to come," she said, pressing his hand in her soft, pink palm as he bowed before her. "Ada has gone riding with her father, and I am very lonely."

"It is not much kindness on my part," said he, bluntly: "for I am aware that I am not very cheerful company for anyone these days. I only came because you asked me."

"And not at all that you wished to see me," said she, with a very becoming pout of her rich, red lip.

"Oh, pardon my rudeness," said Lance, contritely. "You know I did not mean that. Of course I like to see you. You are very kind to me always. I meant that I would not presume to inflict my sad countenance and heavy heart upon you unless you insisted I should do so."

"You are very sad, certainly," answered she, with a pensive air. "Indeed, I sometimes wonder, Lance, that the natural light-heartedness of youth does not begin to assert itself within you. It is almost five months since your bereavement, and we do not grieve forever for the dead."

"Do we not?" he asked, with a heavy sigh. "Ah, Mrs. Vance, my grief does not lessen with time. My love was deeper than a common love, and my regret will be eternal!"

"That is all romantic nonsense," she answered, impatiently. "It is not the nature of any human creature to cherish the memory of one dead forever. 'Men's hearts crave tangible, close tenderness; love's presence warm and near.' You will be happy again, Lance, and you will love again."

"You judge me wrongly, Mrs. Vance, and under-rate the constancy of a heart like mine. You used a quotation just now, Permit me to reply with another one."

In a voice like saddest music he repeated those exquisite lines from Leigh Hunt:

"The world buds every year,
But the heart, just once, and when
The blossom falls off sere,
No new blossom comes again.
Ah! the rose goes with the wind
But the thorns remain behind!"

"Your poetry reminds me of the new songs," said she, dropping the argument. "It was very kind of

you to bring them. Will you come to the piano and turn the leaves while I try them?"

"Certainly," he answered, rising and attending her.

It was the hardest thing she could have asked of him, but Lance was very unselfish. He put down the throb of pain that rose at the remembrance of the new songs he and Lily had been wont to practice at the same piano, and turned the leaves with a steady hand while her fingers flew over the keys. But one thing she had asked more than once. It was that he should sing with her. This he always quietly declined to do.

"That is rude of you," she would say, in a voice of chagrin. "Your tenor is so perfectly splendid, why should you refuse?"

"I shall never sing again," he would answer, quietly but firmly, and no persuasion on her part could induce him to change his mind.

It was agony for him to stand there and turn the leaves, looking down upon that dark head instead of the golden one he had been wont to gaze upon so fondly. When the face was lifted with a smile to his, and instead of Lily's soft, blue eyes he met the gaze of the black ones, his heart thrilled with pain. Perhaps she guessed it, but she kept him there all the same, thinking that time would blunt the keenness of his remembrance and teach him to adore the brunette as fondly as he had loved the blonde.

She played at him, she sung at him, lifting her passionate glance to his whenever some appropriate sentiment in the song seemed to warrant such expressiveness. Lance never dreamed of the reason for her pantomime. He had seen the same thing practiced by ladies in society. He deemed it a harmless kind of flirting, but never thought of responding to it.

She kept him there perhaps an hour patiently waiting on her pleasure, and passing his opinion only as it was called for on the various pieces she was practicing. At last, to his great relief, she grew weary of her amusement, and left the piano.

"Come and read to me, Lance," said she, with a pretty tone of proprietorship in him; "I am tired of the music, I do not like the songs. There is not a passable one in the whole selection."

She threw herself down half-reclining on a rich divan and settled herself to listen. Lance selected a volume of Tennyson, and seating himself near her, began to read quite at random the celebrated poem of Lady Clara Vere De Vere.

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"Lady Clara Vere De Vere,
Of me you shall not win renown;
You thought to break a country heart
For pastime ere you went to town.
At me you smiled, but unbeguiled
I saw the snare, and I retired;
The daughter of a hundred Earls,
You are not one to be desired."

"Oh! no more of that," she cried, as he paused after the first verse. "I have never fancied that poem—try something else."

Patiently he turned the leaves and came upon the exquisite little poem of "Edward Gray"—a dainty bit of versification admired by all women.

"This will please her fancy," he thought, and began again:

"Sweet Emma Moreland of yonder town
Met me walking on yonder way,
'And have you lost your heart?' she said;
'And are you married yet, Edward Gray?'
Sweet Emma Moreland spoke to me;
Bitterly weeping I turned away:
'Sweet Emma Moreland, love no more
Can touch the heart of Edward Gray.'"

"You need not finish that one," said she, impatiently. "Pray excuse me, Lance, but I do not think you make very pretty selections, or perhaps I am not in the humor for listening. Put the book aside—let us talk instead."

"As you will, fair lady," said he, gallantly. "I shall listen to you with pleasure; but I must warn you that my conversational powers are not great."

"Perhaps the will is wanting," said she, trying hard to repress all signs of vexation. It was terribly hard to lead him on, this frank-spoken young ideal of hers.

"Oh, no," said he, smiling slightly. "It is a real inability for which I ought to be excusable."

"And so you are excusable," said she, with a tender glance. "There are but few things I would not excuse in you, Lance."

"You are very good to say so," he answered, quite gravely. "I am very faulty, I know, and it needs the eyes of a true friend indeed to overlook my manifold imperfections."

"A true friend," she sighed, softly. "Ah! would that I might find such an one."

Lance was about to make some commonplace reply to this aspiration when he suddenly observed that her face had dropped into her hands, and she was crying softly, her graceful form heaving with deep emotion.

"Mrs. Vance," said he in alarm, "what is the cause of your distress? Have I said or done anything to wound you? If I have, pray forgive me. It was unintentional, I assure you."

There was no reply. She continued to sob violently for a few minutes while Lancelot sat silent and perplexed at her unusual emotion. At length the storm of grief ceased in low sighs, and she lifted her head and carefully wiped off a few genuine tears that hung pendent on her silky lashes and threatened to fall upon her cheek and wash off the delicate rose-tint so carefully put on. Lance at once renewed his apologies and regrets.

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"It is I who should beg your pardon, Lance, for this childish and undignified outburst of mine," said she, with quivering lips, "But indeed I could not help it. Our chance words struck a chord so tender that it vibrated painfully. Oh! Lance, I am very unhappy!"

"I should not have thought it," said he, quite surprised at her admission.

"No; because I mask my aching heart in deceitful smiles," was the mournful answer.

"But you have no present cause for unhappiness," said Lancelot, quite perplexed as to the means of comforting her. "Your home is pleasant, your friends are kind and loving."

"Ah! you think so," said she, with a bitter smile, "but you do not know what I have to endure. You could scarcely believe how bitterly Ada Lawrence taunts me with my poverty and dependence. Were it not for Mr. Lawrence, whom I will admit is kind in his way, I believe she would drive me forth homeless and shelterless."

"Surely you misjudge Ada," said he, warmly, "I am sure she has a tender heart."

"Ah! her sweet face is no index of her mind," answered Mrs. Vance, with a gloomy shake of her head. "God knows what insolence I daily endure from that ill-natured girl! Ah! Lance, this life of dependence is a bitter one. I would leave here to-morrow and seek to earn my own bread with my own weak hands were it not for one dear tie which holds me with a power stronger than my woman's will."

"And that tie?" asked the unconscious young man, in a voice of gentle interest.

"Is my passionate, uncontrollable, hopeless love for one whom I will not name," she answered, in a broken voice, and drooping her eyes from his earnest gaze.

"You mean Mr. Lawrence?" Lance queried, in surprise.

"Can you think so?" inquired the lady, in a low and meaning tone, lifting her eyes with one swift glance to his face, then quickly letting them droop again beneath their sweeping lashes.

"It seems incredible," pursued Lancelot, quite oblivious of the meaning she had so delicately conveyed. "Mr. Lawrence, though a very fine looking man, is at least double your age, and is not at all the kind of a man I should have supposed as likely to win your love, Mrs. Vance."

"Heavens, what obtuseness!" thought the almost distracted woman. "He *will* not understand. I shall have to tell him plainly, and then see what will become of his sublime unconsciousness!"

"Oh! Lance," she cried, shading her burning cheek with her hand, "why will you misunderstand my meaning? I did not mean to tell you the truth, but your assumption of my love for that old dotard forces me to vindicate the choice of my heart! Oh! Lance, do you not know, can you not see what I am ashamed to put in these plain words, that it is *you* whom I love and no other?"

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If a bombshell had exploded at Lancelot Darling's feet he could not have been more surprised and actually alarmed than he was at this avowal of love from the woman whom he had honestly admired and revered as one among the gentlest and loveliest of her sex. He sprang up and stood looking down at her while a blush of honest shame for her burnt on his cheek.

"Oh, no," he stammered, finding breath after a long, embarrassed pause. "You cannot mean what you say!"

She arose at his words, and drawing near him laid a fluttering hand on his coat-sleeve. Her dark eyes still drooped before his, and her shamed yet imploring posture was the embodiment of grace.

"Do not be angry," she pleaded. "I do mean it; how could I help it when you are the only living creature that is kind to me? Oh, forgive me, Lance, for my wild words, and let me love you a little."

"Mrs. Vance, it is a shame for a woman to love unsought," said he, in a low, rebuking tone.

"Oh, do not say so!" she answered, wildly. "You men are too hard upon us women. You tie us down and restrict us in everything, and if we let our poor, clinging hearts go out to you ever so little before you give us leave, then you cry out shame upon us. Oh, Lance, is it so strange that I should love you? You have been kind to me, you are dangerously handsome and winning, and a woman's heart must cling to something. I have not a true friend on earth, Lance; I have no one to love and no one to love me. I am lonely and wretched beyond expression. Let me love you and say that you will love me in return."

Her forlornness moved his generous heart to pity and sorrow for her. He stood still as if rooted to the spot, listening to the wild torrent of words she poured forth so eagerly.

"Why should you be angry because a woman's heart lies at your feet, Lance, to trample on or to cherish as you please? Am I not young, beautiful, accomplished? If you chose me for your own before the world what could any one say against me, save that I could bring you no wealth but myself?"

Still no word from the appalled listener.

She raised her eyes beseechingly to him and drew a step nearer.

"Lance, do speak to me—do tell me that I am not wasting the wealth of my woman's heart in vain!"

He gently removed her clinging hands and seated her in a low arm-chair, standing beside her and looking down with visible embarrassment, yet with a steady purpose.

"Mrs. Vance," he said, gently, "words would fail me if I tried to express the unutterable regret I feel for the revelation you have made. You must know how hopeless your affection is, remembering all that I have said on that subject this afternoon. There is no woman living, no matter what her attractions may be, who could take the place of Lily Lawrence in my heart."

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"But she did not love you—she died by her own hand rather than wed you."

"Perhaps so—we cannot tell. Be that as it may, I shall keep her image in my heart forever, and no other woman shall come between us," earnestly answered Lily's loyal lover.

"Then there is no hope for me," she moaned, faintly.

"None, Mrs. Vance—absolutely none. Pardon me that I have been forced to wound you thus, and forget this madness if you can. No one shall ever know of it from me," said he, gently, as he turned to go.

"Are you going?" she asked, rising.

"Yes," he asked, pausing reluctantly.

"One word, Lance. I have been mad and blind in allowing my feelings to find vent as I have done. I beg your pardon, and ask you as a priceless boon to forgive and forget my madness. Will you try and do it?"

"Gladly," he answered, with a sigh of relief.

"And one thing more. You will not suffer this act of mine to alter your pleasant relations with the household here. You will come and go as usual that they may not suspect anything has occurred. I promise you that I will not obtrude my company upon you," said she, humbly.

"It were better that I should remain away," he said, hesitatingly.

"But you will come sometimes," she said, and he did not answer nay, but only said: "Good-bye."

CHAPTER XXI.

Mr. Shelton, the famous detective, was slowly but surely gaining ground in his mysterious and interesting case.

For a long time it had puzzled him and baffled his investigations, but having at last obtained a single clue, he began to push on, slowly, to be sure, but certainly, to eventual success.

He had discovered, after patient and almost incredible labors, that Doctor Pratt was the man who had bribed the sexton and obtained the key of the Lawrence vault the night of Lily's interment there. He had also learned that Harold Colville wore the missing half of the broken locket found in Mr. Lawrence's hall the night on which the specter of the banker's daughter had appeared to the assembled family. As yet he had not thought of linking these separate facts together, but the day was not far away when he would do so.

He adopted quite a bold method of obtaining the desired knowledge regarding Mr. Colville.

He called upon that gentleman attired in a very plain business suit, and still further disguised by a rather long wig of reddish hair, set off by beard and eyebrows of the same ruddy hue. He sent up a card to the gentleman of pleasure, simply engraved: "J. Styles."

After some delay he was ushered into Mr. Colville's parlor. That gentleman, attired in the extreme of fashion, merely nodded at his visitor's entrance. He did not think it necessary to rise for such a plain-looking personage.

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"I have not the honor of knowing you, sir," said he, stiffly.

"J. Styles, under-clerk to the bankers, Lawrence and Co.," explained the visitor, briskly.

"Indeed!" said Mr. Colville, affecting nonchalance, but he started violently and the keen eyes of "J. Styles" saw that he turned a trifle paler.

"You have met with a loss, I see," said the under clerk, abruptly bending forward and taking hold of the broken locket that dangled among the charms of the gentleman's watch-chain.

"A personal affair that does not concern strangers," answered Mr. Colville, haughtily, as he drew back.

"I beg your pardon—it is the very business on which I called," replied the visitor, imperturbably. As he spoke he slipped his fingers into his breast pocket, produced the missing half of the locket, and deftly fitted it to the broken part that dangled from the chain. "I have the honor to return this to you, sir," said he, slipping the jewel into Mr. Colville's hand.

The gentleman's fingers closed over it mechanically.

"Why, what—the devil—where did you find it?" asked he, thrown off his guard by the unconcerned and business air of the under-clerk.

"I did not find it at all," answered "J. Styles," calmly. "I was commissioned to return it to you by Mr. Lawrence. It was found in the hallway of his residence on the evening of the twenty-first instant."

Mr. Colville started as if a bullet had struck him. He grew deathly white even to the lips, and stared at the visitor a moment in silence. At length he recovered himself with a powerful effort, and asked, curtly:

"Well, why did Lawrence think of sending it to me? I did not lose it there. Lawrence is a friend of mine, certainly, but I have not called on him for several months."

"He recognized it as your property, and supposed that you might have called on the ladies that day in his absence," returned the visitor, fabricating this lie with bare-faced effrontery.

"Yes, that seemed plausible," answered Colville, with evident relief.

"I suppose now that you have no idea where you actually lost it?" inquired the clerk, respectfully.

"Not the slightest—indeed, it was but yesterday that I discovered the loss. That must have been several days afterwards if, as you said, it was found on the twenty-first," replied Colville, more affably than he had yet spoken. "You will return my thanks to Mr. Lawrence for its prompt return."

"It appears strange that it should be found in the hallway of a house which you have not entered for months—does it not, sir?" remarked the clerk with a musing air.

"Exceedingly strange," returned Colville, uneasily. "But perhaps it had been found on the street by some person who might have lost it in Mr. Lawrence's hall that day. That is the only explanation of the mystery I can think of, for I assure you I have not been to the house for months. Not since long before the—the tragic death of his daughter," said he, growing pale as the words left his lips.

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"By the way, a most startling event occurred at the home of Mr. Lawrence the same night on which your locket was found," said the clerk, who seemed in no haste to leave. "Your mention of Miss Lily recalls it to my mind."

"Indeed, and what was that?" inquired Colville, with an affectation of carelessness.

"Why, the spirit of the deceased young lady actually appeared to the family, who were all assembled in the drawing-room in company with the gentleman to whom she was to have been married," replied the visitor in a voice of awe.

"Can it be possible?" inquired Mr. Colville in a tone of surprise and interest. "In what manner did the apparition appear?"

"She appeared in the doorway, sir, with her arms extended towards her lover. She was heard to utter her father's name twice, then the whole illusion faded out in the thick darkness."

"Dear me, how very interesting," said Colville, shifting uneasily on his chair as though it were set round with thorns. "I have heard of such things, but never witnessed any manifestations myself. Miss Lawrence was a charming girl. A pity she should have destroyed herself."

"Yes, sir—a most lamentable affair—well, I must be going," said "J. Styles," rising.

"You will let me offer you a reward for your trouble in returning my property?" inquired Mr. Colville.

"Oh! no, I thank you, sir—but perhaps the housemaid who found it would be glad of a trifle, sir!"

Mr. Colville placed a bill in his hand, and the pair separated courteously, the fine gentleman returning to his seat in a tremor of anxiety and trepidation, while the detective took himself to the office of Mr. Lawrence, and after revealing his identity (for his disguise completely deceived that gentleman) he proceeded to detail the interview with Mr. Colville and its result as we have already described it.

"I took the liberty of borrowing the name of one of your under-clerks," said he. "I suppose there is no harm done."

"None at all, I should say," returned the banker, with a smile.

"And here is the reward the gentleman gave me for the housemaid who found the locket," continued the detective, producing the money.

"Ah! he was generous," commented the banker, tucking the five-dollar bill into his vest pocket. "Well, and what do you make of all this, Shelton?"

"Much, if I could guess at the meaning of it," returned the detective, frankly. "At present I am all at sea, but from this day forward until I get at the truth, Colville will be a shadowed man. I shall be on his track like a bloodhound. His agitation and alarm at learning where his locket had been

found meant much, and his lying assertion that he had not been at your house that night meant more. I assure you that Harold Colville was in your house that night and with no good purpose. I will yet give you proofs of my assertion."

"You have done well so far," said Mr. Lawrence, approvingly; "I believe you will succeed in ferreting out that mystery, and I will try and bide the time patiently. And now about the man who had the key of my vault the night of my daughter's interment. Have you tracked him yet?"

"I have," answered Mr. Shelton, triumphantly.

"You have?" cried the banker, eagerly. "His name?"

"You remember the physician who was called in to examine your daughter's body the morning she was found dead—the same man who testified at the inquest? The man is one Doctor Pratt, a physician of fair repute in this city and of some skill in his profession."

"A physician, Shelton? My God! Then poor Lily's body was stolen for purposes of dissection!"

"I do not think so. They would not have run so great a risk to gain so little. No, Mr. Lawrence, I still firmly believe that it was done for the sake of a large ransom."

"Then why do the thieves not return the body, since I have long ago offered a ransom for it and no questions asked?" said the banker, impatiently.

"Perhaps you have not offered as much as they expected," answered Shelton.

"Would you advise me to increase the amount? I would willingly double and treble it if necessary," said Mr. Lawrence, earnestly.

"Do not do so at present, sir. I hope that we shall succeed in finding the body and punishing the knaves for their unholy sacrilege. I am loth to reward their treachery and suffer them to go scot-free," answered Shelton, earnestly.

"Well, you know best, Shelton. I will wait yet a little longer, then—but, oh, Heavens, this suspense is very dreadful. I feel myself growing old before my time with the pressure of my troubles," said Mr. Lawrence, passing his hand wearily through his fast whitening hair.

"Have patience yet a little longer. Indeed, Mr. Lawrence, I feel deeply for your distress, and will do all I can to alleviate it," said the detective, in a tone of respectful sympathy.

"Thank you, Shelton. I believe that you will," said the banker, gratefully. "And now about this rascally physician. You were very clever in finding him out. How did you manage it?"

"It would weary you if I went into details, Mr. Lawrence. I arrived at my knowledge after much time and labor. But I will briefly explain that I furnished the old sexton who helped on this trouble a deputy in his business, and disguising the old fellow thoroughly, I took him about with me night and day until he recognized his man and pointed him out to me."

"It seems incredible that a man with a good profession and of fair repute should be found engaging in such a nefarious scheme," said Mr. Lawrence, in amazement.

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Mr. Shelton smiled knowingly.

"My dear sir," he said, "there is nothing incredible, nor even uncommon about it. My experience in the detective line has made me familiar with a hundred such cases. Men steeped in every iniquity are found concealed under the guise of respectable professions or genteel business. Wolves in lamb's clothing, you know."

"It is shocking to think of," said the banker. "Well, can anything be done with this Pratt? Should not he be arrested at once on the charge of bribery?"

"And thereby lose the chance of tracking him to the hiding-place where he has the body concealed?" said Mr. Shelton. "Oh! no, Mr. Lawrence, we will not molest him yet. I have my eye upon him. Like Mr. Colville, he is a shadowed man; I have a colleague in this business, and we each have our marked man to watch. Dr. Pratt's profession takes him abroad so much and into so many houses that it will be difficult to track him, but depend upon it we shall run him to earth at last."

"I truly hope so; your recent discoveries have put new heart into me, Shelton; may God prosper you in your undertaking," said the banker, supplementing this aspiration with a very large roll of bank-bills which he slipped into the detective's hand.

"Thank you, sir," smiled Shelton. "That material way you have of supplementing a prayer is not a bad thought. I may count upon your silence about what I have disclosed—may I?"

Mr. Lawrence placed his fingers on his lips with a nod and smile.

"All right, I'll rely upon you," said the disguised detective, and with a brief "good-day, sir," he went buoyantly away on the secret mission that meant detection and ruin to Messrs. Pratt and Colville.

The banker returned to his counting-room with renewed hope and vigor. The impenetrable darkness that had hovered over Lily's disappearance so long seemed to be lifting at last and a gleam of light shone through the little rift in the clouds.

CHAPTER XXII.

Mr. Shelton spoke truly when he said to Mr. Lawrence that he would shadow Harold Colville like a bloodhound.

By day and by night, on foot or on horseback, in various disguises, he kept himself on the track of the fine gentleman.

For several weeks he kept up this close espionage, but at the end of that time he seemed no nearer his object than when it was first begun.

Mr. Colville's comings and goings seemed to be quite the same with those of other gentlemen of his means and position.

He frequented theaters and gaming-houses; he was a welcome and much sought-for partner in ball-rooms, and was smiled upon by scheming mothers with marriageable daughters.

Thus far Mr. Shelton had seen nothing on which to seize as a possible clew to Mr. Colville's mysterious presence in Mr. Lawrence's house the night of Lily's appearance. [Pg 79]

Mr. Shelton had made one discovery, however, though he did not begin to attach much importance to it. It was that Doctor Pratt and Harold Colville were acquainted with each other, and, moreover, that they sometimes "hunted in couples."

That is to say, the worthy physician occasionally stopped his carriage on meeting Colville, whereupon the latter would spring in and accompany the doctor on his round of visits, seeming deeply interested in the conversation they pursued together.

Mr. Shelton was puzzled to decide whether there was any collusion between the gay man of fashion and the busy physician, or whether it was only one of those odd friendships that are sometimes observed to exist between persons of totally different temperaments and pursuits. Sometimes he was inclined to believe it was only the latter.

But he noticed a fact at last that struck him as rather peculiar. Following the pair closely on his stout, black horse, he had seen that Colville always remained in the carriage while the physician went into the houses to pay his visits to the sick.

On this occasion, which struck him so forcibly, they drove quite out upon the outskirts of the city, and stopped before a house standing almost a half mile distant from any other.

This house, the detective observed, had a gloomy and forbidding aspect, being closely shuttered and surrounded by a very high stone wall.

Here Dr. Pratt descended and fastened his horse. Mr. Colville also sprang out, and they entered with a familiar air, the heavy gate closing and shutting them in.

"Now, that is rather strange," thought the detective as he walked his horse slowly past the deserted-looking place.

"What business has Colville in there? I can imagine that Pratt may have a patient inside those gloomy walls; but what the deuce can Colville have to do with it? I am almost positive that I heard shrieks issuing thence when they went in at the gate. I wonder can it be a private asylum for the insane?"

He spurred his horse ahead and rode on for some distance, then paused, and remained as erect and still as a statue while he watched and waited for the pair of confederates to come forth. But at least an hour elapsed before they emerged, and pursued the devious tenor of their guilty way.

"Now, upon my word," thought the wary spy, "Doctor Pratt must have a very interesting case inside of those gloomy, prison-like walls. I have a mind to stop somewhere in the neighborhood and inquire about the inhabitants thereof."

He accordingly suffered Doctor Pratt's carriage to drive on out of sight, and stopping before a cottage on the road with the ostensible purpose of obtaining a drink of water, he inquired of the woman who gave it to him as to the names of the people who inhabited the old house with the stone wall.

"And indade, it's mesilf that cannot tell ye, sor," said she, with a very broad Hibernian accent, "for shure, Mickey and mesilf have but lately moved intil the cot, and knows naught about the nayburs!" [Pg 80]

Mr. Shelton rode on and made the same inquiry at the next house, but elicited no encouraging answer. People did not seem to know anything about the deserted-looking old house in such close proximity to them.

After several similar experiences he rode on quite disgusted with the general stupidity of the neighborhood.

Almost two miles from the old house that had so powerfully attracted his interest, he came upon a little house standing close to the roadside.

A kind-looking woman sat in the doorway, though the day was chilly, and as she kept knitting away on the homely gray stocking, sang cheerily at her work.

"Now that is a pleasant-looking old soul," he thought. "Perhaps her intellect is above the average of her neighbors. Perhaps she is better informed than they are. At any rate, I will speak to her."

He dismounted from his horse this time, fastened him at the gate-post, and walked up the narrow

path to the door.

The good woman arose in quite a flutter.

"Do not let me disturb you," said he, courteously. "I only wish to trouble you for a drink of water. I have ridden far and feel very thirsty."

"Certainly, sir," said the woman, in a voice as pleasant as her face. "Come in and have a seat, sir, and you shall have a draught fresh from the spring."

She hurried away on hospitable thoughts intent, and soon returned with a glass of pure cold water. The guest sat still in his homely chair and sipped at the water very slowly considering how thirsty he had professed himself to be.

The fact was, he had drunk several glasses of water already while prosecuting his inquiries, and began to feel himself almost unequal to this latter one.

"You do well to sip your water slowly, sir," said the woman, observing him, "for the doctors do say that it is very imprudent to drink rapidly when tired and overheated."

"Bless the good, unsuspecting soul," thought the detective. Aloud he said very politely: "Yes, madam, I am aware of that fact, and I believe some very severe illnesses have resulted from injudicious gulping down of cold water by thoughtless persons. I always make a point of sipping mine very slowly."

"And very right of you, too, sir," said the kind soul, approvingly.

"Ah, by the way," said he, "I am a stranger in this neighborhood, and I passed a house about two miles back that powerfully attracted my curiosity. It was an old, deserted-looking building, inclosed by a high stone wall. Its prison-like aspect repelled me. Do you know anything about it?"

"They do say it was a convent once, sir," answered the good woman, readily. "I know the place you speak of, and as you say, sir, it has a very repelling aspect."

"Is it inhabited now?" inquired the wayfarer.

The hearer shuddered.

"That it is, sir," said she; "and by a wicked lot, I assure you."

"Is it possible?"

"It is quite true, sir. The place has been inhabited for many years by an old couple of the name of Leveret. They have no family at all, and live there alone, having no friends or neighbors, and it is said that they keep a powerful bloodhound upon the place. Strange tales are told of these people, but nothing is known certainly. Both of them are hideously ugly, and many people declare that the old woman is a witch."

"Is either of them sick, do you know?" inquired the detective.

"That I cannot tell you, sir. They are all very reserved, and hold no intercourse with people around them. I have heard that they are misers, and have large quantities of gold buried in their garden, and guarded by the great bloodhound. They might both sicken and die, and not a living soul be the wiser. May I inquire why you asked that question, sir?" asked she.

"Certainly. I saw a doctor's carriage standing in front of the gate, and concluded that someone must be sick, within."

"Perhaps there may be, sir, but I would not have thought they would have called in a doctor. These old witches, like Haidee Leveret, as they say her name is, usually cure sickness with their own herbs and simples."

"Perhaps they failed on this occasion. Well, I must be going," said the detective. "Many thanks for your information. Permit me to offer you a trifle for your kind entertainment," said he, politely tendering a piece of silver.

"Not a penny, sir. The water costs nothing, and as for changing a bit word with you, why, that's a pleasure to a lonesome old lady like me, with few neighbors and friends. Why, it was only last month that a young thing in trouble, passing this way, offered me her fine diamond ring to pay for a bit kindness I showed her. But I refused it, sir. I want nothing for showing a little kindness to the wayfaring," said the good woman, pausing to take breath.

Shelton's attention had been caught unaccountably by the mention of the diamond ring.

"You stimulate my curiosity," said he, deliberately sitting down again. "The young person must have felt your kindness very sensibly to have offered such a costly reward as a diamond ring."

"Aye, she was in sore trouble, sir, that I believe. But now I bethink me," said the good creature, stopping short, "she charged me if any one came here inquiring for her to say she had not been here, and here I am blabbing away at this thoughtless rate."

"But you see I am not inquiring for her," said the visitor briskly. "I am a perfect stranger in these parts, and I am not looking for anyone, so there is no harm done in relating this interesting story to me."

"Why, that is very true, sir," said she, and thereupon followed a minute and detailed account of the visit of Lily Lawrence, and the disguise she had furnished her. Mr. Shelton listened to the story with very close attention.

"How long ago has it been since this happened?" he inquired when she had finished her relation.

"Several weeks, sir. Stay, let me see—I was so excited by it that I put down the date in my little memorandum book," she said, as she began to fumble in her pocket. Presently she produced the book in question, and turning a leaf announced triumphantly, "it was fully two months ago, sir. It was August—the 21st of August."

"The very day that Lily Lawrence appeared to her friends," thought the detective, with a start. "Can there be any connection between the two?"

"She was young and beautiful, you say?" asked he.

"Aye, she was, sir. Not more than seventeen or eighteen, and beautiful as a white lily, sir. She put me in mind of that flower, she was so delicate and pale, sir—not a tint of color in her poor lips and cheeks. Her hair was pale golden too, sir, falling down upon her shoulders, and her eyes of a beautiful deep blue."

"I suppose no one came by to inquire for her?" said Shelton.

"No one, sir; I did not see anyone passing that day except a doctor's carriage that whirled past in a desperate hurry soon after she left here."

"Let us hope she made her escape from whatever evils menaced her," said he, fervently. "Well, I must be going in earnest now. My kind friend, will you tell me your name? I may call on you again."

"My name is Mrs. Mason, sir," she answered.

"Do you live here alone?" asked he, as he jotted it hastily down in his note-book.

"Quite alone, sir. My poor husband and my only child have been dead these ten years—I am quite alone in the world," answered Mrs. Mason with a sigh.

"Good day, Mrs. Mason, and many thanks for your kindness to a wayfaring man," said the detective as he went down the path, leaped into the saddle and rode away.

Mrs. Mason's revelation had thrown his mind into a chaos of doubt, perplexity and suspicion. New light began to break in on him, startling him with a wondrous possibility he had not suspected.

CHAPTER XXIII.

Mrs. Vance had done herself more harm than good by the bold avowal of her love for Lancelot Darling. The innate delicacy and almost womanly refinement of his character revolted at the idea of her imprudent and ill-considered step. He could not understand why she should have lowered herself by declaring her love after all he had said regarding the constancy of his affection for his loved and lost Lily. He pitied, and yet the feeling of pity was more closely allied than he knew to a feeling that bordered on contempt.

The fair widow herself was not by any means cast down by Lancelot's firm and resolute repulse. She thought, from her knowledge of masculine character in general, that Lancelot's vanity would soon overcome his first shocked repugnance to her unfeminine avowal, and cause him to exult in the knowledge that he was so madly beloved by so beautiful and accomplished a woman.

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From that there would be but a slight step to giving his love in return. She had not driven him away from her, for he had not said he would not come again. She would see him often, and work on his feelings by every art of which she was mistress. Surely she could not fail to win him. He was young, impressible, and youth is not prone to constancy to the dead. True he had an idle, romantic fancy that "love is love forevermore," but time and her artifice would cure him of that.

"I will be very shy and humble when he first comes back again," she thought. "No young maiden in her teens shall outdo me in coyness and reserve. I will make him think that my wild outburst that day was entirely unpremeditated and that I am thoroughly ashamed and repentant. He will begin to excuse me to himself, then he will pity my hopeless love, and then—ah, then, 'pity is akin to love!'"

She was sitting in the drawing-room, rocking leisurely back and forth while she trifled over a delicate bit of fancy-work. A fire burned cheerily on the marble hearth, for the late October days were growing chilly, and diffused an air of warmth and comfort in the large, luxuriously appointed apartment. Mrs. Vance herself was quite in keeping with the elegance of the room. Her house dress of delicate pink cashmere, with trimmings of cream-white lace, made a beautiful spot of color in the darker, more subdued coloring of the furnishings around her.

Ada came in from the conservatory with her arms full of flowers, and sitting down opposite the lady, began to arrange them into tasteful bouquets.

"You need two roses to complete the harmony of your dress," said she carelessly, selecting that number and tossing them over to her. Mrs. Vance took the roses and fastened them in her breast and hair. "Now your toilet is perfect," said the young girl in a tone of admiration that was quite sincere, for though she believed Mrs. Vance to be a false and scheming woman, she could not but admit the perfection of her beauty and grace.

There had been no more angry passages between Mrs. Vance and Ada, though the pure-hearted and impulsive girl had in no-wise changed her opinion of the lady. But on mature reflection she

began to think that since Mrs. Vance was her father's guest she had acted wrongly in thus declaring war with her. Therefore she treated her as before her sudden outburst against her, with outward politeness and respect.

The young girl appeared very lovely that morning. Her deep mourning dress, with its heavy crape folds, could not obscure her beauty, and set off, like the somber setting of a jewel, her transcendent fairness. All traces of her severe illness in the summer had disappeared. Her cheeks were glowing with a faint, sea shell tint, deepening to glowing crimson on her full and pouting lips. Her large, blue eyes had the serene, innocent look of a child's tender orbs. Her golden hair, simply drawn back and braided, allowed a soft, curly fringe to escape and flutter caressingly over her low, white brow. Mrs. Vance hated her for the beauty that recalled the image of the rival her jealous hand had ruthlessly slain.

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While they sat thus engaged there was a ring at the door-bell, and presently the beloved object of Mrs. Vance's secret thoughts was shown in. He looked very handsome and distinguished as he replied to Ada's unembarrassed and sisterly greeting, "Good morning, Lance," but his face flushed slightly as he bowed distantly to her companion. Mrs. Vance replied to his greeting with a bow that was quite as formal, and sinking languidly back into her seat, fixed all her attention upon her work. Not a single glance of her down-drooped eyes was allowed to wander toward him. She preserved entire silence while the other two entered into a simple and desultory chat with the easy familiarity of old friends. At length, as though her embarrassment were becoming unendurable, she rose with an incoherent apology, and heaving a deep sigh quitted the room abruptly and did not appear again. Ada looked after her departing form in amazement.

"What is the matter with Mrs. Vance?" asked she. "You seem to have frozen her into a statue."

"I am sure I cannot tell," he answered with an assumption of carelessness.

"But you barely spoke to each other. I am sure I thought you two were the best of friends—really intimate in fact. Yet you seemed on the most indifferent terms just now," said she, incredulously.

Lance smiled carelessly, and reached out for one of the roses in her lap.

"My dear little sister," said he, "who can answer for the vagaries of woman? Mrs. Vance has always been exceedingly friendly with me, but she seems to have taken an opposite whim just now. But it would not be fair to question her motives, would it? Men have to bear the caprices of women without complaint—do they not? I believe one of the best of the female poets claims *caprice* as a *right divine* of the fair sex."

"Oh, yes. Mrs. Osgood says:

""'Tis helpless woman's right divine,
Her only right—caprice,""

returned Ada, repeating the quotation with a very pretty emphasis.

"Then let us not question Mrs. Vance's right to exercise her divine prerogative. I dare not rebel—I must only submit. And, by the way, begging your pardon for changing the subject, will you ride with me this evening? I came expressly to ask you. I have my new phaeton and cream-white ponies—the ones I purchased for Lily's use," said he, with a smothered sigh.

She went to the window to look at them.

How beautiful, how proud, how thoroughbred were the restive creatures champing at their silver bits, impatient of the little groom's restraint—how exquisite the costly little phaeton with its luxurious cushions of azure satin, and the azure satin carriage-robe thickly embroidered with white lilies. The equipage was dainty enough for Queen Mab herself. Ada sighed as she thought of the beautiful form that had chosen the rest of the coffin rather than these downy cushions to recline upon.

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"It is beautiful," she said, "rarely beautiful. Yes, I will ride with you in the park, Lance. Wait a minute until I get on my wrappings, for I believe it is a little chilly to-day."

She tripped away lightly. Lance looked after her with an affectionate glance.

"A dear, sweet girl," he thought to himself; "surely Mrs. Vance misunderstands her, for I am sure she is true and sweet and kind. How like she grows to Lily."

She came back presently, cloaked and heavily veiled.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"Not quite," she answered. "I had forgotten to put my bouquets into the vases."

She tripped around and disposed of her flowers in the various vases that adorned the room, then came back to him.

"Now, I am ready," said she.

They went out, took their places in the dainty phaeton, the little groom in blue and silver sprang into his place, and they were whirled swiftly away.

From an upper window Mrs. Vance was watching for the young man's departure. She started as she saw him drive off with Ada beside him, and a lurid fire of rage and jealousy blazed in her heart.

"The fair-faced little devil!" she muttered, clenching her hands tightly together. "Oh! that I dared

to murder her as I did that other one who came between me and him!"

She paced up and down, wild with contending passions.

"I was wrong to leave them together," she thought, in bitter anger with herself. "He was glad, perhaps, that I came away and left them to an uninterrupted *tete-a-tete*. I over-reached myself that time; but, ah! Ada Lawrence, woe be unto you if you win him from me!"

The postman's impatient rattling at the door-bell interrupted her angry mood. In a moment a maid rapped at the door, delivered a letter to her and went away.

Mrs. Vance had no correspondents usually. She guessed, with a sharp quiver of anger and fear, whence it came, and held it at arm's length a moment as if it had been a noxious reptile.

"The greedy old harpy," she muttered indignantly, tearing it open at last. "Must she bleed me again so soon?"

She tore the coarse, yellow envelope into a hundred little bits, then angrily scanned the note in her hand. It was very brief, but amounted to an imperative summons from Haidee Leveret to come to the old house to-morrow and bring all the money she could raise.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Old Peter Leveret and Haidee, his wife, after much bickering and mutual recriminations, attended by more or less pummelling and hair pulling, had at last made an amicable adjustment of their difficulty regarding Mrs. Vance's secret. [Pg 86]

Old Haidee, termagant and spit-fire though she was, found herself no match for the eternal reproaches and brutal usage of her thoroughly enraged husband, and eventually confessed herself the weaker vessel by yielding to the pressure of a stronger conjugal power and revealing the secret of her influence over Mrs. Vance, at the same time dividing her ill-gotten spoils with the incensed old ruffian.

It is needless to say that old Peter's greedy soul was not content with these ill-gotten gains. He felt that the beautiful widow had not paid, so far, a tithe of what was due to himself and Haidee as the fortunate possessors of so fatal a secret.

"I tell you, Haidee," said he, "the woman has got to come down heavily with the money, or I shall sell her secret to somebody who will pay a better price for it—perhaps to Mr. Lawrence or that young Darling."

"Yes, and get yourself into a fatal difficulty," retorted the wife contemptuously. "Let me tell you, Peter Leveret, you have more brute strength than I have, but all the sense we own between us is in the head that rests on my shoulders. Suppose you try to sell this secret to Lawrence or Darling, where is your evidence against Mrs. Vance? Did you see her commit the murder? Did I see her commit it? Did Doctor Pratt see her either? No; to all of these questions you have nothing to urge in support of your assertion except the bare suspicion of Doctor Pratt. And if you brought forward his name and got him into difficulty, why, he knows enough evil of us both to send us to the gallows to-morrow. Ah! that word frightens you, does it? Well, Doctor Pratt would do it willingly if we got him into trouble. So I say to you be content with what we can wring out of the woman's fears, and let all else alone. She will prove a mine of wealth to us as long as we can make her believe that there was an actual eye-witness to her crime."

"Well, perhaps you are right, old woman," said Peter, dimly comprehending the indubitable force of her statements. "You were always more cautious than I was, Haidee. Now, don't understand me to imply that you have more sense than I have, for I don't admit it at all. I am more hasty than you, that is all. But I say, as I said before, Mrs. Vance has got to plank the money down more freely."

"But I have told you she has nothing of her own, stupid!" retorted Haidee, impatiently. "She is dependent on Mr. Lawrence for every penny she gets. We must be satisfied with our small gains now, and wait until she gets the rich husband she is angling for. Then we shall reap our golden harvest."

"Aye, aye; but, Haidee, write to the lady and tell her to come here to-morrow and bring all the gold she can lay her hands upon," said Peter with dogged persistency.

"So soon?" said Haidee, hesitatingly. Her greed was as great as her husband's; but she had a fair modicum of caution and common sense. "It is but a little while since she gave me the jewels, old man." [Pg 87]

"No matter. Write to her again, I say, or it will be the worse for you," scowled Peter, wrinkling up his heavy brows ferociously.

Accordingly, the note to Mrs. Vance was written and dispatched, and the pair of plotters awaited her coming impatiently. But they little anticipated what fatal results to themselves would follow that imperative summons.

That letter awoke in Mrs. Vance a burning desire to be rid of the old couple, whose constant demands for money she would soon be entirely unable to meet.

She had a hundred dollars in gold that Mr. Lawrence had kindly presented to her that morning,

with a jesting reference to a "new fall suit."

Her wardrobe needed no replenishing, and she could spare this sum to the rapacity of the old people; but she felt that no sooner would this be yielded to their greed than they would demand more.

And where was the next hush-money to come from? It was not probable that the banker would give her any more money before Christmas, and she could not ask him for more than what his own generosity bestowed on her.

She had no claim upon his beneficence whatever. These two old harpies would be down upon her a dozen times before she would have another penny to give them.

And as soon as they learned her inability to bribe them further, they would carry their fatal secret to Lancelot Darling or Mr. Lawrence.

Mrs. Vance looked these difficulties in the face fairly, and could see but one way out of them. The hideous old witch, and her still more hideous old mate, must *die*.

Must die! No thrill of compunction or pity touched her heart as she made this fatal avowal to herself. On the contrary, she experienced a feeling of relief at the thought, mingled with a longing to consummate the deed quickly that she might taste the sweetness of revenge.

They must die. But how?

Her fertile brain could suggest no feasible plan for the execution of the dreadful deed she was determined upon. All through that night she tossed on a sleepless pillow, revolving various schemes in her excited mind. Morning found her haggard and pale, and all her paints and cosmetics could not conceal her wretchedly ill appearance. She would not present that agitated mien at the breakfast table, and had her morning repast sent up to her room on the plea of a severe headache.

At noon she dressed herself in a plain, dark walking dress, wrapped a double veil about her head and face, and set forth upon her errand. She walked some distance, carefully selecting the most secluded streets, and shunning observation. At length she went into a small apothecary shop and purchased from an inexperienced boy-clerk some strychnine which she said she wanted for the purpose of destroying rats. She paid for it, tucked the small parcel inside the palm of her dark kid glove, and walked on steadily to her destination.

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Old Peter and his wife had just sat down to their frugal dinner when her quick rap sounded on the hall door. They looked at each other apprehensively.

"It is she, no doubt," said he in a moment. "So the jade is come at last."

He had been swearing all the morning at her tardiness.

Haidee got up and went to the door, unlocked it, admitted the visitor, and turned the key again.

"You see I keep my engagements punctually," said Mrs. Vance, pleasantly, as she tripped in, "although I barely expected to be called on so soon."

The hostess only grunted in reply to this as she ushered the visitor into the low-ceiled, bare-looking room, where old Peter sat blowing his cup of hot tea.

He looked up and gave the new-comer a gruff nod.

Mrs. Vance stood still a moment taking in all her surroundings with a comprehensive glance, then she took the chair Haidee offered her, and placing it in a position to suit herself she sat down.

She had seated herself sidewise from the table, but in close proximity to that corner of it on which sat the old brown tea-pot from whose cracked nozzle issued the fragrant steam of the hot tea. By raising her hand she could have poured out a cup of the refreshing beverage for herself, but she smilingly declined the grim offer of the table's hospitalities that was made by the hostess.

"I thank you, I do not wish for a morsel of food, but I shall be glad of a glass of a fresh, cold water. I have walked the whole distance and am very tired and thirsty."

Haidee arose, and taking a small white pitcher from the cupboard in the corner, went out to the well.

At the same moment old Peter arose, and taking his plate in hand, hobbled to the stove for a portion of the mutton-chop that had been left in the frying-pan for warmth.

In that moment Mrs. Vance saw her opportunity. Her hand fluttered over the lid of the tea-pot and raised it noiselessly, while a quantity of white powder was poured from her other hand into the smoking-hot beverage. It was but the work of a moment. When the host hobbled back to his place she was leaning back in her chair, her hands folded over her lap, and a look of bland unconsciousness on her handsome face. Her nerves seemed steeled against emotion.

Old Haidee entered and pouring a glass of water, offered it in silence. She took it and drained it thirstily with profuse thanks.

"Have you brought us any money?" asked old Peter, sharply, looking up from his voracious feeding.

"What if I have not?" she retorted, jestingly.

"Then it will be the worse for you, my fine lady," he answered, threateningly.

Old Haidee had resumed her place at the head of the table.

"Pray go on with your dinner," said the visitor, in a patronising tone.

The old woman poured a fresh cup of tea for her husband, diluted it plentifully with milk and coarse brown sugar, then replenished her own cup. At the moment when the old man was greedily gulping his portion down, Mrs. Vance put her hand into her pocket and drew out a netted purse of shining gold coin.

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"Here is a hundred dollars I was fortunate enough to get for you," said she, handing it reluctantly over to the woman; "and you must understand that I cannot possibly get another penny for you before Christmas; so try and economize it the best you can."

Haidee gulped her tea down hurriedly as she clutched the purse, and the old man hurried around to his wife's side.

"Divide fair is my motto," said he. "Give me the purse, Haidee, and I will count it for you."

"No, you don't, old man," she answered, resolutely holding on to it while her husband's fingers worked eagerly. "I will count it myself! Not a coin will I ever see again if I trust this purse in your itching fingers!"

She poured out the shining mass upon the table and began to count it over carefully, but the sight of it was too much for the grasping soul of the old miser looking on. He thrust out his open claw-like fingers and hastily gathered the whole pile into his greedy clutch, except for one or two coins which escaped and rolled down upon the floor.

In an instant his wife sprang up and bounded upon him like a wild-cat.

There ensued a furious battle that defied description. Mrs. Vance retreated hurriedly to the door, and stood at a safe distance watching the couple as they fought over the gold that was clutched in Peter's fingers, placing him somewhat at a disadvantage, for Haidee, with both hands at liberty, pulled, and tore, and bit with the ferocity of a wild animal.

At length old Peter's tight grasp relaxed, the treasured gold fell from his grasp and rolled here and there upon the floor.

Haidee felt him writhing in her clasp and loosened the hold she had upon his throat, and suffered him to fall upon the floor.

He lay there, rolling and tossing, and uttering hideous groans, while dreadful contortions passed over his features.

"You have killed your husband, woman! Look at his throat, purple from the clasp of your hands!" cried Mrs. Vance from the doorway, laughing aloud at the shocked, incredulous stare of the woman as she gazed at her writhing husband.

At that moment the suffering man gave a furious plunge, rose to a sitting posture, gave a hideous rattle from his throat, and fell backward with a dull thud on the bare floor. He was dead!

Old Haidee stooped over the still form like one dazed.

"Is he really dead?" she said in wonder, feeling that it could not be true. "Have I actually killed my old man?"

"Yes, you have killed him," answered Mrs. Vance, with a fiendish laugh. "Ha, ha, old woman, what is your fatal secret worth now? You, too, are a murderess!"

Old Haidee stood still for a moment, utterly stunned and bewildered by the suddenness of the blow that had fallen upon her. But as she gazed at the triumphant face of her enemy, her dazed senses seemed to clear and a perception of the truth rushed upon her.

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"You lie!" she shrieked, in a voice of horrible rage and despair. "Devil, you have poisoned him, and me, too; I see it all now! You sent me out for the water while you drugged the tea! But I will have my revenge before I die!"

With a dreadful oath she sprang forward. The affrighted woman retreated before her, but old Haidee was too quick for her. In a moment her strong, claw-like fingers were fastened about the fair neck of the beautiful woman. In another moment her sinful soul would have been sent forth to its dread account with Heaven; but before that critical instant arrived, the old witch fell backward on the hard floor, writhing in the agonies that had destroyed her husband.

The widow stepped a few paces back out of reach of her victim, and stood regarding her with a smile of wicked triumph, while the witch, amid her dying groans, hurled the most awful maledictions upon her destroyer.

"Ha, ha!" laughed Mrs. Vance, enjoying her revenge to the utmost limit; "did you think you could play with fire and not be burned? Did you think I would destroy a beautiful and valued life like that of Lily Lawrence, yet suffer two worn-out old hulks to stand between me and my cherished purpose? Ha, ha! you realize your folly, now!"

Her words fell on deaf ears. Old Haidee had expired in horrible agonies, while the jeers and taunts of her destroyer yet echoed in her hearing. She lay inside the door-way where she had fallen, a hideous spectacle of death.

Mrs. Vance lifted her foot and spurned the still body with all the intensity of the hate that burned in her heart.

"They are both dead," she said, aloud. "My evil genius has helped me. I am safe now."

She stepped across old Haidee's body with a slight thrill of repulsion, and entering the room, picked up her purse and began to collect the scattered gold coins.

"I may as well have my money again," she thought to herself. "I need not be in a hurry to get away. No one ever comes here, I am sure."

She placed the last coin in the purse and paused to look around her. Old Peter's ghastly dead face met her view. The wicked eyes, wide open and staring, seemed to threaten her as in life. A shiver of deadly fear thrilled along her veins, seeming to freeze them.

"Great God!" she exclaimed. "What if my sins should find me out!"

She lifted her slender, white hands and regarded them fixedly.

"There is blood upon my hands," she said with an irrepressible shudder. "They look fair and white, but they have sent three human souls into the presence of their Creator. Pshaw! why do I pause to reflect here? Let me cover up the traces of my crime and go."

She took up the shovel, and opening the door of the stove, pulled out a quantity of blazing fire-brands and scattered them recklessly upon the bare floor, tossing one so close to the body of old Peter that his shock of red hair was ignited and burned with a disagreeable stench.

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Mrs. Vance turned away with such a laugh as a fiend might have loved to hear, and hurried from the house, leaving the door, which she hastily unlocked, partly ajar.

"It does not matter," she thought to herself. "No one will discover them. The old shell of a house will ignite from the brands directly and burn down to the ground."

Drawing her veil tightly over her face she hurried away over the lonely road. About half a mile from the old house she met a man riding on horseback towards the route she was leaving. He scrutinized the solitary woman keenly, but could make nothing of her thickly shrouded features, and rode onward.

"Some wayfarer," she thought carelessly, and hurried on, eager to leave the hated vicinity of her double crime.

CHAPTER XXV.

Mr. Shelton's first impulse, after his interesting interview with Mrs. Mason, had been to rush into town, secure a squad of police, and make an immediate raid upon the house of which he had heard such suspicious tales.

Had he obeyed this hasty prompting of his mind, all would have gone well, and this story of mine might have been concluded in a very few more chapters.

But the famous detective in his eventful career had usually found it advantageous to think twice before he acted.

He did so in this case, and his second thought resulted briefly in this: He did not consider that he had as yet sufficient to warrant him in taking the step he at first proposed to himself.

He had no actual grounds for suspicion except the fact that Doctor Pratt and Harold Colville had entered the house, and remained there a seemingly rather long time for a professional call from a busy physician whose time was limited.

Mrs. Mason's information was all gained from the oftentimes worthless gossip of a country neighborhood, and could scarcely be depended on as reliable evidence. The mysterious case of the young girl who had been befriended by the worthy woman might have no connection with the old house and its inhabitants as he had hastily concluded at first.

Considering all the circumstances, the cautious detective determined to wait before taking any decided step, and in the meantime to learn more of the mysterious house if possible.

His pursuit of Pratt and Colville in the next few days took him in entirely different directions, but resulted in nothing satisfactory.

In the meantime Mrs. Mason's gossip about the old house and its wicked inhabitants haunted him persistently. He could not rid himself of the thought. It abode with him by day, and in his sleep assumed the guise of night-mare. The old house actually preyed upon him. After a few days of this troubled thinking he came to a firm determination.

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"I will go out there and make some plausible excuse for entering, if I can possibly do so," he said, to himself, "and once inside, I will try to find out whether there is ready ground for suspicion and inquiry."

His mind was relieved when he had resolved upon his course. Accordingly, he mounted his black horse and set out that very evening on his quest. He felt disappointed when he passed the tiny cottage of Mrs. Mason and saw the door closed. He missed the pleasant face from the doorway, but the evening was quite cool, and the good soul was, no doubt, knitting inside by her lonely hearthstone.

Within half a mile of his destination he encountered a lady walking rapidly in the dusty road. She was graceful in figure, fashionable in dress, but her thickly-veiled face gave no hint of her

identity. The detective looked after her with no little curiosity.

"That is not the sort of woman one expects to see walking alone in this vicinity," he thought. "She has the proud air and step of a fashionable New York lady. And she does not wish to be recognized, else why that thick veil?"

He turned in the saddle and looked after her again. The tall figure of the graceful lady was rapidly receding from sight around the bend in the road.

"Some intrigue is on foot," he laughed to himself, as he rode on. "These fashionable ladies sometimes find time hanging heavy on their hands, and—well, 'Satan finds some mischief still for idle hands to do.'"

Thus soliloquizing, he found himself in front of the old house which had lately occupied so many of his leisure moments of thought.

He dismounted, fastened his horse, and laid his hand on the heavy gate, peering cautiously inside before entering, being mindful of Mrs. Mason's report of the bloodhound.

"The hound is probably chained up," he thought, after a careful reconnoissance. "Of course they would not allow such a dangerous beast to run at large in the daytime. Now, I must bethink me of my excuse, for I am about to storm the castle of the formidable ogres."

He advanced up the path to the door which, greatly to his surprise, stood slightly ajar.

"I should have thought these reputed misers would keep a locked door to their house," he said to himself, with unconscious disappointment. "I dare say they will prove to be quite ordinary people after all."

He proceeded to rap lightly on the door, then waited a little for a response from within.

No one came to answer his knock. He repeated it once or twice loudly with a like result.

"Are they all dead or asleep, or gone away?" said he, jestingly to himself, as he pushed the door boldly open and looked into the hall.

He saw nothing in the hall but a thin, blue volume of smoke that was pouring out of an open doorway on the right. With a bound he sprang inside and looked into the room. [Pg 93]

A horrible sight met his startled eyes as soon as they became accustomed to the cloud of smoke that slowly rose over every thing.

Inside the doorway, at his feet, lay the dead body of an old woman, her aged features distorted and drawn as if by her dying agonies. Near the stove lay another horrible corpse, that of an old and deformed man.

The flooring in front of the stove had become ignited from the brands scattered over it, and was slowly burning through. The clothing of the man had caught fire and every shred was burned off of him, while his charred and frying flesh sent forth a sickening smell. The table with its unfinished repast stood in the center of the room. Several dishes had been knocked off in the furious fight of the old couple, and lay shattered in fragments on the floor. Chairs were overturned and gave silent evidence of the struggle that had gone on so lately in the now silent and deserted room. The detective stood as if rooted to the spot in a trance of horror.

He roused himself at last as he saw what headway the flames were making, like one starting from a dreadful dream.

"Heavens!" he cried out, "this is terrible. Murder and arson have both been committed here!"

He looked about him. Two buckets of water stood on a rude plank shelf. He took them down and poured the water over the burning body of the man, then dashed out into the yard where he remembered he had seen a well as he came in.

He filled the two buckets, carried them in, and poured the contents over the fire. Again and again he repeated this operation till the smoldering fire was quite extinguished, and he stood, weary and perspiring, looking at the dismal scene.

"Well, what next?" he asked himself. "I suppose I ought to go into town and bring the coroner; but first I believe I will explore this horrible den. What if the body I have sought so long should lie hidden in this dreadful lazar house."

He went out into the hall and looked down its narrow length. Three doorways opened into as many rooms. The handles yielded to his touch, and the door of each swung open readily, but the rooms were empty, dark and cobwebbed.

Dust lay thick upon the floor, showing that they had long been untenanted. With a sigh of disappointment he closed them again, and stood contemplating the stairway.

"Better luck in the upper regions, perhaps," he thought. "I wonder if I dare venture up there? Surely I can encounter nothing more fearful than I have seen below."

Slowly, and with some apprehension, he mounted the stairs, not knowing what to expect, and thinking it possible that he might encounter some further dreadful spectacle.

At the top of the stairs he found himself in a narrow passage-way on which three doors opened. He advanced to the first door and tried it.

It yielded easily to his touch, and swung open. He entered and looked about him.

There was nothing suspicious here. It was evidently the sleeping apartment of the two dead

people below who would never need it more.

A bed and two chairs constituted the sole furnishing. Some cheap articles of feminine apparel hung upon pegs against the wall, together with one or two rusty old coats and a pair of pants that doubtless belonged to the man he had seen below.

"There is nothing hidden here," thought Mr. Shelton, leaving it and entering the next room.

This room was similar to the first one. A bed and several chairs were all it contained. A single article of feminine apparel hung against the wall.

It was a dress of summer blue, and made in a more fashionable style than the one which he had seen in the adjoining room.

Like a flash he remembered that Mrs. Mason had told him, when describing the appearance of the girl she had befriended, that she wore a "morning dress of a light-blue color, and fashionably made."

"Great Heavens!" he thought, "is it possible that the poor creature escaped from this very house? If so, then she was recaptured and brought back, for here hangs the dress that Mrs. Mason described. My God! what has become of the wearer! Has some fearful fate befallen her?"

Echo only answered him as he sat down trembling with excitement.

He was here in the room where sweet Lily Lawrence had dragged out weary months of captivity, sickness and sorrow; where her pure cheeks had burned at insult and wrong, where she had suffered the pangs of hunger and cold until her weakened frame had almost succumbed to the grim destroyer, death.

But it was silent and deserted now. The dead ashes strewed the hearth, the empty robe hung against the wall, and the cold October wind sighing past the iron-barred window did not whisper of the tender heart that had ached so drearily within.

"This has been a prison for some poor soul," Mr. Shelton said aloud as he noticed the iron bars that guarded the window.

He went out shuddering as if with cold, and advanced to the next room.

The door was locked, but the key had been left upon the outside.

He turned it hastily and stepped over the threshold, half-expecting to find some poor creature incarcerated within.

But silence and gloom greeted him here also.

The room was bare and dreary as the ones he had quitted. A bed and a chair comprised its furniture, and heavy bars of iron secured the solitary window.

"What a horrible prison house," he exclaimed. "And what dreadful deeds of darkness have perhaps been committed within these old walls."

He went to the window and peered out through the heavy bars at the tangled garden. It was faded and dying now, and the russet leaves of autumn strewed the deserted paths. [Pg 95]

"My God, what was that?" he exclaimed with a violent start.

A strange sound had grated upon his ears—the distinct clank of a heavy chain and the smothered moan of a human voice.

Involuntarily he looked downward and saw a trap-door in the middle of the room.

"Now some new discovery of human misery," thought the detective as he advanced and pushed the sliding door backward.

A dark and narrow stairway was disclosed. He descended it quickly and entered the empty room beyond.

A feeling of disappointment struck him as he entered the deserted, cobwebbed dungeon, but guided by the sound of faint, low moans he advanced across the floor and opened the opposite door to the one by which he had entered.

Here he paused and swept his hand across his brow, as though to dispel a mist that had risen before his shrinking vision.

There before his eyes, extended on her low cot bed, with the horrible strap and chain about her waist fastened to the iron staple in the floor, with her hungry black eyes glaring on him from her skeleton face, lay poor Fanny Colville in all her abject wretchedness.

"My God!" exclaimed Mr. Shelton, "horrors upon horrors accumulate!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

"Who are you?" asked the poor, wasted creature, looking up into the strange face of the newcomer.

"I am a friend, poor creature—one who will deliver you from your dungeon, and give you liberty," said the detective, advancing into the room.

Joy beamed on the pale, shrunken features of the prisoner. For a moment she could not speak, then she murmured brokenly:

"Thank God for those words! I am starving and dying here. I have not tasted food for two days!"

Mr. Shelton in his frequent excursions had contracted a habit of carrying a flask of wine and paper of crackers in his pocket for his own occasional refreshment.

He took a silver cup from his pocket, and pouring a small portion of wine into it held it silently to the lips of the poor, famishing woman.

She drank it thirstily. He then began to dip crackers into the wine and fed her slowly and carefully.

"You feel better now?" he inquired, after she had consumed a generous portion of the food.

"Oh! so much better," said she, fervently, laying her head back on its hard pillow while the hungry, famished look died out of her eyes and a softer light beamed in them. "I thank you very much, sir. I was on the verge of expiring when you came to my relief!"

"Perhaps you feel well enough to tell me your name now," said he, smiling kindly.

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"My name is Fanny Colville," she answered, feebly.

The detective started.

"Are you any relation of Harold Colville, of New York?" he inquired.

"I am his wife," said poor Fanny, simply.

"His wife!" repeated the detective, a gleam of light breaking in on his mind regarding Mr. Colville's visit to this place. "Then why does he keep you chained up here like a dog?" he inquired indignantly.

"He does not know of it," said Mrs. Colville.

"He does not know of it," repeated Mr. Shelton in surprise; "you amaze me, madam. Surely he visited you a few days ago. I saw him leaving the house."

"I do not doubt that he was here. It is more than probable he was, but he did not come to see me. He believes me dead. He hired the old woman here to kill me and my child. He was weary of me and sighed for a fairer face," explained the deeply wronged wife.

"Yet the old woman, more merciful than your husband, spared your life," said he.

"She killed my child and let me live because she loved to have something about her that she might torture at will," said the poor woman bitterly. "She has had me chained in here for two years, fed upon bread and water, and an insufficient allowance of that. Oh! God, how I hate that woman, and how I long to avenge my wrongs!"

"She is beyond the reach of both your hatred and your vengeance, Mrs. Colville. She is dead," said Mr. Shelton, solemnly.

"Dead? Old Haidee Leveret dead? It cannot be true," said Haidee's poor victim, with incredulous joy shining in her eyes.

"I assure you, madam, it is perfectly true. When I came here a few minutes ago I found both her and her husband lying dead upon the floor down-stairs, and the room in flames. But for my opportune arrival in time to extinguish the fire, the house must have soon burned down, and you would inevitably have perished with it."

Fanny trembled like a leaf in a storm.

"It was a narrow escape," she murmured. "And so they both are dead. Did they kill each other?"

"I should say not," replied Mr. Shelton. "They both looked as though they had been poisoned. They certainly died suddenly, for their half-consumed dinner was upon the table. This fact, taken in conjunction with the fire, leads me to think they were poisoned by some enemy who then set fire to the house to cover up all traces of the crime."

"They have met with a fearful punishment for their evil deeds," said Fanny, solemnly.

"And now I wish to ask you a question," said her deliverer, "Do you know of any reason for Mr. Colville's visits here now, since he does not come to see you?"

"The villain," she uttered, indignantly. "Oh, yes, sir. I know full well. He has a young girl imprisoned here whom he is trying to force into a marriage with him."

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Mr. Shelton saw that she was growing weak and faint, and poured a little wine between her lips.

"That makes me feel stronger," she said, reviving.

"Mrs. Colville," he said, "you must be mistaken. I have searched the house carefully through, and there is not another living soul here beside yourself."

"Oh, then she has either escaped again or they have removed her to another place," was the confident reply.

"Are you quite sure the lady was ever imprisoned in this house, Mrs. Colville?"

"Oh, I am perfectly sure of that, sir. She occupied the room above me for some time. My groans troubled her so that she sought for me and found me here in my misery."

"And she told you that she was your husband's prisoner?"

"Yes, sir," answered poor Fanny, sighing. "I had her whole sad story from her own sweet lips."

"Was she a New York lady?" inquired the detective, evincing a deep interest.

"Yes, sir, and the daughter of a wealthy man."

"If you feel equal to the task I wish you would tell me all you know about the lady. I am deeply interested in her fate," said he very gently, though he was burning with impatience to learn more of Colville's mysterious prisoner.

"I think I am strong enough. Your coming has put new life and hope into me," answered the grateful creature.

"Go on, then," said he. "Did the wicked Colville abduct her from her home?"

"Worse than that, sir. She was a young lady who was murdered by a jealous woman. A Doctor Pratt, the friend and abettor of Colville in all his sins, was called in to view the body of the murdered girl. He pronounced her dead. In reality he discovered that she was in a curious condition known to the medical profession as catalepsy. He suffered them to bury her, then stole her body from the vault and sold it to Colville, who was in love with her. They brought her here, used every means to bring her to life, and at length succeeded. She revived after four days and found herself the prisoner of my husband, dead to all the world beside, and doomed never to see her friends again unless she consented to become his wife."

She paused, overcome by exhaustion.

Mr. Shelton sat white and rigid on the foot of the cot regarding her fixedly. He seemed frozen into a statue. At length he gasped rather than spoke:

"Her name?"

Fanny Colville's wasted hand went up to her brow in painful perplexity.

"I do not seem to recollect it. Strange that I should forget. I am sure she told me," she murmured.

"Try and think of it, Mrs. Colville. Much depends upon it," urged Shelton, anxiously.

She was silent a few moments, lost in troubled thought. At length she said, timidly:

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"I am afraid I cannot recall it, sir. My poor brain is dazed by my troubles, perhaps. But I am sure of one thing. She had the name of a flower, sir—a beautiful flower. I remember that, because it seemed to suit her so well."

Shelton's eyes brightened.

"Was her name—Lily?" he asked, impressively.

Instantly a gleam of remembrance irradiated the listener's face.

"Lily, Lily!" she said; "yes, that was indeed her name, sir. How could I forget it when I remembered everything else so well? I recall it distinctly now. It *was* Lily—Lily Lawrence."

Shelton sprang up with a cry that rang through the dungeon.

He was like one dazzled by the flash of light that broke in upon his mind.

Here was the solution of the dreadful mystery that had baffled him for weary months, the confirmation of the vague suspicion that had haunted him for days.

It was a living, breathing, beautiful woman he sought instead of a cold and lifeless body! No wonder the banker's reward failed of its object!

"She tried to escape from here, did she not?" he inquired abruptly.

Fanny replied by relating the circumstances of Lily's two attempts at escape, and how Colville had carried her off the second time from under her father's own roof.

"The villains! the fiends!" muttered Shelton, crushing an oath between his clenched teeth.

"After they brought her back again she was put into the room above me, but only for a night. She came in to see me after midnight, and promised to come again soon. But she never came, and I concluded that she had been removed to another place. I am confident she has not escaped from them, for had she done so she would have sent someone to liberate me at once."

"Colville and Pratt spent an hour here five days ago," said he, "so it seems probable that she was still here up to that date."

"No doubt of it. I suppose old Haidee put her into another room for fear that she might discover me down here, and also because the trap-door in that room is the only entrance which she had to bring my weekly dole of bread and water through," said Fanny.

It was getting on toward sunset, and just then they heard the loud baying of the bloodhound. Shelton started.

"It is the horrible hound that is chained up in a kennel in the garden," exclaimed Fanny. "He has missed his dinner and is hungry, I suppose."

"I will put a bullet in his brain before I go away from here," said Shelton, curtly.

"Now, Mrs. Colville," he continued, "I must leave you a little while. I will go and report these dead bodies to the coroner, and I must secure some easy vehicle to transport your poor aching

body away from here to a comfortable place. Do you think you can wait patiently? I shall be absent but a few hours at farthest."

"Oh, yes, I can wait. But you will be sure to come back again?" she said, anxiously.

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He smiled at her pathetic tone.

"Yes, I will certainly return," he answered, confidently. "And I will take you to the house of a good woman who will feed you and nurse you back to health again. I have one favor to ask you," said he, pausing.

"You have only to name it," said she, "if it lies in my power to grant it."

"It is this. When I bring the officers here and they question you, will you withhold the story you have told me—even your name? It will be very easy to do so. Your emaciated condition and feebleness will easily excuse you from giving any evidence at present."

"I will do as you wish me, sir," she answered, in some surprise.

"I do not mean you any harm, dear madam," he explained. "Far from it. My reason is this. If this story gets into the papers (as it certainly must if you relate it to the coroner), it will put those two villains on their guard, and though we could arrest them on your evidence, they might never reveal the place where they have hidden their unhappy victim. But if they are still suffered to go at large, free and unsuspecting, I can track them to their lair and rescue her. So I only ask you to postpone your evidence until such time as I have delivered Lily Lawrence and put these wretches inside of a prison."

"Your reasoning is very clear," answered Fanny. "I will do just as you have told me, sir."

"Thanks; I will leave you my wine and biscuits for refreshment," said he, smiling, and putting them by her side. "Keep up your spirits, Mrs. Colville. I will soon return and remove you to a safe and comfortable home."

He hurried away, fastening the door carefully after him, and went out in the garden in search of the howling, hungry brute. He found him tearing madly at his chain in his rage to get away and seek for food. It made abortive attempts to reach Mr. Shelton when he came in sight, but the detective coolly drew a pistol from his pocket, and fired a bullet into the brain of the dangerous creature, who instantly fell dead. He then walked away, mounted his horse and galloped rapidly towards the city.

At Mrs. Mason's gate he stopped and dismounted. The kind woman opened the door and beamed on him smilingly as she invited him to enter. He did so and soon made known the object of his visit.

"My curiosity about the old house we spoke about when I first saw you," said he, "induced me to visit it this afternoon. I did so, and to my horror I found the old people lying dead in the house. While exploring it I discovered a poor, imprisoned woman in a weak and starving condition. She needs to be removed to a safe and quiet place where she may be carefully tended, for she has enemies who would not scruple to kill her if they discovered her whereabouts. Mrs. Mason, you are a kind and motherly woman, and your home is quiet and secluded. Will you receive that poor soul here and take care of her? I will pay you generously for the trouble."

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Mrs. Mason promised to do all he asked, her kind eyes brimming with sympathetic tears, and he resumed his journey to the city, reported the case to the coroner, and secured a comfortable carriage for the use of Fanny Colville.

After the inquest the grateful creature was removed to the tiny cottage of Mrs. Mason.

The next day the generous detective took care to furnish wines and jellies and every needful luxury for building up an exhausted frame, and himself conveyed them to the new home of the invalid.

CHAPTER XXVII.

My readers are wondering, perhaps, as to the fate of our beautiful and unfortunate heroine.

Let us go back a little in our story and take up the thread of her adventures.

It was the night previous to the day on which the two Leverets came to their death at the hands of Mrs. Vance. Up to that night Lily Lawrence had remained under the guardianship of the wicked old pair.

It was nearly nine o'clock when Lily sat before the fire in her room, her small hands resting on the arms of the chair, her eyes fixed sadly on the glowing coals in the grate. Old Haidee had brought her supper in and departed. She was alone for the night.

The young girl was simply habited in a neat, dark woolen dress. Cuffs and collar she had none, for Haidee, in providing her a winter dress, had had no thought or care for those delicate feminine accessories of the toilet. The thick, dark fabric fastened about her white throat and wrists rendered her extreme pallor and delicacy doubly striking. The earthly tabernacle seemed growing white and transparent enough for the bruised and wounded young soul to glimmer through.

She was thinking of Lancelot Darling—her betrothed husband—and now and then hot tears welled from her eyes and rolled down upon her pale cheeks. She wondered if he still remained faithful to her memory, or if, indeed, the wily widow had won him from her, as Doctor Pratt and Harold Colville had so confidently asserted.

"It is false," she said to herself, through her fast falling tears. "Lance loved me too truly to forget me so soon. What if I did see him bending over that wicked woman, turning the leaves of her music as he was wont to do for me? She had beguiled him to her side by the fascinating arts which a true woman would disdain. It was to win him that she tried to murder me. But though I never see my lover again I will not believe he could love her after having loved me, even though she might try to poison my memory with her false tale of suicide. No, no; I will believe in the loyalty of my lover until my latest breath."

She was sitting near the side of the fireplace, and on the other side of the wall old Peter and Haidee, who had retired to their room for the night, were sitting over their fire and talking earnestly together. She could hear the sound of their voices quite distinctly, for on her side of the room there was a large cracked place in the wall from which the plaster had fallen out, leaving a thin aperture through which voices were distinctly audible. Lily had never felt any desire before to hear the conversation of the old couple, but at this moment a sudden curiosity seized upon her as she heard the sound of her own name distinctly repeated.

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Rising noiselessly from her chair she knelt upon the floor, and, placing her ear against the broken place in the wall, listened intently.

Their words and even the tone of their voices were plainly audible to her trained and acute hearing.

Words were being spoken by that wicked old pair that seemed to chill the blood in her veins to an icy current as she knelt there listening to the awful doom she had no power to avert.

"Yes," said the woman's voice, sharply, "I hate the girl so that I could strangle her with my own hands! Ever since the day she knocked me down and escaped from me, I have hated her with the hate of hell!"

"Aye, aye," said old Peter; "then why delay the deed we have long been determined upon. I am in favor of getting it done and over with."

"If I were not afraid of the vengeance of Pratt and Colville," said she, hesitating. "It's a terrible risk to run."

"Ten thousand dollars is worth running a considerable risk for," answered the old miser. "Now, here is the way we are placed, Haidee: Harold Colville will give us a few paltry hundreds for keeping the girl here, but her father will pay ten thousand dollars to the person who delivers her dead body, and no questions asked. How can you hesitate which to choose?"

"My God!" thought the wretched girl, with a wildly beating heart, "they are planning to murder me."

"I would not hesitate a moment—you know that, Peter—only that I see the difficulties in the way more plainly than you do," said the cautious Haidee.

"Difficulties—now that is the way with women, the silly geese," snorted Peter in angry contempt. "They always make mountains of mole-hills! What difficulties can you see, I wonder."

"How could we account to Pratt and Colville for her disappearance?" answered she.

"Easily enough; I have told you that twenty times before, old dunder-head! Say that she has escaped from us again."

"They would not believe it when they know that we both guard the door—they would not believe such a tale in the face of our united strength," returned she, rather shortly.

"Say that I was ill—say that I was drunk—or that I fell down in a fit before the door, and while you were assisting me she rushed past and escaped. Say anything you please to account for it—only tell them that she has given us the slip. They cannot help but believe it, knowing that she has made two desperate attempts before."

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"That is true," she admitted; "still, when they find the body has been returned to the banker, and the ransom paid, what will they think then?"

"They will think that some designing person has palmed off a spurious body on them at first, and before they learn better we can be off and away to another city, Haidee. It all seems so plain and easy to me I wonder why you hang back so."

"My God! this is horrible," breathed poor Lily to herself, but a dreadful fascination held her immovable to her post.

"And then, the body itself," pursued Haidee. "It would have the look of one lately dead. How could we account to her friends for that? Remember, she is supposed to be dead these five months."

"Haidee, you are an old fool! You are getting into your dotage—what silly questions you ask, to be sure," panted the old man, in a furious rage with his hesitating wife.

"Oh, yes, I hear all that. But you have not answered my question yet," returned she, pertinaciously.

"I have answered it twenty times before—every time that we talked the matter over. We can say

that we had it embalmed so that her friends might make sure of her identity when we claimed the ransom."

The old witch sat silently pondering a few minutes.

"Perhaps that would do," she said, rousing herself at last. "It may be that I am over cautious; I confess that I wish the girl dead."

"You consent then?" said Peter eagerly.

"Yes, I consent," she answered, with a ring of fierce joy in her unwomanly tones.

"Now that's my sensible wife," said Peter, transported with joy. "I thought you would come to your senses after a while. Well, since you *are* willing I say the sooner the better."

"Yes, the sooner the better," his wife repeated after him.

"Let it be to-night then," suggested Peter, who did not want to give Haidee's cautious fears any time to change her resolution. He believed in the old adage: "Strike while the iron is hot."

"Yes," answered Haidee readily, "let it be to-night."

The listener's heart gave a great fluttering bound and then sank like lead in her bosom.

Through all that she had suffered the desire of life, and the hope of ultimate release had remained strong in her breast. How could it be otherwise with one so young and lovely, and for whom life held so much? Now all her hopes were blighted in the dreadful knowledge just come upon her. Death in the horrible form of murder was about to blot out her young and tender life forever from the earth. She clasped her hands together, and repressing a strong desire to shriek aloud, lest that cry of anguish should precipitate her fate, listened on.

"Who will do the deed?" asked Peter, who was a coward in spite of his braggadocio.

"I will!" said Haidee, fiercely. "I will get my revenge upon her thus. Presently, when she is asleep and dreaming perhaps of her home and her lover, I will steal in upon her and clasp my hands around her white little neck and strangle her to death." [Pg 103]

"It is settled, then," said old Peter, with a fiendish chuckle of delight. "Get our pipes, now, Haidee, and let us sit up and wait till the time comes."

Lily Lawrence dropped down upon the floor and lay there like one already smitten with death.

"Oh, God!" she thought, "if I only had not listened I might indeed have been asleep, and death might have stolen on me unconsciously. How dreadful to lie here and wait for death each moment."

She lay there shuddering and trying to pray as the fatal minutes crept on, each one bearing away on its swift sands the brief span of precious life yet left her.

At each movement in the next room she shivered and started, thinking that old Haidee was about to come forth to execute her murderous task.

How long she lay there weeping and praying she never knew, but at length she heard the clock in the lower hall strike ten.

The next instant stealthy steps came gliding through the hall to her door.

Already she seemed to feel the horrible clutch of old Haidee's hands about her warm, white throat, pressing out the life.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"Oh, God spare me!" breathed Lily, clasping her hands in agony as she heard the key grate in the lock, and the hand of the murderess turning the knob of the door.

At that instant, before the door opened, while but a moment intervened between Lily and a horrible death, a loud and hurried knocking was distinctly heard down-stairs. It was so startling, coming upon the previous utter stillness, that old Haidee darted back to her own room in a fright, and directly she and her husband were heard making a shuffling descent of the stairs. Lily arose upon her feet in a tumult of hope.

"Who can it be?" she murmured. "Can it be possible that rescue is at hand?"

The revulsion from despair and terror to instant hope was too great to be borne.

Her slight form wavered an instant, then unconsciousness stole upon her and she fell prostrate on the floor.

In the meantime the old couple down-stairs, after removing bolts and bars, admitted, to their astonishment and dismay, the two conspirators, Pratt and Colville.

"You were not expecting me, eh?" said Doctor Pratt, with a laugh at Haidee's astonished look as she blinked at him beneath the flaring candle she held aloft. "Well, that cursed hound of yours was not expecting me either. He had nearly taken a piece out of my throat before he recognized my voice and became pacific. I had thought he must have known me at once. Look you, I shall put a bullet in his head some day, the blood-thirsty brute!" [Pg 104]

"If you do, you will destroy the best safeguard you have against the escape of your prisoner," said Haidee, shortly.

"Ah! well, let him live a little longer then, but you must teach him not to forget his old friends," was the careless reply.

"You come late, doctor. We did not expect you, and were about retiring," said old Peter.

"Yes, we thought it better to come by stealth," said Pratt, shortly. "The fact is, Colville has taken it in his head that we are watched by some fellow, and it suits us to be wary just now. We wish to see Miss Lawrence at once. Is she safe and well?"

"As safe and well as usual. Starvation does not seem to agree with her very well," answered Haidee, leading the way up-stairs with her flaring candle.

"It will break her proud spirit all the sooner," said Colville, brutally, as he followed them.

Haidee stepped into the hall, opened Lily's door and entered, nearly falling over the prostrate form of the girl. She started back in dismay.

"Why, what—the devil!" cried Pratt, entering behind her. "What has happened to the girl? Is she dead?"

He knelt down, felt the pulse, and laid his ear over the heart as Colville and Peter entered after him.

"She is in a faint," he said, looking up into Colville's frightened face. "Our arrival was most opportune. Haidee, bring wine or whatever stimulants you have in the house. Her vitality is exhausted. The late regimen has been too severe for her weak constitution, perhaps."

He straightened the still form out upon the floor and applied a vial of pungent smelling salts to her nostrils. In a moment life came fluttering back, and Lily's languid gaze opened upon the faces of her enemies. The white lids closed again and a heart-wrung sigh drifted over her lips.

Doctor Pratt lifted the light form in his arms and laid her upon the bed as Haidee entered, carrying a glass of wine. He took it from her hand and held it to the lips of his patient.

"Drink this, Miss Lawrence," he said, "you are weak and faint; it will revive you."

She drank it thirstily, and felt a momentary thrill of returning strength. Rising on her elbow she looked at them all languidly.

"You time your visit late, gentlemen," she said, with a slight inflection of scorn on the concluding word.

"We are obliged to consult our own convenience rather than yours, Lily. Pardon our informal and ill-timed visit," said Mr. Colville, coming forward to her side.

She flashed a look of scorn upon him, but deigned no reply. He turned to the two old people who stood waiting.

"You may go," he said. "We will apprise you when we are about to leave."

"No, let them remain," said Lily, imperiously. "I have something to say to you, Mr. Colville, and I desire that these, *your friends*, may hear it."

Old Peter and Haidee looked at each other in some trepidation at her words and manner, but stood still, curious and a little frightened. [Pg 105]

"My *friends*," muttered Colville, indignantly; "Miss Lawrence, I do not choose my friends from among such rabble, I assure you!"

"Do you not?" said she, contemptuously. "Yet if you had a precious treasure, Mr. Colville, and desired to guard it very carefully, you would entrust it to your best friends rather than your enemies—would you not?"

"Assuredly," he answered, wondering what she meant by her strange words and manner.

"You would? and yet you have professed to regard me as the thing most precious upon earth to you while you have given the lie to the assertion by leaving me here in the keeping of these wretches whom you disdain to own as your friends. Is it not so?"

He quailed before the scorn in her ringing voice, and the proud gesture of her lifted finger.

"You were safe with them," he muttered. "My dearest friends could not have guarded you more faithfully than they have done."

"It is false," she said, scornfully. "My life has been in constant jeopardy at their hands ever since I first entered this house."

"Miss Lawrence, you are raving," said Doctor Pratt. "These people have been paid to keep you here: it is to their interest to do so. And why should you fancy yourself in danger from them?"

"It is no fancy," she answered, coldly, while her scathing glance fell upon the cowering pair of interrupted murderers like lightning a moment, then returned to the faces of those she addressed. "I assure you, Doctor Pratt, and you, Mr. Colville, that your sudden coming interrupted her—I was on the point of being *murdered* by that woman there!"

"She lies!" cried Haidee and Peter, simultaneously.

"Silence, wretches!" thundered Dr. Pratt, furiously, reading guilt in their very faces. "Let the lady tell her story, then deny it if you can."

"It is the wine that has got into her head," whined Peter, abjectly.

"Silence, fellow! Now, go on with your story, Miss Lawrence," said the physician, impatiently.

Thus encouraged, Lily related every word of the frightful conversation that was indelibly stamped on her memory. There was no discrediting her assertions. The truth was unmistakable.

"She was just opening the door," concluded Lily, "when your loud knocking frightened her away. My relief from the pressure of over-wrought feeling was so great that I fainted when I attempted to stand up again!"

Dr. Pratt was foaming at the mouth with such furious rage that he could not speak. Colville, pale, trembling, with chattering teeth and staring eyes, found his voice first.

"Wretches! Devils!" he shouted, in a voice hoarse with passion, as he pointed to the door. "Go hide yourselves from my sight before I rend you limb from limb!" [Pg 106]

The craven wretches slunk away and locked themselves into their room in wild fear lest the two infuriated men should put their threat into execution. Colville came forward and stood by the bedside of the young girl who had fallen back panting from weariness after her denunciation of the would-be murderers.

"Lily," he said abjectly, "I am so unnerved by the thought of the horrible fate you have just escaped that I can scarcely speak: but, believe me, my dearest girl, I thought you perfectly safe in this place, I never dreamed of such perfidy in these hired servants of my will."

"This is no time for apologies," interrupted the doctor abruptly. "Make them hereafter when you have more leisure and better command of your feelings. At present the most important thing is to remove Miss Lawrence from this house immediately, and place her in a safer retreat."

He drew Colville aside one moment.

"I know of a place a few miles from here," he whispered, "to which I have the *entree*. The place is a private mad-house, and is kept by a doctor who is a very particular friend of mine. I know of no better retreat at present for our fair little friend. He will receive her with pleasure, and you can represent her as insane if it pleases you."

"Let us take her there then," answered Colville.

Doctor Pratt took down a dark cloak with a hood attached which hung against the wall.

"Miss Lawrence," he said, quite courteously, "my carriage is at the gate and I find it necessary to remove you at once from the perils that environ you here. Put on this cloak and let us go. I will find means afterward to punish these wretches for their perfidy."

Lily obeyed in silence, and was led down between them to the waiting carriage.

The Leverets did not appear again, nor did the hound offer to molest them.

Placing their prisoner in the carriage the two confederates drove rapidly away over the country road.

CHAPTER XXIX.

The inquest that was held over the dead bodies of Peter and Haidee Leveret developed no information that could lead to the conviction of their destroyer.

An expert examined the bodies and declared that the cause of their death was strychnine poison.

Large quantities of this baneful drug was found in the tea pot and in the partly emptied cups of the victims.

Mr. Shelton testified to the accidental finding of the bodies, and to his extinguishing the flames which had been lighted for their funeral pyre—also to the finding of the chained prisoner in the gloomy dungeon. His evidence threw no light on the subject.

Fanny Colville testified to the names and general bad character of the deceased, but knew nothing which was calculated to enlighten the jury as to the mystery of their death. [Pg 107]

She had not seen Peter for two years. Haidee had been in the habit of bringing her some bread and water once a week, but had neglected to return the last time, and nine days had elapsed since Fanny had seen her, two of which days she was entirely without food.

She supposed that the old witch was putting into execution her often-reiterated threat of starving her to death.

This was all they learned of Fanny. She had given her evidence with many pauses and turns of faintness. At length she became so ill and exhausted that it seemed cruel to weaken her with farther questioning, and it was decided to defer it until she became stronger and better.

The jury, in accordance with the facts elicited, rendered a verdict that the pair had come to their death by strychnine poisoning at the hands of some person unknown.

Search was made for the hidden treasure the misers were supposed to have concealed about the house, but nothing of value was found, and the bodies of the iniquitous pair were committed to burial at the expense of the city. They had lived their evil life, and the world being rid of them

was better off.

Mrs. Colville was removed to the home of Mrs. Mason, and the kind soul was shocked at the spectacle of human misery thus presented to her view.

She gave the poor creature a warm bath, clothed her skeleton limbs in soft and comfortable apparel, and shingled her long, inextricably tangled hair close to her head.

This done she proceeded to put her to bed and feed her with warm and nourishing food.

The poor, starved woman could scarcely realize her good fortune.

She lay looking about her at the pleasant little room with its neat carpet and curtains, its comfortable bed and cheery fire, and feared it was all a dream from which she would awaken to the horrors of her lonely, fireless dungeon.

But the gentle voice of her hostess soothed away her fears and lulled her into profound and restful sleep.

For several days the most of her time was spent in eating and sleeping.

The warm room and nourishing food seemed to induce slumber, and she began to improve very slowly, but still so perceptibly that when the detective came to see her after the lapse of a week he was delighted at the change.

"Mrs. Mason, you must be a capital nurse," said he, smiling. "Your patient looks very well, and begins to improve at a rate I hardly dared hope for; I should scarcely have known her."

"And, but for your timely help I should have been dead ere this," said the invalid, giving him a grateful look from her large, hollow, dark eyes. "I owe you my life. I do not know how to thank you."

"Do not try," answered the detective, feeling shy under the gratitude that was about to be showered upon him. "The revelation you made me when I found you fully repays the debt." [Pg 108]

"Ah! that dear girl," sighed Fanny. "Have you learned anything further about her, Mr. Shelton?"

He shook his head sadly.

"I am sorry to say I have not. The wretches have eluded me in some way, and managed to remove her without my knowledge. But I do not despair of catching up with them yet, and restoring the unfortunate young creature to her friends."

"God grant you may," she murmured, fervently.

"There is one thing I wish to ask you," said he, suddenly. "When you were telling me your story that day in the dungeon, you made an assertion that threw a new light on the subject of Miss Lawrence's supposed death."

"Ah! what was that?" she inquired.

"You know, or, perhaps, you do not know," said he, "that the jury's verdict was suicide. Yet you made the assertion that she was murdered by a jealous woman."

"Miss Lawrence was my informant, sir," answered Mrs. Colville. "Perhaps she knew all the circumstances better than the jury."

"No doubt she did," he answered, smiling at her demure tone. "And the woman?"

"Was a beautiful widow who lives under the Lawrence roof, and is dependent on the banker for the very means of existence. I cannot recall her name, for I have a peculiar faculty for forgetting names, but perhaps you have heard it."

"I have," he answered, gravely. "And indeed it amazes me. It passes belief that she should have struck a blow so terrible at the heart of Mr. Lawrence, to whom she owes nothing but gratitude."

"She was maddened by jealousy, sir. She loved the young man whom Lily Lawrence was on the point of marrying. I heard this from the young girl's own lips. She told me she had long before suspected her love, and pitied her sincerely, without a thought of the cruel vengeance she was about to take."

"Cruel! It was fiendish," said Mr. Shelton.

"Yes, sir, it was fiendish. She crept into the room while Miss Lawrence was trying on her wedding-dress, caught up a dagger from the table, and exclaimed, as she plunged it into her victim's heart: 'Girl, you shall die because Lancelot Darling loves you!'"

"Horrible!" exclaimed the detective.

"Miss Lawrence became immediately unconscious," continued Mrs. Colville, "and does not know how the woman left the room after locking her door on the inside, but thinks it probable she slid down the long vine that runs up to her chamber window."

"It is very probable she did," said Mr. Shelton. "Heavens! what a tissue of crime and villany has been woven about the innocent life of that beautiful girl! But I will see her righted, I swear it by all that I hold most sacred. And then let Mrs. Vance and Pratt and Colville look to themselves. I hold the evidences of their crime in my hands now. They only bide my time to see the inside of a prison cell!"

Mrs. Mason, sitting with her knitting, had been an interested listener to the above conversation. The detective turned to her now, saying kindly: [Pg 109]

"We have been discussing secrets very freely in your presence, my kind hostess, but I suppose you know how to keep silence regarding them."

"Wild horses should not drag a word from me, sir, without permission," replied she, earnestly.

"I fully believe it," answered Mr. Shelton. "Therefore I shall commission Mrs. Colville to take you fully into our confidence after I leave here. You will thereby hear a very romantic story regarding the young lady whom you so nobly befriended some time ago."

"Bless her sweet face! I never shall forget her," said Mrs. Mason, on whom indeed that little incident had made a deep and lasting impression.

"I hope you may yet have the pleasure of meeting her under more favorable auspices," said the detective, strong in the faith that he should yet rescue Lily from her cruel and unrelenting captors.

"Mr. Shelton," said the invalid, abruptly, "I have been thinking of sending for my poor old mother from the country. I must tell you that I ran away from home to marry that villain, Colville. I have never seen my poor old mother since, but I sent her my marriage certificate to keep for me, and to assure her that I was an honorable wife. I have never seen or heard from her since. I would like to see her very much."

"Well?" he said, as she paused, looking wistfully at him.

"Would you advise me to send for her?" asked Fanny.

Mr. Shelton took down a little mirror hanging over the small toilet table and held it before her face.

"Is it possible your mother would recognize you?" he inquired, gently.

Poor Fanny did not know how sadly she was changed before. She looked at herself and shuddered.

"Oh! no, sir!" said she, mournfully; "I was a black-eyed, rosy-cheeked young girl when I left home. I am a gray-headed skeleton now."

"Then take my advice and wait a little while. In the meantime, let Mrs. Mason feed you and nurse you until you get some flesh on your limbs, and some color in your ghostly face. Then as soon as you get strong enough to travel, I myself will take you home to your mother."

"Oh! thank you, thank you; that will be best," she murmured, gratefully.

"No thanks," he answered, and bidding them adieu, he went hurriedly away.

CHAPTER XXX.

Lily Lawrence leaned back in the physician's carriage and wept silently as she was whirled onward to her new prison.

Her companions were very taciturn. Doctor Pratt was driving and gave the most of his attention to his task. Beyond one or two questions as to her comfort he did not address either Lily or Colville. The latter sat entirely silent opposite the young girl through the whole time. [Pg 110]

At length, after several miles of rapid driving the carriage came to a pause, and the young girl was lifted out in front of a large, frowning brick edifice which loomed up gloomily in the darkness of the chilly night. She was led up a flight of stone steps and Doctor Pratt rang the bell.

The summons was quickly answered by a small dark man, who showed surprise at the visit, but welcomed Doctor Pratt with the cordiality of an old friend.

"Doctor Heath, this is Mr. Colville, a friend of mine," said Doctor Pratt as they stepped into the hall. "We have brought you a patient in the person of this young lady."

"Indeed!" said the host, bowing gracefully to these two new acquaintances, and ushering them into a small reception-room on the right. "Pray take seats, my friends, and draw near the fire. The night is raw and chilly."

Mr. Colville placed a comfortable chair near the fire for Lily, and she sat down and held out her numbed hands to the cheerful blaze that burned on the hearth.

Doctor Heath took a seat near her regarding her with looks of surprise and admiration. Her colorless beauty shone out like a lily indeed from the dark hood over her head.

"She looks very ill," said he in an undertone to his colleague, and unseen by Lily, he tapped his forehead significantly.

Doctor Pratt gave a shy affirmative nod.

"She has been very ill," he answered, "and has had a tiresome drive to-night in addition. Perhaps it would be better to let her have some refreshments and retire at once. I wish to have a private conversation with you."

Doctor Heath retired to give the necessary order. Lily's blue eyes turned upon her captors with a look of dread in their soft depths.

"Doctor Pratt," said she, "what new trials am I about to experience here?"

"None at all, I hope," said he, smoothly. "Your health is visibly declining, Miss Lawrence, and I have concluded to place you under the constant care of my friend, Doctor Heath. I think you will find this a more comfortable place than old Haidee Leveret's and you will have kinder treatment; I shall leave orders for a rather more generous diet than has been lately allowed you, for I fear your constitution may be ruined by your recent course of starvation. Yet I must say your own obstinacy brought it upon you. One kind word from your lips to Mr. Colville would have placed every luxury at your command."

"And I would die rather than speak that word!" said Lily, with a scornful curl of her beautiful lip.

"You will change your mind, doubtless, before you have remained long in this place," said Mr. Colville, in a tone so significant that she stared and looked at him keenly, as if trying to fathom its hidden meaning, but she could not read the expression on his face, and dropped her eyes with a weary sigh.

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Doctor Heath came in, followed by a neat young woman with a large and apparently very strong frame. She came in and stood behind Lily's chair.

"This young woman will attend you to your room," said Doctor Heath, with a polite bow. "I dare say you are tired and would like to seek repose."

Mr. Colville approached Lily and bent down to say, softly:

"I may not see you again for several weeks, Lily; but if you should change your mind and wish to recall me sooner, you need only signify it to Doctor Heath, and he will communicate with me at once."

"I am not likely to change my mind," she answered, coldly, turning from him and following the strong-limbed young woman out of the room.

Her guide led her up a stairway and along a wide hall, with a number of closed doors on each side. At length she paused and threw open the door, saying, politely:

"This will be your room for the present, miss."

Thus addressed, Lily stepped reluctantly across the threshold and looked around her.

She found herself in a small and neatly-furnished room. The floor was covered with a bright, warm carpet, a nicely-cushioned chair was drawn before a comfortable fire, and a tray containing refreshments was placed on a little stand in front of it.

The attendant entered behind her and closed the door.

"Allow me to assist you," said she, removing Lily's cloak, and seating her in the easy-chair before the fire.

Lily's lip quivered slightly at the gentle kindness of the woman's tone. Poor girl! harshness and coldness and threatening had become the only familiar sounds to her ears. This woman, though she looked young herself, assumed a motherly tone like one talking to a sick child.

"You would like a cup of tea, I reckon," said she, pouring out the fragrant beverage, and putting in cream and sugar, "and a bit of this toast and cold chicken? You look very cold and tired, my dear."

"Thank you," answered Lily, taking the tea and drinking it thirstily.

After her long fast upon bread and water the food tasted simply delicious to her. She did not know how much its quality was sweetened by the kind looks of her attendant, who sat by and watched her with a good-natured smile on her round and rosy face.

"Perhaps you would like me to help you to bed before I take away the tray," said she, as Lily finished her tea and leaned back wearily in her chair.

"Thanks; presently I will avail myself of your kindness, but now I wish to ask you some questions," said Lily, quietly.

"Yes, miss," said the woman, kindly, but she looked at Lily with a great deal of surprise at her tone.

"What is your name?" inquired the young prisoner.

"Mary Brown, if you please, miss," answered the woman in her kind, soothing tone.

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"You live here, I suppose, Mary?" pursued the young girl.

"Yes, miss."

"Then, Mary, I wish you would tell me what kind of a house this is. I have been fancying that it must be a hospital, as there seems to be a resident physician. Am I right?"

"Oh! yes, miss, certainly, this is a hospital. We have a number of sick people here," said the woman, like one humoring an inquisitive child. "But don't you wish to retire now, miss? It's about midnight I should think."

"In a minute, Mary. Tell me first, is it a public hospital?"

"Oh! no, miss. It's perfectly private, and very select indeed. We receive none but first-class people here—we don't indeed."

She was turning down the covers of the bed as she spoke, and now she said, persuasively:

"Come, now, let me help you to bed, miss, I want to tuck you up warm and comfortable before I leave you."

Lily submitted patiently, but as she laid her tired head on the pillow, she asked, suddenly:

"Is Dr. Heath a good man, Mary?"

"La, now, miss, you must judge of that yourself. You will see him often enough before you get well," said Mary Brown.

Lily was about to open her lips to refute the charge of her illness, when she was suddenly interrupted by the sound of a wild and piercing shriek which seemed to come from the room that was next her own. In her alarm she sprang up and caught Mary Brown's arms in both hers, shuddering with surprise and terror.

"Oh! what is it?" she cried, as the wild shriek was repeated again and again, mingled with frenzied shouts and peal after peal of frightful, demoniacal laughter.

"It's only one of the sick ones, miss," said Mary Brown, uneasily. "Don't fret yourself, my dear. Lie down again. He will soon be quiet, and then you can go to sleep."

A horrible suspicion flashed into Lily's mind.

"Mary Brown, you have been deceiving me with your kind face and friendly talk. This is not a hospital for the sick. It is a private mad-house—is it not?"

"Well, it is for people who are sick in their heads," admitted Mary.

"You mean for people who are insane," said she, holding tightly to the woman's arm.

Mary Brown nodded acquiescence.

Lily was silent a moment, lost in painful thought. At length she said, sadly:

"I hope you do not think that I am insane, Mary Brown?"

"Oh! dear, no, miss," said Mary, in her placid tone. "Of course not."

"But you *do* believe it. I can see that plainly," cried Lily, in an anguished tone. "You have been humoring and petting me, taking me for some insane creature. But I assure you I am not. I am perfectly sane, though I have suffered cruelty and injustice enough to have driven me mad long ago. I have been brought here by two wicked men to be made a prisoner because I will not marry a man whom I hate."

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"You poor, injured dear," said the good nurse, affecting to believe the young girl's story, though in her heart she set it down simply as one of the vagaries of madness.

"You do not believe me," cried Lily, passionately. "Oh! God, is this crowning insult to be added to my sufferings? Must they represent me as mad, and thus drive me into insanity indeed?"

The attendant began to think that her beautiful and gentle patient was becoming violent. She gently but forcibly released her arms from Lily's clasp, and laid the moaning girl back on her pillow.

"My dear," she said, "you must not excite yourself. You look too ill to stand agitation. I must go now and help Doctor Heath to manage that poor shrieking maniac in the next room. Try and go to sleep, my pretty dear."

She drew the warm covers up carefully over the patient, brushed back the disordered golden hair with a coarse but kindly hand, extinguished the light, and, taking up the tray of dishes, went out, carefully locking the door after her.

In the hall she encountered Doctor Heath about entering the room of the shrieking patient. He paused at sight of her.

"How is your new patient?" he inquired, abruptly.

"A little excited at present, sir. She appeared very quiet and sensible at first, but after the violent patient began his shrieks she became violent and wild, sir!"

"Did she tell you her name?" he inquired.

Mary Brown replied in the negative.

"Her case is rather peculiar," said Doctor Heath. "She is the victim of a strange hallucination. A wealthy young lady of New York committed suicide last summer under very romantic circumstances. This young person imagines herself to be the identical young lady who killed herself, and asserts that she was resurrected by a physician and his friend, who detain her in durance vile because the latter wishes to marry her. She will tell you her story, of course. Do not contradict her, but gently humor her. She will not give you much trouble, I think, as it is a mere case of melancholy madness. The young lady she personates was named Miss Lawrence. Be particular and call her by that name, Mary."

"I will, sir," said Mary, passing on.

Mrs. Vance read in the daily papers an account on the inquest that had been held over the dead bodies of her two victims.

She was surprised and troubled at first because her scheme for burning the house down and destroying the bodies had failed, but as she saw that no clue to the perpetrator of the poisoning had been discovered, her courage rose in proportion.

"I am free now," she thought, with a guilty thrill of triumph. "The two old harpies who preyed upon me are dead, and their secret with them. No one will ever discover my agency in their death. Suspicion would never dream of fastening upon me. Who would believe that these white hands could be stained with crime?"

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She held them up, admiring their delicate whiteness and the costly rings that glittered upon them, then went to the mirror and looked at her handsome reflection.

"I am beautiful," she said to herself with a proud smile. "There is no reason why I should not win Lancelot Darling. A woman can marry whom she will when she is gifted with beauty and grace like mine. And I will yet be Lancelot Darling's wife. I solemnly swear that I will!"

In the exuberance of her triumph and her pride in herself, she ordered the carriage and went out to spend the money she had rescued from Peter and Haidee in some new feminine adornment wherewith to deck her beauty for the eyes of the obdurate young millionaire.

Time flew past and brought the cold and freezing days of November. The latter part of it was exceedingly cold, and snow covered the ground with a thick, white crust.

Lancelot Darling came into the drawing-room one day where Ada and the beautiful widow sat by the glowing fire, Mrs. Vance busy as usual with some trifle of fancy work, and Ada yawning over the latest novel. They welcomed him without surprise or formality, for he had fallen into a habit of dropping in familiarly and with the freedom of a brother. Mrs. Vance, after the first few weeks of affected shyness and prudence, had resumed her old frank relations with Lance, though but feebly seconded by that young man, who had not recovered from the shock of her unwomanly avowal of love for himself.

"Well, Ada, how does the novel please you?" he inquired, looking at the book that she had laid aside.

"Either the author is very dull, or I am out of spirits," she returned, smiling, "for I have failed to become interested in the woes of the heroine, this morning. Have you read it, Lance?"

"Oh, yes, a week ago," he answered, carelessly. "I found it readable and interesting. I dare say you are in fault to-day, not the author. You are out of tune."

"Perhaps so," said Ada, "but what am I to do about it? Can you suggest a remedy?"

"The sleighing is very fine just now," he returned. "It thrills one very pleasurably. Have you tried it?"

"Oh, yes, Mrs. Vance and myself have been out twice with papa this week."

"By daylight?" he queried.

"Yes, by daylight," she answered.

"The latest sensation, however, is sleigh-riding by moonlight," rejoined Lance. "There is a full moon, you know, and the nights are superb. Parties go out to Dabney's hotel—it is far out on the suburbs—and have hot coffee and oysters by way of refreshment, you know—then they return to the city, getting home near midnight usually. Altogether it is very exhilarating."

"You speak from experience, I presume?" said Ada.

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"Yes. I tried it myself last night, being induced thereto by the glowing representations of two young friends of mine. I found the drive quite as bracing and delightful as they described it. I should be tempted to try it again to-night if I could persuade you, Ada, and Mrs. Vance to accompany me."

"Why, that would be delightful," said Ada, clapping her hands, with the pleasure of a child over a new toy. "I think that is just what I am needing—a new sensation."

"You consent, then?" said he, smiling at her pretty enthusiasm.

"Oh, yes, if Mrs. Vance will go, too. Will you do so?" inquired she, turning to the lady, who had as yet taken no part in the conversation.

"Do you wish to go very much?" inquired she, looking up from her work with a very pleasant smile.

"I think I should enjoy it very much."

"I don't know that I care for it very much," said the widow, with a light sigh; "but I will go to please you, Ada."

"It is settled then," said Lance. "We will go, and I think I can promise you both a very enjoyable evening."

It could not fail to be otherwise, Mrs. Vance thought to herself, with a thrill of pleasure at the knowledge that she would be seated beside him for hours, hearing his musical voice and looking into his handsome face.

"If it were not for that hateful Ada going, too," she said to herself, "what a chance I could have to

make an impression on his heart!"

But regret it as she would she could not prevent Ada from going, for she saw plainly enough that the excursion was planned for the young girl's pleasure, not her own. She was merely secondary in the affair. A thrill of jealous pain cut through her heart like a knife, and the furtive glance of hatred she cast upon Ada boded no good to the lovely and high-spirited young girl.

Night came, and Lance appeared with his elegant little sleigh. The ladies, comfortably arrayed in sealskin cloaks and hats, were helped into the sleigh, the warm buffalo robes were tucked around them, and taking the reins in hand, Lance started out at a dashing pace over the smooth and shining crust of snow.

The moon shone gloriously, making the ground look as if paved with sparkling gems, the silver bells rang out a merry chime, and the hearts of all three seemed to fill with pleasure at the joyous sound, and the breath of winter seemed like a caress as it sighed past their warm and glowing cheeks.

Numbers of merry pleasure-seekers were out enjoying the fine sleighing and the beautiful night. Gay words and happy laughter rang out from youthful voices, and many a heart beat high with hope and love.

Mrs. Vance and Ada enjoyed their moonlight ride very much, and found their appetite sharpened for the delicious supper which was ready for them when they arrived at their destination.

They met several of their friends at Dabney's hotel on the same pleasant mission as themselves, and enjoyed an hour of social converse before starting on their homeward way. They were the last to leave. [Pg 116]

"It has been very pleasant," said Ada, impulsively, as Lance tucked the buffalo robes around them preparatory to starting.

"I am glad you have enjoyed it," answered the young man, touching up his spirited horses and starting off in gallant style.

They had gone about half a mile when, in turning a corner, the mettlesome young horses became suddenly frightened at something, and reared upward, nearly upsetting the sleigh and its occupants. With a grasp of steel, Lance tried to bring them down upon their feet, but succeeded only to see them start away at a maddened and furious pace, entirely beyond his control, while shriek after shriek of terror burst from the two ladies as they clung to Lance.

Impeded by the clinging arms of the two, and distressed beyond measure by their frightened screams, it was impossible for Lance to do anything to help them. Though he held on to the reins so tightly that his hands were wounded and bleeding, his utmost strength was insufficient to arrest the speed of the horses. They ran faster and faster, as though incited to greater speed by the screams of the women. At length, with a frantic effort, they cleared themselves of the sleigh and bounded away, leaving the dainty vehicle overturned and broken, and its occupants reposing in a snow-drift.

Lance was the first to lift himself up and look about. He felt as if every bone in his body were broken, so swift had been the impetus that hurled him out; but repressing his own pain he hastened to his two companions.

"Ada, Mrs. Vance, are either of you hurt?" he inquired, anxiously.

Mrs. Vance was already on her feet, shaking the loose snow from her hair and dress.

"I believe I am quite uninjured beyond the shock of the fall," said she. "Are you, Lance?"

"Oh! I am all right," said he; "but, Ada, my dear girl, are you hurt?"

Ada answered his query with a moan of pain, but made no effort to rise. He bent over her and lifted the slight form in his strong arms.

"Can you stand?" he inquired, anxiously.

"Oh, no—no!" she moaned. "My ankle seems to be twisted or sprained, and my head struck something hard like a rock in falling. It aches dreadfully."

She burst into tears, sobbing aloud in her pain. Lance looked about him in despair.

There he was in the road, several miles from the city, with two helpless females to take care of, and his broken sleigh lying useless, the horses quite out of sight. Worse than all, Ada lying helpless in his arms, unable to stand or walk, and moaning like a child in her acute suffering.

"This is terrible," he said. "What can we do, Mrs. Vance?"

"Nothing," said she, coldly, maddened by the sight of Ada's head resting against his shoulder, "except to remain here and freeze to death waiting for some other vehicle to happen along and take us home." [Pg 117]

"Something may happen along at any minute," he answered, encouragingly. "There are numbers of people out to-night as well as ourselves."

"It is quite probable that we are the last on the road," said she doubtfully. "Indeed, I believe that we are. If Ada were unhurt I should suggest that we walk home, or back to the hotel at least. Ada, my dear, rouse yourself and do not weep so childishly. Do you not see what a plight you are putting us in? I am quite sure you can walk a little if you will only try to make an effort."

Thus adjured, Ada lifted herself and tried to put her foot on the ground and stand up.

"It is useless," said she, falling back with a sharp cry. "My ankle is too badly hurt. I cannot stand upon it."

Ere she ceased to speak, the welcome tinkle of sleigh-bells in the distance saluted their ears.

"Thank Heaven!" ejaculated Lance, "we have but a moment to wait. Relief is at hand."

"How fortunate!" chimed in Mrs. Vance, recovering her good humor at the prospect of help in their extremity.

Directly a splendid little sleigh drove up to them, stopped, and the single occupant, a handsome young man, jumped out.

"What is the trouble here?" he inquired, in a genial, friendly voice. "Why, upon my word," with a start of surprise, "it's you, Lance, is it not?"

"Yes, it is I, Phil, and I was never so glad to see you before in my life," answered Lance, in a tone of relief. "Mrs. Vance, Miss Lawrence, this is my best friend, Philip St. John."

"You have met with an accident?" said Mr. St. John, after briefly acknowledging this off-hand presentation to the ladies.

"Yes, my horses ran off and overturned the sleigh, pitching us into the road. Mrs. Vance and myself luckily escaped unhurt, but Miss Lawrence has sustained an injury that incapacitates her for walking."

"Perhaps I can help you," said the new-comer, cordially. "My sleigh is very small, but it will be roomy enough to accommodate one of these ladies, I am sure. Now, if Miss Lawrence will trust herself to my care, I will take her home immediately. And, Lance, if you and Mrs. Vance can stand a walk of a mile back to Dabney's hotel, you will find that they keep a good trap there and you can get it to return in."

"What do you say to my friend's plan, Ada?" asked Lance, looking down at her as she leaned upon his arm. "Will you allow Mr. St. John to take you home? I assure you he will take the kindest care of you."

"I accept his offer with thanks," said Ada, gratefully, "but it seems selfish to leave Mrs. Vance and you to trudge back to the hotel on foot."

"My dear child, pray do not distress yourself on that score," said Mrs. Vance, in her kindest tone. "I feel so thankful for this timely assistance in your behalf that I shall not mind the long walk at all."

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"It is the best thing they can do, Miss Lawrence," said Mr. St. John, respectfully. "They would freeze if they remained here waiting till I sent a conveyance out from the city, but if they walk back to the hotel they can get Dabney's sleigh and follow us directly."

Ada was accordingly lifted into the very small sleigh of Mr. St. John; the robes from Lance's useless sleigh were brought and tucked around her, and in a minute she was off like the wind for home, feeling in spite of her pain a very shy consciousness of her proximity to the handsome young stranger.

Lancelot and his fair companion in distress set off rather soberly on their return to Dabney's hotel.

CHAPTER XXXII.

It was rather an embarrassing position to be placed in both for Lancelot and the handsome widow. After some little desultory conversation they both relapsed into silence and walked soberly on their way.

Mrs. Vance at length broke the silence in a low and very faltering voice.

"Lance," she murmured, "I must avail myself of this, the only opportunity I have had, to crave your pardon and forgetfulness for a confession which I too sadly remember with blushes of shame for my madness and folly. Forgive me for recurring to that moment of frenzy and shame. I only do so to entreat your pardon and crave your forgetfulness."

He felt the small hand trembling within his arm where it rested, like a fluttering bird; looking down in the brilliant moonlight he saw tears shining like drops of dew on her down-drooped lashes.

He did not answer, and she continued, in a voice full of sadness and shame:

"Words cannot paint my grief and shame for that deeply deplored confession. Not shame that I love you, Lance, but shame that in an hour of impulsive and passionate abandonment, I showed you the secret of my heart and gained in return your bitterest scorn."

"No, no, you mistake me, dear madam," said he, struggling for words to reassure her. "It was not scorn—it was grief that moved me to speak as I did. I felt your words dimly as an outrage on the modesty of womanhood—oh, forgive me, I do not know how to express myself," cried he, feeling himself floundering into deeper depths with every effort he made to extricate himself.

"You express yourself only too clearly," she cried with inexpressible bitterness; "I see that my

fault will never be forgiven or forgotten."

"Oh! indeed it will," cried Lance eagerly, trying to condone his offensive words. "What I meant to say was this; I felt very badly over your words at first, but since I have seen how much you regret your rashness I have ceased to consider it anything but a momentary indiscretion which I trust soon to wholly forget, when you will again be reinstated in my whole confidence and respect."

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"Oh! thank you, thank you," she cried, chafing at the coldness of his words, but trying to content herself since she could extract no kinder speech from him. "Believe me, Lance, I will try to merit your confidence, and no indiscretion of mine shall wound you again."

"And we will drop that subject forever, will we not?" said he, leading her up the hotel steps and into the warm, lighted parlor.

"Forever!" she answered with a quivering sigh.

He drew forward a chair before the glowing coal fire and led her to it.

"You must feel tired and cold after your long walk," he said; "I will have something warm sent in while I inquire about the sleigh."

He went away and directly a neat serving-maid entered, bearing a tray of warm refreshments.

Mrs. Vance drank some coffee, but had no appetite for the viands, warm and delicious as they appeared, so the maid, with a courtesy took the tray and retired.

She waited some time before Lance returned. He came in looking pale and troubled.

"It is too bad," he said in a tone of vexation, "but Dabney's sleigh which I counted on confidently as being available was hired out in the earlier part of the evening to a couple of young fellows off on a lark into the country. They will not return until to-morrow evening."

"Then what are we to do?" she asked.

The young fellow smothered some sort of a vexed ejaculation between his mustached lips.

"We are to be patient," he answered, grimly. "Dabney knows a man a mile away from here who keeps a sleigh. He has sent off on the mere chance of its being at home to secure it for us."

He went out and left her sitting before the fire gazing into the glowing coals thoughtfully.

After he had gone she took out her watch and looked at it.

"Twelve o'clock," she repeated to herself, putting the watch quietly back.

Lance returned after an hour of patient waiting, accompanied by Mr. Dabney himself.

"We have been very unfortunate, indeed, in being unable to secure you a conveyance of any sort to-night, madam," he said, courteously. "It is now after one o'clock and all efforts have failed. Would it please you to retire and wait until morning? We will then provide comfortable means for your return."

She looked at Lance timidly.

"It is the only thing to be done," he answered, moodily. "I would walk to the city myself if it were the slightest use; but I am an indifferent walker, and could not possibly get back here till long after daylight; so the only course I see open is to wait for a sleigh which is promised me in the morning."

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"If that is the case," she answered, sadly, "I should be glad to retire. I am very tired, and feel the shock of my accident painfully."

The gentlemen retired, and a maid came in and showed Mrs. Vance to a sleeping apartment. She locked the door, and threw herself wearily across the bed. She was laboring under some strong excitement. No sleep refreshed her burning eyelids that night. At daylight the little maid knocked at the door with a tempting breakfast arranged on a tray.

"The sleigh has arrived, and is waiting until you have your breakfast," said she, politely.

Mrs. Vance bathed her face and hands, re-arranged her disordered hair, and after doing full justice to the tray of viands, descended to Lance, who impatiently waited her coming.

He helped her into the sleigh, took up the reins and set off homeward.

"I hope you slept well?" he remarked, to break the awkward silence.

She turned her dark eyes up to meet his questioning glance. He saw with surprise they were hollow, languid and sleepless, while a glance of ineffable anguish shone upon him.

"Could I sleep well, do you think?" she inquired, in a voice full of passionate reproach. "Could I sleep at all, knowing the dreadful fate which awaits me?"

"I fail to understand you," said he, in a voice of perplexity.

"You cannot be so blind, Lance. You are only playing with me," she murmured, sadly.

"Pray explain yourself," he answered. "I give you my word of honor that your speech and manner simply mystify me. What dreadful fate awaits you, Mrs. Vance?"

She turned upon him a moment with flashing eyes, then looked down again as she answered in low, intense tones:

"Do you not understand, Lance, what my pride shrinks from telling you in plain terms?—the bitter

truth that my stay with you last night at the Dabney Hotel has irretrievably compromised my fair fame in the eyes of the carping and censorious world?"

She paused, and Lancelot Darling sat still and motionless like one stricken with paralysis.

"Oh! that is impossible," he said at last. "No one knows of our accident."

"All New York will know it to-morrow," she said, bitterly. "Ill news flies apace. To-morrow the finger of scorn will be lifted against me on every hand. Perhaps even Mr. Lawrence will turn me out of doors."

The reproach and passion had died out of her voice. It was full of pathetic pity for her own sorrow.

"Surely it cannot be as bad as you fear," said Lance, startled and troubled.

"Alas! it is too sadly true!" she said, mournfully.

"What can I do to remedy your trouble?" he inquired, his native chivalry rising to the surface in defense of the woman he had unwittingly injured. [Pg 121]

"What *can* a man do in such cases?" she asked, in a low and meaning tone.

"Marry, I suppose?" he said, after a long hesitation.

"Yes," she answered, quietly.

Silence fell for the space of a few moments. Lance drove on mechanically, drawing his breath hard like a hunted animal.

He roused himself at last and spoke in a cold, constrained, unnatural tone.

"Then I will marry you, Mrs. Vance," he said. "I cannot promise to love you, nay, I can hardly give you the respect I would think the natural due of some other woman. But since I have injured your honor I will give you the shelter of my name."

"Thanks, a thousand thanks," she murmured.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

Mr. Shelton did not think it expedient to communicate to Mr. Lawrence the startling fact that the beloved daughter whom he mourned as dead was yet numbered among the living.

He had not the heart to give him this joyful assurance and then offset it by the statement that she was immured somewhere in the walls of a prison in the power of two wicked and unscrupulous men.

He determined, if possible, to trace out her whereabouts and rescue her before revealing the whole truth to the sorrowing father.

He therefore compromised the matter by telling a portion only of the truth to the banker.

Namely, that he had traced the body of the young girl to a certain house in the suburbs, but that it had been removed thence when he went to look for it, and that he was following up a new clew which he confidently hoped would soon lead to its recovery.

He also added the fact that Doctor Pratt and Harold Colville were the guilty parties in the matter.

Mr. Lawrence was anxious at first to have these two men arrested and forced to acknowledge their guilt and return the missing body, but he yielded to Mr. Shelton's contrary persuasions on being assured that such a proceeding might result in the disastrous failure of his plan.

"For though we might imprison them, Mr. Lawrence," said he, "the rigor of the law could not force them to divulge their dreadful secret unless they chose to do so. It is only too probable that they would maintain the most obstinate silence on the subject. Therefore let them go free a little longer, and let us oppose cunning to cunning, and fraud to fraud until we attain our end."

The banker acquiesced, and the detective hurried away, for he was resolved that the wily schemers should not elude him again as they had certainly done on the occasion of the removal of Lily Lawrence from the Leverets' house.

Once more he and his faithful colleague took up their task of espionage, but it was unavailing for weeks. Harold Colville had conceived a dim suspicion that he was watched, and was therefore doubly vigilant and wary. For more than a month he did not visit Lily, but contented himself by receiving cautious bulletins of her welfare from Doctor Heath, weekly. The messages went through the mails and were directed to a fictitious address. [Pg 122]

In these careful weeks a new scheme was revolving in Colville's brain, always fertile in evil. He was growing heartily tired and impatient at Lily's obstinacy, and was frightened lest some unforeseen accident should snatch his lovely prize from him. He began to realize that Lily would never yield her consent to become his wife, yet he swore to himself that he would never give her up. He determined, therefore, on a forced marriage.

"What do you think of it?" said he to his familiar, Pratt, after detailing his fears and anxieties to that worthy, and stating his final resolution. "Would that do?"

"Excellently well," said Pratt, who began to feel as anxious as Colville about the obstinacy of their prisoner. "It is the best thing we can do. Our position is becoming environed with difficulties. If we had not removed her from Leveret's just in the nick of time, that detective, Shelton, who found the bodies of Haidee and Peter, must inevitably have discovered her, and ere this hour we must both have seen the inside of a prison. Yes, it would be infinitely wiser to force a marriage with the perverse little jade and carry her off to Europe if need be. Seeing herself thus irrevocably bound to you, she would understand that her only hope of happiness lay in reconciliation and she would act accordingly."

"Marry it shall be then," said Colville, with a brightening face. "But when, and by whom? Could we find a priest who would read the ceremony over us under the peculiar circumstances of the case?"

"Never fear for that," said Pratt, laughing. "I can find you a priest in New York who would do the deed without any twinges of conscience for a pocket full of money. Leave that to me, and when I have found him I will report progress and you shall name the happy day."

"It will be a speedy bridal if I am allowed to usurp the lady's usual prerogative and name the day," returned Colville, in a fine humor with himself at the near prospect of his union with the beautiful Lily.

"It will be better to allow her the chance of doing so," replied Pratt, sarcastically. "Ladies are great sticklers for these small points of etiquette, you know. After we have settled the preliminaries we will slip out there some dark night in disguise and acquaint her with the good fortune in store for her, and give her a chance to yield gracefully. Should she still refuse we will make no more ado about it, but take the priest out there next day and marry the beauty willy-nilly."

"It is settled, then," said Colville, "and I shall write myself 'Benedick, the happy man.' But, apropos of that, Pratt, whom do you imagine the chained prisoner found at Leveret's could be? I had no idea the devils were carrying on such a double game."

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"Nor I," said Pratt. "I have indulged in a great many surmises respecting that mysterious prisoner, but cannot arrive at anything satisfactory."

"Have you fancied it might be *Fanny*?" inquired Colville, fearfully, while drops of perspiration broke out upon his brow.

"Yes, I have fancied it might be she," answered Pratt, coolly. "Perhaps old Peter and Haidee played us false, and did not kill her as you desired. We were not strict enough with them. We should have demanded a sight of the body for our assurance."

"Where is the woman they found?" asked Colville.

"I have tried to learn her whereabouts diligently," said Doctor Pratt, "but only ended by asking myself the same question you asked now. It is rather strange, too; I should have thought there would be no difficulty, but there seems to be a mystery connected with her removal."

"If I could find her, and it prove to be Fanny, I would kill her," muttered Colville, with a fearful oath.

"Perhaps she is dead already," replied the physician. "The papers described her as being too far gone to give her name or any evidence regarding herself. Probably she has succumbed to her great weakness and died."

"I hope so," replied the other, "for I have felt horribly afraid that she might prove to be Fanny."

"The killing of those two wretches was a most mysterious affair," remarked Pratt, musingly.

"Have you any suspicion as to the perpetrator?" asked Harold Colville.

"Not the slightest. It is a most mysterious affair to me. The wildest conjecture fails to fathom it."

"Whoever the mysterious poisoner may be he has my sincere thanks and best wishes," said Harold Colville, sardonically. "I owed the wretches a grudge for their attempt on Lily's life!"

"Yes, their death is eminently satisfactory to me," remarked Pratt. "I was casting about in my mind for some safe way to punish their perfidy without getting into trouble myself, when this opportune accident to their health stepped in between me and my meditated revenge. A pious person might almost call it an intervention of Providence."

"I dare say we should have called it an intervention of the devil if we had not been fortunate enough to carry my lady off safely the night before it happened," laughed Colville.

"After all, their plot to kill her was rather fortunate, since we came in just in time to frustrate it," answered Pratt, "for if they had not conspired against her life we should not have thought of removing her that night and she must have fallen into the detective's hands on the ensuing day."

"The devil takes care of his own. I am certain his satanic majesty helped us in that affair," was the laughing reply.

The two villains continued to indulge in these pleasing retrospections of the past for some minutes, then separated, the physician going off on his medical duties, and the man about town to some of his familiar haunts of dissipation.

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As they emerged from the hotel, each man, unconsciously to himself, was followed by another man who stole forth from the corridors of the building.

One of those men—the same who now followed Pratt—had been outside of Colville's door, with his ear glued to the keyhole during the progress of their interesting conversation. It was Mr. Shelton, the detective.

How little the two conspirators dreamed of what ears had listened to their nefarious schemes of forcing their victim into a loathsome marriage by the aid of some priest who disgraced the holy robe he wore by such sacrilege.

Fate was weaving her web silently but rapidly around the two wicked plotters, and ere long they would receive their reward.

Mr. Shelton had learned several facts unknown to him before while listening to that private conversation. He resumed his weary task of espionage, infused with new hope and courage, feeling within himself the consciousness that he must and would succeed.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

Lancelot Darling's unfortunate sleigh-riding accident had achieved for Mrs. Vance a victory that all her previous arts and maneuvers had failed to conquer.

Lancelot's noble and chivalrous spirit could not brook the thought that any woman's fair name should suffer through his fault or accident.

He therefore fell an easy victim to her artful wiles, and prepared to sacrifice himself on the altar of her imperious will, while deploring with all the passion of his manly nature the cause that demanded it.

"I thought myself the most miserable of all men on earth before this happened," said he to Mr. Lawrence, after confiding to him his unhappy position. "Life has held nothing but despair for me since Lily died. But now that I must take to my heart, in place of my worshiped darling, this mature woman, with her bold beauty and coquettish arts, I feel myself, if possible, driven nearer than before to the verge of madness."

"I believe you are sacrificing yourself unnecessarily, my boy," said the banker, warmly, for he saw through the widow's arts directly, and lamented the chivalrous nature that made Lance become her prey easily. "I believe Mrs. Vance, in order to secure a rich husband, has represented matters in a much stronger light than truth would sanction. Your unfortunate accident is unknown save to a few, and by a timely whisper to those who are cognizant of it, it need never transpire to the world. And even if it should there is no harm in it."

"It would be impossible to convince Mrs. Vance of that," said Lance, with a heavy sigh.

"Because she does not desire to be convinced of it," said the banker, grimly. "In her eagerness to secure you she will make the most of her small capital that she may delude you into becoming her husband."

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Lance felt that Mr. Lawrence spoke the truth; but he was too modest and honorable to tell his friend of the previous attempt of the wily widow to secure him by her bold declaration of love. He felt that he had gotten into her toils, and that she would never allow him to extricate himself; so he answered, sadly enough:

"Be that as it may I have given her my word to make her my wife, and I cannot now withdraw from it."

"You would if you were of my mind, though," said his friend; "you are at least ten years younger than she is, Lance, and the match is totally unsuitable. Take my advice and withdraw from it. Make over to her a sum of money. Perhaps that would heal her wounded honor."

"I do not think she would release me on any terms were I brave enough to propose it," said Lance; "and to tell you the truth," he added, with a blush, "I actually believe that the woman really loves me."

Mr. Lawrence laughed at the blush and the assertion.

"Perhaps she does," he admitted. "I suppose that would not be difficult for her to do. Women run mad over handsome faces, you know. But, seriously, Lance, jesting aside, I would be off with the whole thing. If you loved her it would be different. She is handsome enough to grace your home and queen it royally there. But to burden yourself with an unloved wife will be like hanging a millstone about your neck."

"I wish I could take your advice, sir," said Lance; "but I think it would be useless to try to get loose from Mrs. Vance. She is quite determined to write her name Mrs. Darling."

"How soon does she propose to immolate her victim on the altar of sacrifice?" inquired the banker, grimly.

"At a very early day," answered the young man. "The twenty-fourth of December is her choice."

"Shameful!" ejaculated the banker. "She is determined to push her power to the utmost. And you permitted it?"

"Naming the day is the lady's prerogative, you know, sir," said Lance, bitterly. "I confess I did hint for a rather longer extension of my bachelor freedom; but she asserted that the peculiar

circumstances attending our engagement would not admit of farther delay."

"She was afraid you might possibly escape her toils if you were afforded a longer time in which to reflect on your position," asserted Mr. Lawrence. "Well, Lance, if you are determined to sacrifice yourself for a scruple of overstrained chivalry I need not urge you further. It would be useless. I am tempted to drive the deceitful jade forth from the shelter of my roof within the hour."

"Oh, pray do not," said Lance, earnestly. "It would only precipitate the evil day of our union. She would claim my protection immediately then."

"It is very probable she would. For your sake, then, Lance, I will let her remain, and even allow her marriage to take place in my house; but I can never like or respect her again, even as your wife." [Pg 126]

"I will leave you to make the truth known to Ada," continued Lancelot, bitterly; "do not allow her to believe that I am faithless to Lily's precious memory, Mr. Lawrence."

"I will tell her the whole truth," answered Mr. Lawrence, deeply moved.

Lance went away, and Mr. Lawrence hastened to communicate the astonishing news to Ada, who was confined to her sofa with her sprained ankle.

"Papa, I am not so surprised as you expect me to be," said the young girl, frankly. "I have long seen that Mrs. Vance was using every art in her power to win poor Lance. Indeed, I incurred her everlasting displeasure some time ago by boldly charging her with it. She did not deny it, but retaliated by saying that I wanted him myself. She seized upon the occurrence of last night as a pretext for winning what she has long been angling for—the hand of our poor, unhappy Lance."

"He will live to repent his boyish notion of chivalry, I am sure," he added; changing the subject abruptly, "I called on young Philip St. John to-day, and thanked him for his friendliness to you last night, and invited him to dinner. I had to show him some attention, you know," he said, observing the flush that colored Ada's cheek so suddenly. "You do not object, I hope?"

"Oh, no, no," she murmured; "he was exceedingly kind."

"He is a very superior young man," said the banker, cordially. "Well born, wealthy, and a lawyer by profession. He is a particular friend of Lance, which in itself is a recommendation to any young man," continued Mr. Lawrence, in whose eyes Lancelot Darling appeared the *beau ideal* of human perfection.

If Mrs. Vance had expected to be congratulated by the banker and his daughter upon her approaching marriage she was doomed to disappointment. Neither one of them alluded to it at all, though she knew that Lance had told them, and that they resented her conduct bitterly by the cold and altered manner, almost amounting to contempt, with which they treated her.

She was obliged to broach the matter to Mr. Lawrence herself, coupled with a modest request for the funds wherewith to purchase as elaborate a *trousseau* as could be gotten in the short time intervening between then and Christmas.

Mr. Lawrence, in the grimmest and coldest manner imaginable, presented her with a check for a thousand dollars, and with profuse thanks she hurried out to expend it in finery.

She was very happy now in the coming fulfillment of her cherished desire, and no coldness, not even the lowering shadow on Lance's face when he came and went, had power to alter her imperious will.

To win him she had steeped her hands in human blood and risked the dangers of the scaffold. It was not likely she would relent now, when the sin and sorrow lay behind her in the past, and the happy consummation of all her efforts loomed brightly before her.

She went on blithely with her task of preparation for the grand event, seeing dressmakers and milliners daily, and leaving herself no time for retrospection in her whirl of engagements. And time, that "waits for no man," hurried on and brought the day of fate. [Pg 127]

CHAPTER XXXV.

Slowly and wearily passed the days to the poor captive girl immured in the midst of Doctor Heath's insane patients.

She was kept closely confined to her room, seeing no one at all except the kind-hearted attendant, Mary Brown, and occasionally Doctor Heath. Both these persons, in spite of her agonized assertions and explanations, persisted in regarding her as a lunatic.

Immured in a madhouse, startled and frightened daily by the insane shrieks of the mad people about her, and regarded as insane herself, Lily's heart sank within her, and she began to fear that her mind would indeed give way under her trials, and she would become in reality the melancholy maniac they pretended to believe her.

But she had at least one comfort in the midst of her troubles. She had been spared for nearly two months the odious visits of Harold Colville and his confederate, Doctor Pratt.

She could not conjecture why she had been thus highly favored, but congratulated herself all the same upon the fact.

If she had known the real truth of the matter, that they believed themselves watched and were afraid to venture near her, she would have felt her heart leap with new hope at the knowledge; but her long imprisonment and many trials had worn out hope in her breast. She believed that death was the only friend that would intervene to save her from Harold Colville.

She sat sadly musing before her fire one night, when the loud ringing of the bell below startled her from her dreaming, and the thought that she was about to receive a visit from her captors darted into her mind.

Ten minutes elapsed and she began to feel relieved and believe herself mistaken, when footsteps were heard upon the stairs, and presently the two wretches entered her room.

They had remained below long enough to remove their disguises, without which they had been afraid to visit her.

They would not have felt so secure if they had known that the lynx-eyed detective, Mr. Shelton, was pacing up and down the road in front of the house, laughing in his sleeve at the ineffectual trouble they had taken in disguising themselves.

Mr. Shelton had seen this house before, knew that it was a madhouse, was acquainted with the name of the proprietor, and knew also that he was suspected at the police headquarters of being engaged in a fraudulent business, and that a descent upon the house for the purpose of verifying suspicion was meditated.

"Ah! Miss Lawrence, good-evening," said Doctor Pratt, airily. "I trust you find yourself in better health and spirits than when we last met."

Lily turned her head away without replying, while Colville, bending over her, whispered gallantly:

"Ah, my obdurate fair one, have you relented yet?"

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"No," answered Lily, briefly and coldly, withdrawing the hand he had tried to take in his own.

"I hoped your mind had changed in the long interval since we last met," said he, taking a seat near her.

Doctor Pratt had already taken a chair by the grated window.

"You were mistaken," she answered, coldly, as before.

"I think you will admit that I have waited long and patiently on your pleasure, Lily," said he, in a tone of expostulation.

Lily lifted her large blue eyes for a moment and looked at him with a glance in which contempt and weariness were blended.

"Mr. Colville," she said, quietly, "pray spare yourself the useless discussion of that subject. You had my answer long ago. I assure you my decision is unalterable."

"But, Lily, reflect a moment. Would not a union with me be preferable to a lifetime of isolation and weariness here?"

"No," she answered, steadily. "Even the wretched existence I drag out here among the insane inhabitants of this place is far more welcome to me than the hated thought of a union with you!"

"I am sorry you think so," he answered, in tones of bitter sarcasm, "as, unfortunately, I do not propose to give you any choice in the matter."

"What do you mean?" she inquired, with a thrill of indefinable fear creeping coldly around her heart.

He saw the look of terror that came into her eyes, and, villain though he was, he hesitated before speaking out what was in his mind. He glanced at Dr. Pratt and took courage from the gleam of that villain's eyes.

"I mean," he answered, in a low voice of concentrated rage and bitterness, "that your obstinacy has at length worn out my patience, and I have determined to take my own way in the matter regardless of your will."

"What are you going to do?" she asked, in a quivering voice, while her young face blanched to a deathly hue.

"I am going to make you my wife without your consent," he answered, grimly.

"You cannot!" she answered, with dilating eyes and a trembling voice. "It would be no marriage if I refused to consent."

"So much the worse for you, then," he answered, laughing harshly, "for the marriage ceremony shall certainly be read over us, and that will be entirely sufficient for me. I shall surely consider you my wife, then, and take you to my heart without further scruples."

"No holy man of God would perform such an unhallowed ceremony," said she incredulously.

"Do not delude yourself thus, my sweet girl," he laughed mockingly. "A *bona fide* priest is already engaged for the important occasion. Will you be pleased to appoint the happy day?"

"Never!" she flashed out bitterly.

"You force me then to usurp your feminine privilege," he answered coolly. "And in that case your womanly vanity can of course pardon the impatient ardor of a lover who has waited humbly and patiently as I have done. To-morrow, then, shall witness our bridal!"

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"To-morrow!" she cried, springing up and clasping her small hands together in helpless agony. "To-morrow! Oh! no, you do not mean it! You will not be so cruel?"

"You will see!" he answered. "I have made every preparation for the event, even to our bridal tour. To-morrow a steamer leaves her wharf for Europe. I have secured our passage, and this morning sent aboard of her a trunk well filled with feminine apparel for your use during the voyage. Of course you will select your bridal *trousseau* after we arrive at Paris. I shall not deny my beautiful bride any luxury. It only remains for me to inform you that I will bring a priest out here to-morrow, and our marriage shall be duly celebrated before we take passage for the Old World."

Lily remained standing, gazing at the scheming villain with dilated blue eyes, and lips and cheeks blanched to the pallid whiteness of death.

Harold Colville laughed mockingly.

"You may stare, fair one," he said. "To-morrow shall see you my wife. No power can save you."

"No power!" she repeated, gazing at him with flashing eyes. "No power! Oh! blasphemer, do you forget that there is a God above who cares for the innocent and punishes the guilty? Beware, lest His vengeance fall upon you in the hour of your fancied triumph!"

She looked like some beautiful, inspired prophetess as she faced him with a lifted hand that seemed to menace him with evil.

Her golden hair had become loosened from its fastenings and streamed over her shoulders, gleaming around her lovely pallid features like a halo of light.

For a moment Harold Colville quailed before her with something like fear of that dread tribunal with whose vengeance she threatened him.

His heart sank strangely within him, while hers, for the moment, thrilled with a presentiment of coming deliverance.

Surely if "coming events cast their shadows before," both the guilty Harold Colville and the wronged Lily Lawrence were gifted with a momentary prescience of that which was hastening to them in the near future.

Doctor Pratt saw the subtle shadow settling over Colville's pale features, and arose hastily.

"Come, come, Miss Lawrence," he said harshly. "These tragedy airs would be very fine on the stage, but they are out of place here. Spare yourself so much unnecessary exertion; you will most certainly become Mr. Colville's wife to-morrow. Instead of this useless defiance let me advise you to cultivate a spirit of meekness and submission. It is useless to threaten us with the punishment of God. We do not believe in Him!"

She was walking restlessly up and down the floor, and made him no answer, save one scathing flash from her brilliant eyes. He turned away with a laugh of derision. [Pg 130]

"Come, Colville, let us go," he said. "Other matters demand our attention now. We must arrange matters with Dr. Heath before we go."

Colville paused at the door and looked at the young girl restlessly pacing the floor.

"To-morrow, then, my fair and obdurate love," said he. "To-morrow! Until then, adieu!"

No word or motion betrayed that she heard him.

He closed and locked the door, going away with the exultant thought that this was his last parting from his beautiful captive.

She heard the sound of the receding footsteps, and fell on her knees, lifting up her convulsed face in a passionate appeal to God that He would deliver her from the snares of these wicked men.

They went down-stairs and were closeted some time with Doctor Heath.

When they went away a large roll of bills was passed from the purse of Harold Colville to the pocket of the complacent little insane-doctor. Then resuming their disguises they took leave.

"To-morrow, then," said Colville, as they descended the steps, speaking thoughtlessly aloud. "To-morrow we shall return, and with the worthy priest's assistance, I shall bear away my unwilling bride."

"Hush! do not speak so loud," said Doctor Pratt, cautiously. "The very stones have ears."

They sprang into their carriage and drove rapidly away.

Then a dark form that had been crouching beneath the steps came out and straightened its cramped limbs.

"To-morrow," he repeated, with a low, exultant laugh. "To-morrow! Ah! what a happy day to-morrow will be to some sorrowing hearts that I know of. Take courage, sweet Lily Lawrence! To-morrow shall see you restored to the arms of your father and your lover! Let me see—to-morrow is the twenty-fourth of December. What a triumphant Christmas eve it will be for me!"

He walked on some distance to where he had secured his horse, and mounting him in haste, rode away full of plans for his next day's happy mission to sorrowing hearts.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

It was the twenty-fourth of December and Mr. Lawrence sat alone in his elegant office at the bank, musing sadly before the glowing fire in the grate.

The banker looked worn and sad, and now and then a heavy sigh parted his well-cut lips, and a dimness crept over his fine blue eyes.

He was thinking of his beautiful elder daughter whose tragic death had well-nigh broken his fatherly heart.

He brushed his handkerchief across his eyes and sighed heavily.

There was a knock at the door and a clerk entered with Mr. Shelton's card.

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"Ah!" said Mr. Lawrence. "Show the gentleman in, Mr. Styles."

Mr. Shelton entered with suppressed excitement beaming from every feature. His greeting ceremonies were brief and hurried.

"Mr. Lawrence," he said directly, "I have a carriage in waiting outside. Will you do me the honor to ride several miles with me this morning?"

"You have made some important discovery?" exclaimed Mr. Lawrence, rising excitedly.

"Yes," answered the detective, "but I cannot explain until we are on our way. We have not a minute to spare!"

They hurried out and took their places in the carriage.

"Driver, you have your directions," said the detective to the man on the box. "Do not forget. Drive fast and overtake the other carriage if possible—if not, try and get within sight of it at least."

"Is there another carriage?" inquired the banker, bewildered.

"Yes," said Mr. Shelton. "I have sent a carriage ahead of us containing four policemen, and they are secretly following another carriage. The first carriage contains Doctor Pratt, Harold Colville, and a priest. They are on the way to the place where the body of your daughter is concealed, and we are on our way to secure and arrest them."

"You are perfectly certain, I hope," said Mr. Lawrence, trembling with excitement.

"Yes, success is assured," said Mr. Shelton, with a ring of triumph in his clear tone.

"Thank God!" exclaimed the banker fervently. "At last my poor Lily's desecrated corpse may rest in a fitting sanctuary."

He leaned over and wrung the detective's hand gratefully.

"God bless you, my friend, for the patience and perseverance that have brought this result at last," he said.

The detective was deeply moved by the emotion of the elder man.

"Mr. Lawrence," said he, bending forward and speaking in low, impressive tones, "prepare yourself for a wonderful revelation! Are you strong enough to bear tidings of great joy?"

"What do you mean, Mr. Shelton?" inquired the banker with a start. "Alas! what joyful tidings can come to me, broken-hearted as I am at the loss of my daughter?"

The detective leaned forward and laid his hand on the banker's arm.

"Mr. Lawrence," he said, in a voice that vibrated with feeling, "it is not the corpse of your daughter that I am about to restore to the desecrated vault, but the *living*, beautiful Lily that will be given back to your heart and your home!"

Mr. Lawrence fell back against the cushion of the carriage like one stricken with death, so great was the shock of the detective's revelation. Mr. Shelton took a small flask from his pocket, and forced some wine between his white and gasping lips.

"I feared these joyful tidings would unnerve you," said he, gently. "Calm yourself, my dear sir. Your daughter, whom you have mourned as dead, yet lives. It was her own living self that you saw in your hall that night, not her spirit!"

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"Oh! God be thanked! Lily lives!" repeated the banker in a low voice of ecstasy.

Shelton put his head out of the carriage window a moment.

"We have caught up with the officers' hack," said he. "Now we are all right. Driver, just keep on at your present pace. We do not need to go faster."

"Every moment seems an hour," exclaimed the banker, in a fever of anxiety and impatience. "Oh, to think that my darling lives! And yet, oh, God! what would be her feelings on learning that her betrothed will wed another to-night!"

"Do not distress yourself about that marriage, Mr. Lawrence," answered the detective. "I assure you it shall never be consummated."

"Ah! you think she will generously yield him to Lily when she finds that she is still living?" said the banker; "but you do not know Mrs. Vance. Nothing would induce her to release her victim from the toils she has wound about him."

"Perhaps I know more of Mrs. Vance than you suppose," said Mr. Shelton. "For instance, Mr. Lawrence, you believe that your daughter committed suicide—do you not?"

"It was the jury's verdict," said the banker.

"Mr. Lawrence, your daughter was as happy and as much in love with life as you believed her to be. She never attempted to commit suicide," said the detective, firmly.

"She did not? Then who—what—?" began the banker, in a maze of bewilderment.

"The dagger that pierced her innocent breast was driven home by the murderous hand of Mrs. Vance!" was the reply.

Fear, horror and amazement were blended on the pale, excited features of the listener. His gray head fell back against the cushions of the carriage, and he struggled helplessly for speech in which to express his feelings. Mr. Shelton again had recourse to his convenient flask of wine.

"I fear I am exciting you too much with my astonishing revelations," said the detective, kindly. "I do not wonder at your emotion, for my own agitation at learning these facts was great. How much more poignant must your feelings be than mine were, under the circumstances that affect you so closely."

"The viper! The serpent that stung the hand that warmed and fed her!" exclaimed the banker, bitterly.

"You may well say so," said Mr. Shelton. "She has indeed proved herself a monster of ingratitude! But to-day she will find herself foiled and ruined. She has but a few hours remaining to her now of her fancied security and happiness."

"God be thanked!" said the banker; "and, oh! Mr. Shelton, are we almost there? The time seems so long. Forgive a father's impatience, but you cannot imagine what suspense I suffer, what longings overwhelm me at the thought that I shall soon clasp my darling Lily to my heart again!"

"We shall soon be there now. Patience, my friend," said the detective. "Believe me, I sympathize in your impatience to behold your daughter again."

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"You are a noble fellow, Mr. Shelton," said the banker. "You will not find me ungrateful."

The carriage slackened its pace, and Mr. Shelton put his head out of the window.

"We are there," he exclaimed in a voice that trembled with excitement and triumph, while his manly, handsome features beamed with joy.

The carriage stopped and Mr. Shelton descended, followed by the banker, who trembled so that he could scarcely stand upon the ground.

The four officers had already descended from their vehicle and stood respectfully awaiting Mr. Shelton's approach. The empty carriage of Pratt and Colville stood in waiting before the door.

At a word from Mr. Shelton they all ascended the steps, and the detective rang a furious peal upon the bell.

The summons was unanswered. Mr. Shelton rang again and again with a like result.

"What will you do now?" asked Mr. Lawrence, in a perfect fever of dread and impatience.

"Burst in the door!" said the detective, in a ringing voice.

At the word the four officers fell to furiously with their clubs upon the door. A few moments of their impetuous battering sufficed to burst it in, and they all bounded tumultuously into the hall.

A neat-looking maid-servant stood at the bottom of the stairway, looking frightened and indignant. It was none other than Mary Brown.

"Woman," said Mr. Shelton, imperiously, "lead the way to Miss Lawrence's room immediately!"

"It's against orders, sir," said Mary, sullenly.

"No matter, do as I bid you!" thundered the impatient detective.

"Miss Lawrence has company, sir, and the orders are not to admit any one."

"Push her aside, men; we will hunt for Miss Lawrence ourselves," said the detective sternly.

Strong hands forced Mary aside from her position on the stairway. Several domestics, attracted by the noise, had hastened up from the regions of the basement and stood staring stupidly, but did not offer any resistance to the officers' power. The men began to mount the stairs rapidly, and Mary Brown rushed frantically after them.

"Oh! for the Lord's sake, gentlemen," she panted, "don't burst in the doors up-stairs, and let the poor crazy people out upon us. They will murder us all."

"Will you do as we told you, then?" asked the detective, sharply.

"Oh! yes, yes," whimpered Mary, running along in front of them. "This way, gentlemen."

She stopped, at length, and indicated the door. It was locked, but the officers' clubs demolished it directly, and not a moment too soon were they for what was progressing within that room.

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The villanous priest who was desecrating his holy office by this sacrilege, stood in the center of the floor with his prayer-book open at the marriage service, from which he was slowly reading. Colville stood in front of him, and the united efforts of the worthy doctors, Pratt and Heath, were employed in holding up the form of Lily Lawrence beside him.

With a scream of horror Mr. Lawrence rushed forward, and snatching his daughter from their villanous hold, he folded her tightly to his heart. She looked up an instant with a wild and piercing shriek, and seeing the beloved face of her father, dropped unconscious in his loving arms.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

"Harold Colville, Doctor Pratt and Doctor Heath, you are under arrest," cried the detective, in a ringing voice that fell on the ears of the villanous trio like the trump of doom. "Officers, secure your men."

There was a brief struggle, accompanied by loud cries and oaths, then the superior power of the policemen triumphed, and each man had his prisoner handcuffed and reduced to grim silence. The fourth officer had collared the fat little priest, who was struggling in his grasp.

In the meantime Mr. Lawrence had been vainly striving to restore the consciousness of his fainting daughter. He had laid her upon the bed, and was wildly chafing her cold hands, while he called her by every term of love his fond affection could devise.

"Here, woman," said Mr. Shelton to Mary Brown, who lingered in the hall looking in at the scene, "come and lend a hand in reviving the young lady. She has fainted."

Mary hurried in with alacrity, and Lily was soon restored to partial consciousness, to the great delight of her father. She lay quite still, with half-open eyes, contemplating the banker's face with an expression of languid ecstasy, though she trembled excessively.

"I must get my prisoners away at once," said Mr. Shelton. "Do you think you are strong enough to return to the city with us now, Miss Lawrence?"

She looked up in languid inquiry at the strange yet kindly voice addressing her so respectfully, and made an effort to rise, but fell backward wearily. Doctor Pratt turned about sullenly.

"In my character of a physician," said he, shortly, "I would advise you not to remove the young lady for several hours. She needs complete rest for a little while to recover from the shock she has sustained. You can take my advice or not, as it pleases you."

Mr. Shelton looked at the banker. He in turn looked inquiringly at the pale face of his daughter.

She answered in feeble tones:

"Perhaps he is right. I feel completely exhausted now. Allow me an interval of rest, and then, oh! how gladly I will leave this place with you, dear papa." [Pg 135]

"I will take these men into the city, then," said the detective, "and return for you, Mr. Lawrence, as we intend to search the house thoroughly. It is strongly suspected that some persons as sane as you or I are confined here through the wickedness of their relatives and the connivance of this man, Dr. Heath. I will leave two officers on guard here while I am away."

He went out, followed by the officers with their prisoners. Mary Brown followed after, and the banker was left alone with the daughter who had been so strangely restored to him after he had mourned her as dead for many months. He bent down and clasped her in his arms, and his joyful tears rained upon her sweet, white face.

A smile of heavenly sweetness beamed on her pale face. She lay still a little while, nestling against her father's breast, trying to picture to herself the ineffable sweetness of the re-union that awaited her. She pictured to herself the happiness that would shine in the dark eyes of her lover when she came back to him as one from the dead. Her heart began to beat tumultuously, and a tinge of color crept into her wasted cheeks. She closed her eyes to shut out the hateful sight of her prison walls, and fancied herself at home with the loved ones instead.

In the meantime Mr. Lawrence was gazing sadly on her pale and wasted features, marking the mournful ravages privation and sorrow had worked in that once blooming face.

"My Lily," he said, in a tone of anguish, taking up one delicate hand and looking at the blue veins wandering so clearly over its surface, "you have grown to be a lily indeed. How white and wan you look."

She trembled and clung closer to his breast.

"Ah! papa," she murmured, "they tried to starve me into compliance with their wishes. But though my strength failed and my beauty faded, I would not give up, though I thought I should have died with the weakness and the horror of it all."

"The devils!" exclaimed Mr. Lawrence, smothering a stronger malediction between his lips.

"Papa," she said, in her weak tones, "you know all, do you not? How Mrs. Vance hated me for Lancelot's sake? How she tried to murder me?"

"Yes, my dear," he answered, gently. "Thank God, her wicked attempt did not succeed. A terrible retribution awaits her."

"Papa, I can forgive her now since I am restored to you all again," said Lily, sweetly. "Cannot we let her go away and not punish her for her cruelty? I hated her at first, but that is all over with

now since she has failed in her endeavor. You know it was all because she loved my Lancelot."

"My love," said the banker, "your sweet forgiveness is angelic; but the secret of Mrs. Vance's crime is in other hands than mine. However much we might wish to shield her from the consequences of her sin we could not do so. The law will have to take its course."

He did not tell her of the marriage that was to take place between her lover and Mrs. Vance that night. In her weak state he feared to shock her by the disclosure. He hoped that they would reach home before the appointed time, and forestall the dreaded event, and he resolved that the knowledge of it should never come to Lily's hearing.

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Mr. Shelton returned in a few hours and instituted a search. As he had suspected, several sane persons were found confined in the house, and these were set at liberty, swearing deadly vengeance against Dr. Heath and sundry wicked relatives. The evening was far advanced, and the detective began to see the necessity of his hastening Miss Lawrence away if they were to reach Fifth avenue in time to stop the contemplated marriage of Lancelot to Mrs. Vance. He accordingly stated the fact to Mr. Lawrence.

Lily was feeling stronger and better, and declared her desire to start immediately. The carriage was made as comfortable as possible with pillows and cushions, and the young girl was lifted tenderly into it.

They then set forth rapidly on their journey, but the early winter twilight had given place to night before they reached the banker's house.

Lily's heart beat rapidly as they reached home. She remembered the last time she had glided up those steps, worn and weary, but, oh! so happy in the prospect of reunion with her loved ones, and the cruel hand that had snatched her away in the moment that she beheld the faces she had so longed to behold. She clung convulsively to her father's arm as they stepped upon the pavement.

"Courage, dear," he whispered, feeling how she trembled, and how nervously she glanced about her. "You are safe, love. No one can harm you now."

"Oh! papa," she whispered, after her first startled glance around her. "What does all this mean? Is Ada giving a party?"

Mr. Lawrence glanced up in dismay. He knew what to expect, but he had fondly hoped to reach home before matters went so far.

The mansion was brilliantly lighted from top to bottom. A silken awning extended from the house out to the street to shelter the heads of the guests from the few flying flakes of snow that whirled homelessly through the bitter cold air. They stepped from the carriage upon an elegant Turkey carpet that led to the marble steps.

Every arrangement betokened a grand reception, and as they walked through the wide hall, lined with staring servants, the notes of the wedding march pealed forth from the grand organ in the music-room.

"Oh, God, if we should be too late!" whispered Mr. Lawrence to the detective.

"It seems that we are just in time," whispered Mr. Shelton reassuringly.

"Must we take Lily in with us?" asked the banker dubiously.

"Yes," was the firm reply, and at the words all three stepped across the threshold of the open drawing-room door.

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What a startling sight met the eyes of the fair young girl so strangely restored to her home and loved ones!

The room was crowded with guests, elegantly arrayed, the men in their fine black reception suits, the women in their satins and laces and sparkling jewels. Hot-house flowers were in profusion everywhere. A beautiful horse-shoe, formed with white flowers, depended from the ceiling, and beneath it Lily saw a group that seemed to freeze the blood in her veins to solid ice.

Brilliantly beautiful, flushed with love and triumph, Mrs. Vance stood there in elaborate bridal robes, leaning on the arm of a splendidly handsome young man. His face was slightly turned away, but Lily knew it was none other than her own betrothed, Lancelot Darling, who was listening so calmly there to the opening words of the beautiful marriage service read by the lips of the white-haired and venerable clergyman. At one glance she took in the whole appalling scene, and then a shriek of agony, loud, piercing, horror-stricken, broke from the lips of the stricken girl, thrilling every heart with terror.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

So wild and startling was that anguished scream that even the bride and groom sprang apart and looked toward the door in terror.

Lance saw his lost darling standing there, clinging to the arm of her father, the dark hood thrown back from her head, and her golden hair streaming over her shoulders and about her lovely face, now convulsed with pain and grief.

With a wild prescience of the truth, he rushed forward and with a ringing cry of joy caught his darling to his heart.

At the same moment the clear, full voice of the detective pealed through the large apartment thronged with wedding guests, with the suddenness of a trumpet call.

"Mrs. Vance, I arrest you for the attempted murder of Lily Lawrence, and that of Haidee and Peter Leveret!"

The detective had instantly recognized her form as that of the woman he had seen walking in the road near the Leveret house the day of the murder, and the conviction rushed upon him with the suddenness of a flash of lightning.

None who were present ever forgot the look of the guilty woman as those clarion tones fell upon her ears.

Her brain was reeling with horror, her heart beat to suffocation's verge as she beheld Lancelot clasping her rival to his heart.

When the detective's ringing voice with its dreadful accusation reached her hearing, she turned her face on him a moment, and its expression of awful horror and black despair was fearful to behold.

The next instant she threw up her arms with a wail of agony, and fell down in a writhing heap upon the floor.

The aged minister, who stood nearer to her than the rest of the guests, hastened to lift her up, though he was trembling so perceptibly he could hardly stand. [Pg 138]

As he raised the dark head on his arm and turned her face upward to the light, a stream of blood gushed from her lips and poured its crimson rain upon the stainless whiteness of her bridal robe and veil.

"She has burst a blood vessel," said a physician in the crowd, now coming forward. "She will die."

The words reached her ears as they knelt around her trying to stanch the life tide flowing thick and fast from her lips. Her dark eyes opened and stared up into their faces with a mute despair awful to behold.

She must die! That was the only triumph that was left her out of the full cup of happiness pressed to her lips overflowing but a moment ago! She might cheat the scaffold of its prey—that was all! Life with all its pleasures and luxuries lay before her just a moment before—now, darkness and the grave! Like one in a dream she seemed to recall words carelessly heard in the past that lay behind her forever beyond recall:

"The wages of sin is death!"

They gathered around her, the awe-stricken guests, with their pale, pale faces and gala attire, and looked at her dying before them with the awful stain of murder on her soul—that beautiful woman with the bridal wreath crowning her coronal of dark hair, and her satin robe deluged with her life-blood—such a beautiful, beautiful sinner!

Her haunting eyes roved over their faces restlessly, seeking, seeking for one face that was not there. *He* stood apart with Mr. Lawrence and Ada, showering caresses on the pale, almost fainting girl lying on a sofa, with her dear ones clustered round her. Mrs. Vance could not see them, but her quick intuition told her the truth, and the groan that burst from her lips brought with it a fresh torrent of life-blood.

"She wishes to see someone, I think," said the physician, interpreting her yearning look.

She gave him a glance of assent, and, with a violent effort, pronounced almost unintelligibly the name of "Lance."

Mr. Shelton, who had stood beside her, carried the message to Lancelot, but in his passionate anger against her the young man refused to go, and the detective went back without him.

"He refuses to see you," he said, with a pitying glance at her ghastly face.

The streaming blood had ceased to flow for the moment, and as the physician wiped the stains from her gasping lips, she whispered, brokenly:

"Bring Lily!"

The gaping throng parted to admit Mr. Shelton, with Lily Lawrence clinging to his arm. She knelt down, trembling, and took into her own white, innocent hand the crimson-stained one that had thrust the dagger into the gentle bosom.

Her blue eyes beamed with the soft compassion of an angel's as she looked down upon the fallen woman.

"I am here, Mrs. Vance," she said, in her sweet, flute-like voice. "I am not angry now. I forgive you everything—freely!" [Pg 139]

But Mrs. Vance pushed away the hand that held hers as if its soft clasp hurt her.

"I do not want forgiveness," she gasped, in broken, yet defiant tones. "I want—Lance. Bring—him—to me."

Silently the young girl turned away, followed by the wondering and admiring glances of all.

She came back at last, bringing with her the reluctant one for whom the dying woman waited

longingly. He bent down over her, trying to hide his horror and aversion under a mask of calmness.

The dark eyes, fast growing dim, lighted up with passion as she looked upon his face.

"I wanted—to tell you," she gasped, faintly, "that—that all my—sin—was for—love of you, Lance!"

He bowed in silence. He had no words with which to answer her passionate avowal.

"She is going very fast," said the physician, in a whisper.

Mr. Shelton bent over her.

"Do you confess your crimes?" he inquired, in a low voice.

Her eyes left Lancelot Darling's face one moment, while she gazed into that of the detective.

"You are—my—accuser?" she faltered.

"I am," he answered, briefly. "Do you confess?"

She did not answer. Her gaze had gone back to Lancelot Darling's face, searching its cold, immovable outlines longingly. The white-haired man of God bent over her gently.

"Do you confess your sins?" he inquired.

No answer. Her dying gaze was fixed on the one beloved face to the exclusion of all other earthly objects. The minister touched her arm gently.

"I pray you," he said, "do not suffer yourself to die with your unconfessed sins lying heavy on your soul."

She heard the words, and spoke faintly to her idol:

"What is it they want—of me—Lance?"

"To confess your crimes," he said, coldly. "Oh! Mrs. Vance, are you indeed guilty of all with which you are accused?"

"All, all!" she murmured, hollowly. "I tried—to kill Lily—first, you see—then when I felt safe—from detection—old Haidee learned my secret—and threatened to tell *you—you*, my darling! So I poisoned her and the old man both—to save myself. But, Lance—it was all for love of you!"

There was neither regret nor repentance in her tone—nothing but passionate love and despair. He did not answer, and she broke forth wailingly:

"Oh! Lance, do but say that—you—are sorry—that I must die! Say that—you might have learned to love me—poor me—if you had not learned—my fatal secret!"

Lance turned his head away that he might not see the agonized pleading of her eyes, and seeing that he could not answer her, the minister again spoke gently:

"Mrs. Vance, the time for human love is over with you now! Look rather to the Divine love that is able to pardon your sins though they be as scarlet. Do you repent?" [Pg 140]

"Repent!" she echoed, with a wild and chilling laugh. "Repent! No, never! Were it all to do over again, and the prize the same, I would wade through seas of blood to reach my darling's heart! All for *love*, and—my soul—well—lost!"

With the wild, defiant words, a fresh stream of blood poured forth from her lips.

There was a gasp, a spasmodic tremor of all the features, a convulsive quiver of the limbs, and the soul of the guilty woman went wandering forth into the vast arcana of eternity!

"The wages of sin is death."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

On the day that Mr. Lawrence paid the reward of ten thousand dollars to the detective, Lancelot Darling was present.

He immediately wrote a check for fifteen thousand dollars and tendered it to Mr. Shelton, saying gracefully:

"Allow me also to testify some slight sense of my gratitude, although money alone can never pay the great debt we owe you!"

"Our hearty appreciation and faithful friendship shall unfailingly pay the interest, at least," added the banker cordially.

Mr. Shelton's fine features beamed with pride and joy. He felt a pardonable elation at the wonders his skill and patience had accomplished.

He felt within himself the proud consciousness that his indefatigable perseverance had nobly earned his success.

Within a few weeks he had the pleasure of seeing Doctor Pratt and Harold Colville sentenced to the penitentiary for a long term of years, and Doctor Heath also was duly punished for his wickedness.

The testimony of Lily Lawrence and Fanny Colville filled the thronged court-room with horror on the day of the trial.

Everyone felt that lynching would not be too bad for such villains; but the sentence of the court was duly carried out, and the wretches were incarcerated in the penitentiary.

Doctor Pratt served out his sentence faithfully. When it was ended he left the shores of America for a foreign land, not, as some may suppose, to repent of his sins, but solely to hide his dishonored head from the contempt of all who knew him, and begin again under new auspices a second career of vice and crime.

Harold Colville's patience could not uphold him, as it did his colleague, the doctor. Solitude and confinement fairly maddened him.

Within a few months after the trial he hung himself in his cell, and sent his wicked soul forth into the darkness of eternity.

Fanny Colville was thus left a widow, and on producing requisite evidence that she had been the dead man's wife, inherited his handsome property.

She took possession of his wealth, feeling herself honestly entitled to it, purchased a handsome house in the city, and brought her old mother from the country to live with her, while the friendly Mrs. Mason was duly installed as her housekeeper.

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In the meantime Fanny had paid several visits to Lily Lawrence, and the two young creatures had exchanged numberless congratulations with each other on the happy termination of their mutual trials.

"I never should have recognized you, my dear," Lily said frankly at their first meeting, "if Mr. Shelton had not informed me who was coming. When I *first* saw you I could not believe that you were not an old woman. Now you have grown young and pretty."

Fanny laughed and blushed at the compliment, and it only made her more attractive. In truth, she deserved Lily's praise.

Her clear, dark complexion began to glow with health and strength. Her softly rounded cheeks had a soft tint glowing on them like the heart of a sea-shell.

She had beautiful eyes, large, dark and expressive, and her black hair, which Mrs. Mason had shingled close to her head, now clustered in short, silky rings about her brow, adding a charming piquancy to her pretty face.

Her dress, too, was always as perfectly elegant as wealth and taste could make it, so that many more beside Lily Lawrence considered the dark-eyed widow young and pretty.

Mr. Shelton was among the number of those who agreed with Lily.

The forlorn young creature whom he had rescued and cared for had begun to twine herself about his heart.

He was a bachelor, and forty years old, but his heart was not proof against Cupid's darts.

Now since Fanny Colville had come into his path of duty, pity and kindness had grown into love, strong, fervent, and abiding.

He strolled into her drawing-room one day a few months after her husband's death, and found her sitting cosily before the fire with a bit of fancy-work lying on her lap.

"I hope I do not disturb you," he said, noting her dreamy look. "You seemed to be thinking on some very absorbing subject when I entered."

"I was thinking of you, Mr. Shelton," returned the young widow, with a smile and a slight blush.

"Of me!" exclaimed the detective, observing the blush with a thrill of pleasure. "I hope your thoughts were agreeable ones."

"They could not be otherwise when I think of my kind friend and preserver," answered Fanny, giving him a gentle glance from her frank, dark eyes. "Oh, Mr. Shelton, when I think of myself as I was when you discovered me in that loathsome dungeon, starving and freezing in my wretched rags, and delivered me from my bonds—when I remember that and contrast it with my present happy lot, I feel that I can never repay the great debt of gratitude I owe you."

"I fear," he said, at length, "that you overestimate the value of the service I did you, Mrs. Colville. It is true, I suppose that I saved your life, but what then? Life to many is not as great a boon that they would thank one for saving it."

"Ah, but they are misanthropic," returned Fanny, brightly. "Life to me, Mr. Shelton, is a great boon. I love to live! I love to feel the warm blood rushing through my veins with the ardor of youth and hope. I love to feel my pulses bounding with life's fitful fever. Oh, Mr. Shelton, can I do nothing to show my gratitude for all you have done for me?"

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The detective drew nearer and took her soft, warm hand impulsively in his own.

"Yes, dear Fanny," he said, his deep, manly voice trembling with emotion. "Give me the life I saved for my reward. Give me your own sweet self for the day-star of my future. Be my wife!"

Blushing and startled, Fanny looked up into his face, but her eyes drooped swiftly before the great tenderness in his.

The next moment she laid both hands in his and whispered, between April smiles and tears:

"Take me if I can make you happy. I ask no brighter fate."

CHAPTER XL.

It was the close of New Year's Day, and Lily and Ada Lawrence stood together in the grand drawing-room, their arms fondly interlaced, the glow of firelight and gaslight shining down like a blessing on their golden heads.

Ada was perfectly lovely in an elegant costume of white cashmere and blue brocaded silk. The only ornaments of her fair girlish beauty were knots of fragrant blue and white violets.

"My darling sister," said the younger girl affectionately, "you look very weary. Sit down here in this comfortable arm-chair and rest."

She drew forward the chair as she spoke, but before Lily could seat herself two more visitors were announced. They were Lancelot Darling and Philip St. John.

Lancelot's friend was duly presented to Lily, and after a little friendly chatter Lance stole away with his darling to the quiet library.

"My dearest, I am very selfish," he said to her fondly. "I want you all to myself, that I may look at you, listen to you, and feel that my happiness is real, and not a dream from which I may awaken to the pangs of bereavement!"

They sat down together on a low divan before the glowing fire. Lancelot drew the golden head down upon his breast and pressed passionate, lingering kisses on the sweet red lips of his long-lost darling.

"My darling," he whispered, presently, "our wedding-day has been long deferred, When shall I have the happiness of claiming you before all the world?"

"Papa and Ada could not bear to give me up yet," said Lily, smiling at his eagerness.

"I do not want to be selfish, love," he said; "I know you wish to stay with them a little longer, and I know how hard it would be to them to give you up now. But you must pity my loneliness and come to me soon."

"I want to get my roses back first," she answered, demurely. "I am so weak and weary from all that I have suffered that I should be a pale and faded bride if I came to you now. You must wait, dear Lance, until I grow strong and well again before I don the bridal veil." [Pg 143]

"How long must I wait, then?" he inquired.

"Till the roses come again," she answered; "you know how I love the summer, with its beautiful sunshine and fragrant flowers. I should like for the happiest event of my life to be associated with the sweetest month in the year. Let it be in June."

Lance was beginning a passionate protest when the door opened and Mr. Lawrence entered.

The banker looked very bright and happy as his eyes fell on the handsome pair before him.

"Here, papa," said Lily, making room for him beside her; "I am very glad you have come, for I think Lance was just about to find fault with me."

"On what pretext?" inquired her father, kissing her sweet, upturned lips.

"For cruelty," said Lance, promptly. "She actually intends to defer our marriage until June."

"Soon enough," said the banker, laughing at the young man's impatience. "You must leave us our darling yet awhile, Lance. Come and see her every day if you choose, my boy, but do not persuade her to leave us yet. It will be hard to give her up, even to you."

When the beautiful "month of roses" came round again, Mr. Lawrence had to lose both his lovely daughters.

Philip St. John had wooed and won the beautiful, girlish Ada, and Lily's bridal day was to be hers also.

Once again Lily stood in her old familiar chamber, with the robes of satin and lace trailing over the velvet carpet, and the snowy mist of the bridal veil hiding the blushes that came and went on her lovely face.

"There is no one to envy your happiness now, Lily," said Ada, as she clasped the pearl necklace around her sister's snowy neck. "That dreadful woman is dead!"

"It is so cruel a thing to remember, dear; let us try to forget the sin, and forgive the sinner!"

"Amen!" said Ada, solemnly.

Mr. Lawrence came in, and kissed and blessed them with a sadness on his face that he could not wholly hide. The only alleviation to the sorrow of that hour was the knowledge that he was giving the happiness of his beloved children into the keeping of "good men and true."

"Papa, you must not forget what I told you once before," whispered Lily, through April tears and smiles. "You will not lose your daughters; you will only gain two sons."

Lily was to go to a beautiful home on Fifth avenue, close to that of her father. Lancelot had been

busy for months preparing his splendid mansion for the home-coming of his bride, and now it only awaited the sunshine of her presence to become an earthly Eden. [Pg 144]

Ada and her husband were to live with the banker. His great house would be so lonely, the old man pleaded, with both his darlings gone. So they yielded to his wish and promised to make his house their home as long as he lived.

The grand portals of Trinity Church opened wide to admit the two lovely brides.

New York had never seen a grander marriage, nor brides so lovely, nor bridegrooms more gallant and handsome. Trinity was thronged with their friends, and the pavements outside were crowded with interested spectators. No marriage had excited so much interest for years as that of the lovely girl whose romantic story was known far and wide.

"She is beautiful as a dream," they whispered, when the first bride passed over the flower-strewn pavement to the church steps. "And the sister is equally lovely," they cried, rapturously, when the trembling Ada followed after her.

"God bless them both!" whispered a good woman who had a prominent seat in the church.

It was Mrs. Mason, the kind soul whom Lily had not forgotten when her wedding cards were issued to her friends.

So amid good wishes and blessings the fair brides passed up the stately aisle on the arms of their father, followed by a score of lovely bridesmaids in snowy flower-bedecked robes. At the altar they were met by Lancelot and Philip, and then, above the pealing notes of the wedding march, the minister's voice arose in the beautiful words of the marriage service.

Silence brooded over the throng softly as the wings of a dove, while the holy, reverent words filled the church. In the stillness the sweet responses of the brides even were distinctly audible. The rings were slipped upon their fingers, the solemn words of the benediction were spoken, and then, with the sweet strains of music echoing above their heads, the fragrance of flowers beneath their feet, and the tender blessings of friends around them, the two beautiful brides, with their chosen mates, went forth with smiles to the future that lay beaming in the sunshine of love and happiness.

[THE END.]



QUEENIE'S TERRIBLE SECRET

OR,

A Young Girl's Strange Fate.

By MRS. ALEX. McVEIGH MILLER.

[Pg 1]

CHAPTER I.

"There is positively not a dollar left to buy a dress for Queenie and yet she *will* insist upon going to the ball. Could you let me have your old green silk to make over for her, Sydney?"

The small figure perched on the top of a large Saratoga trunk sprang down upon the floor, and stamped her foot so vehemently that the blue satin bow flew off from her tiny slipper.

"Wear Sydney's old green silk to the ball!" cried Queenie, indignantly. "Indeed I *won't*, mamma, I will stay at home first!"

"The best place for you," said her sister, Sydney, calmly. "I see no use in taking a child like you to Mrs. Kirk's grand ball."

"A child, indeed," flashed the younger sister, with a pout of her rosebud lips. "I am as tall as you, Syd, and I was seventeen yesterday. It's real mean to call me a child and leave me at home every time I get invited out. I know why it is, though. It's because mamma spends every dollar papa gives her decking out you and Georgie, and there's never a decent thing left for me to wear."

"It is because you are too pretty, my dear," laughed her father, who had entered the dressing-room unnoticed. "The girls keep you back because they are afraid you will cut them out with their fine beaux."

Sydney and Georgina flushed angrily and muttered that it wasn't so, and that papa ought to be ashamed of himself—it was all his fault that Queenie was setting herself up for a woman so fast

when he couldn't afford to dress the two that were already grown decently enough for the position they had to fill in society.

The poor, worried mother, having been so quickly snubbed on the subject of the old green silk, looked on and said nothing.

"I give you every cent I can spare from my business, girls," said Mr. Lyle, in a vexed tone, "and this time I strained a point and pinched myself in order that little Queenie might have a new dress and go to the ball, too."

"But they have spent every cent upon themselves!" cried pretty little Queenie with the tears of vexation standing in her pansy-blue eyes. "The dressing-room is littered all over with their finery yet they want me to wear that horrid green silk of Syd's! A pretty fright I should look!"

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"Never mind, dear, you can stay at home with your old papa. Your time will come after awhile when the girls are married and out of the way," said her father kindly, as he drew his arm about her. "Maybe it is true that I have spoiled you, dear, and that you are too young to go to such a grand ball."

"No, I am not, papa. I am quite old enough, and I know how to dance, and I love to dance, and I *will* go to the ball," exclaimed the pretty, willful little creature, with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes.

"But, Queenie, what on earth will you wear?" asked the poor, tired mother, who was quite worn out with the worry of keeping herself and her two elder girls well-dressed. "I have no money to give you a new dress."

Queenie stood meditating, with her head perched on one side like a little bird, her slender, arched brows puckered into a thoughtful frown.

"I'll tell you," said she at length, "I shall sell my painted fan—the white satin one that Uncle Rob sent me from Paris. It is worth fifteen dollars at least, and I can certainly get five for it. Five dollars will buy lots of white tarleton, and I can make the dress myself. There are plenty of flowers in the garden, so you see I can make a toilet for the ball," she added, half laughing.

"Sell Uncle Rob's gift!" cried mamma and the girls in concert.

"Necessity knows no law!" answered Queenie, dancing out of the room to avoid their remonstrances.

"Mr. Lyle, you really should not allow her to sell her uncle's beautiful gift!" exclaimed Mrs. Lyle, in a vexed tone.

"I certainly shall not try to prevent her," answered her husband, rather shortly. "If you had acted fairly by her and divided the money I gave you for the three girls she need not have been driven to such straits as to sell her pretty fan. Why, I gave you a hundred dollars, and she only wants five for her dress. You might have spared her that small pittance!"

"I did not think she would be contented with such a shabby dress," muttered Mrs. Lyle.

"Queenie only wants to enjoy herself," said the fond father. "She will be as beautiful and as happy in her five-dollar tarleton as Georgie and Sydney in their elegant silks."

CHAPTER II.

Full of her suddenly conceived purpose, Queenie Lyle went to her room, attired herself in a neat walking-suit, and tied a blue tissue veil over her luxuriant golden ringlets.

Then carefully wrapping a paper about the box that held her painted fan, she set forth upon her errand, feeling sorry that she must part with the elegant trifle, yet determined to sacrifice it rather than forego the ball, which to her young, imaginative fancy appeared like a promised peep into fairy-land.

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In the large city where she lived there were plenty of stores that dealt in fancy articles.

She entered one of these stores, and presented her fan for the merchant's inspection.

"How much will you give me for it?" asked she, childishly, coming straight to the point.

"Did you paint it yourself?" asked the man; unfurling the beautiful fan, and gazing admiringly at the delicate leaves and flowers painted upon it by a skillful hand.

Queenie laughed at the question, and the gay, musical chime attracted the attention of a gentleman a little further down the counter—a tall, dark, handsome man, who drew nearer as if fascinated, and glanced furtively at the young girl, revealing a lovely face as fresh and fair as a flower, the eyes as dark as pansies, the cheeks as pink as roses.

She was smiling that moment, and the stranger saw two dazzling rows of milk-white teeth between her parted crimson lips, and the loveliest dimples in the world in her rounded cheeks and chin.

"No, indeed," she said, in answer to the merchant. "My uncle sent it to me from Paris. It is quite French, I assure you. I would not part with it if I did not need the money very much."

"We are overcrowded with such articles, miss," said the man, carelessly, not wishing to show his

anxiety to possess the elegant fan, "but to oblige you, and because you need the money, I will give you five dollars for it."

"Very well, I will take it," said little Queenie, and as she spoke she looked up carelessly and suddenly encountered the fixed gaze of a pair of burning, dark eyes.

Blushing crimson, she knew not why, Queenie dropped the sweeping lashes over her eyes, and taking her money from the merchant, hurriedly left the store.

"A pretty trifle—what will you take for it?" said the handsome stranger, stepping forward as Queenie went out.

"Twenty dollars," answered the merchant, coolly. "It is a real Parisian fan and worth more than that, but as I bought it so cheap I will let you have it at a small profit."

"Do you know the young lady from whom you bought it?" inquired the gentleman, as he laid down a twenty-dollar bill on the counter.

"No, I do not; but she was a little beauty," laughed the merchant, as he wrapped up the fan and handed it to his customer.

The handsome stranger bowed and hastily withdrew with his purchase. In the street he paused, and looked up and down.

Seeing Queenie's graceful little figure half a square ahead of him, he slowly walked on after her.

Little Queenie went into a dry goods store, and invested the price of her fan in a nice quality of white tarleton. She told the obliging clerk where to send the package, and dropping her veil over her sweet face, hurried homeward.

"Queenie, oh, Queenie, come in," called Georgina, as she was passing the open door of the dressing-room. "Only think—something so perfectly splendid has happened. Guess what it is." [Pg 4]

"You have been buying some more finery, I suppose," answered the young girl, seeing a large box in the center of the floor.

"Uncle Rob has sent us another box from Paris," announced Sydney, triumphantly.

"Dresses and jewelry both," added Mrs. Lyle, joyfully.

"You can go to the ball as fine as a queen now," laughed Georgina, diving down into the box and bringing out a parcel which she placed in Queenie's hands.

"It is for you," she said.

Queenie unrolled the tissue paper from the bundle and shook out the folds of a magnificent cream-colored brocade silk.

"Oh, how exquisite!" she exclaimed. "What has he sent you, girls?"

Sydney, who was a brilliant brunette, exhibited a rose-colored brocade as handsome as Queenie's dress. Georgina, a plump blonde, rejoiced in the possession of a costly azure satin.

"Uncle Rob is a dear darling," exclaimed little Queenie, delightedly.

"And only look here," said Mrs. Lyle, who held three jewel-cases in her lap, "he has sent you each a lovely set of jewels—diamonds for Sydney, opals for Georgina, pearls for you."

Little Queenie looked and admired until she was almost wild with delight. She clasped the pearls on her neck and arms, and held the rich brocade up before her, admiring the sheeny richness of the creamy folds.

"If you had only waited a little while you need not have sold your painted fan," said Georgie. "You can have this lovely dress to wear to Mrs. Kirk's ball."

"No, I cannot," answered Queenie, with a sigh. "Madame Dufarge would charge thirty dollars to make such a dress as this, and where could I get thirty dollars? No, I'll wear my five-dollar tarleton and the pearls to the ball, but I will put this lovely brocade away, and keep it for my wedding-dress."

"Only hear the child," exclaimed Sydney, who was twenty-five and unmarried yet. "She talks of marrying as confidently as if husbands grew on trees."

"They do for pretty girls like me," answered Queenie, with a saucy nod at her sister. "But, mamma, did Uncle Robbie write? Is he getting well? Is he coming home soon?"

"Ah, the best of the news is yet to come," exclaimed Georgina, who was in brilliant spirits. "We are to go out to Uncle Robbie, you and I, and Syd, and mamma, and have a continental tour with him. Isn't that glorious news?"

Little Queenie's bright eyes danced with joy.

"Mamma, is it true?" she panted, breathlessly.

"Yes, dear, it is quite true," said Mrs. Lyle, looking quite happy. "He has sent us a check, and we are to go over in the *Europa*, which sails three months from now. We are to employ ourselves in the interim polishing up our French."

"Hurrah for Uncle Rob!" exclaimed the delighted little Queenie, boyishly waving her hat around her head, "he is a perfect fairy prince. The dream of my life has been to go to Europe." [Pg 5]

"I think *you* will need to polish more than your French, Queenie," exclaimed Sydney, peevishly.

"Your manners are as rude as a school-boy's!"

"And yours are as prim as an old maid's!" retorted Queenie, maliciously, for Sydney's perpetual fault-finding was a thorn in the flesh to the petted little creature.

Sydney flushed crimson at the retort. Her years were verging so near to the line of old-maidhood that she was particularly sensitive on the subject. She now said angrily:

"Mamma, can you sit silently there and permit Queenie to address me so disrespectfully?"

Mrs. Lyle looked at her youngest daughter imploringly.

"Queenie, how often have I scolded you for aggravating Sydney? Apologize to her immediately."

Queenie looked at Sydney's tearful eyes and flushed cheeks, and her tender little heart melted at once. She crossed over and put her round, white arms about Sydney's stately neck.

"Sister, do forgive me," she said, sweetly. "I did not mean a word of it. Your manners are simply perfection, and I only wish that mine were half as polished!"

"You should cultivate yourself," answered Sydney, coldly, as she put the clinging arms away from her neck, "I am ashamed of your hoydenish manners."

"I *will* try to cultivate myself, Sydney, indeed I will," answered Queenie, innocently. "I am so young yet, you know; I have time to learn a great many things!"

Sydney bit her lip and made no reply. There was nothing she envied so much as Queenie's tender youth, and to have it thrust upon her notice like that, however innocently, was unendurable. The silence that fell was becoming awkward, when a servant entered the room with a small parcel which she laid in Queenie's hand.

"A small boy left it at the door for you," she said, as she withdrew.

Queenie stared at the parcel in bewilderment. It had a familiar look.

"Open it, my dear," said Mrs. Lyle, curiously.

Queenie tore off the paper and a box was revealed. She took off the lid with a trembling hand. Within the box lay the painted fan she had sold an hour ago to the dealer on — Street.

"What is this?" said Georgina, stooping down.

She picked up a card that had fallen from the box. Upon it was written in a clear, bold, manly hand:

"From an unknown admirer of Miss Queenie Lyle."

"Someone has sent your painted fan back to you," exclaimed Mrs. Lyle. "How kind! But who could it have been?"

"Queenie has caught a beau!" said Georgina, laughing.

Involuntarily Queenie's thoughts reverted to the dark-eyed stranger who had looked at her in the store, but she said nothing.

CHAPTER III.

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"Who is the young *debutante*, Miss Lyle?"

Sydney Lyle, coming down the long ball-room on the arm of the most distinguished man in the room, looked up with ill-concealed annoyance at his words.

She followed his glance, and saw little Queenie standing in the center of a group of admirers, fluttering her satin fan with the grace of an embryo coquette. The girl looked lovely as a dream in her thin, white dress, with its multitudinous puffings and frillings.

It was looped here and there with natural rosebuds, and she wore her set of pearls clasped round her white throat and wrists, while her golden hair rippled to her waist in a shower of natural ringlets. Anything more sweetly fair and happy could scarcely be imagined than Queenie, as she stood there, warm and flushed from the dance, and enjoying, with all the keenness of youth and novelty, the honied flatteries of the little court around her. An irrepressible pang of jealousy gave a touch of sharpness to Sydney's voice, as she answered:

"That is my sister Queenie, Captain Ernscliffe—a willful child who ought to be in the school-room this moment, but who has persuaded mamma to let her come here instead."

"Ah! your sister," said Captain Ernscliffe. "I might have known it by her beauty. She has lived near the *rose*," and he pointed the compliment by a meaning glance that made Sydney blush. "You will introduce me, Miss Lyle?"

"Certainly." Sydney answered, and pausing beside Queenie, she said, carelessly:

"Captain Ernscliffe, this is my sister, Queenie. If she should shock you by her *outré* manners, please remember that she is but a child and quite unaccustomed to appear in society."

Captain Ernscliffe bowed low over the white-gloved hand of the enchanting little beauty, and Queenie looked up at him and said, with a flash of wrath against Sydney:

"You need not believe Sydney, when she tells you I am nothing but a child, Captain Ernscliffe. I am *seventeen* years old, and I know how to behave myself just as well as any young lady of my age, in spite of Sydney's warning."

The gentleman saw that the young heart was sorely wounded, despite her quick assumption of dignity, and hastened to say, consolingly:

"I can well believe you, Miss Queenie, for I see there is but one unanimous opinion among the gentlemen. You are the belle of the ball."

Sydney passed on with the words rankling in her heart, though she knew that they were true. Among all the beautiful women present, in their cosily dresses and splendid jewels, little Queenie, with her sunny smile and her cheap, white tarleton dress, was the most admired and sought after.

The women who envied her fresh, young loveliness sneered at the simple dress, but the men—bless their ignorant hearts—did not know whether the snowy mist that floated about her cost a hundred dollars or five. They only saw that her face was the fairest, her eyes the brightest, her voice the sweetest of any in the room. Mrs. Lyle saw the sensation she created, and straightway began to lay matrimonial plans for her.

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"Sydney and Georgina are both handsome and stylish, yet they are very slow in marrying off well," she said to herself, with a sigh. "Perhaps I shall have better luck with my willful Queenie. There is that rich Ernscliffe with her now. He is a splendid catch, but then, Sydney has had her heart set on him this long while. She would be very angry if Queenie were to rival her."

In the meantime little Queenie was clapping her tiny hands and saying, in a voice full of girlish pleasure:

"The belle of the ball, Captain Ernscliffe? Oh, how nice that is! I love for people to like me, yet Syd and George said that no one would look at me in this cheap dress, that I bought for five dollars and made with my own hands."

"It is the prettiest dress in the rooms. I had no idea but that it cost at least a hundred dollars," said Captain Ernscliffe, regarding the fairy-like puffs attentively. "And your bouquet, as the ladies say, is too sweet for anything. Was it a tribute from some admirer?"

She blushed and smiled, and lifted the fragrant triumph of the floral art to her sweet face.

"You have guessed right," she said. "It was handed in at our door this evening, with the compliments of an unknown admirer."

"The fellow had fine taste anyway," laughed the captain, "both in the selection of the flowers and their recipient."

"Thank you," answered Queenie, demurely, looking up with a smile, and dropping her lashes very quickly a minute after, for something in the glance of his dark eyes sent a blush to her cheek and made her silly little heart thrill strangely.

Captain Ernscliffe only smiled like one used to such effects. He was a bachelor, and thirty years old, and women called him a flirt. Be that as it may, he was as handsome as a prince, and knew how to make women's lashes flutter down upon cheeks that blushed crimson under his glance.

"What an innocent little darling she is," he thought, to himself. "How different from her sisters, and from the girls one meets usually in society! One might well resign all the liberties of bachelorhood to win and wear so sweet a flower." "Doubtless you have woven a pretty web of romance about the unknown giver of your flowers, Miss Lyle," he said, jestingly.

She had pressed the flowers to her lips unconsciously, and at his words she started and smiled, and looked up to reply with the brightest face he had ever looked upon. But suddenly, before a single word left her lips, her aspect changed strangely and marvelously. Her cheeks and lips grew white as death, her eyes grew wild with horror, and she swept her hand across her brow as if to dispel some horrid vision. Her form trembled like a leaf in a storm, and with a wild, inarticulate cry she wavered and fell in a lifeless heap at Captain Ernscliffe's feet.

It was all so sudden that Captain Ernscliffe lifted her up and carried her through the low window out on the balcony before anyone had noticed her fall. He laid her down on a rustic lounge, turned her white face up to the air, and went and called her mother very quietly.

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"Oh! Captain Ernscliffe, is she dead?" exclaimed Mrs. Lyle, wringing her hands in terror.

"Oh! no, she has only fainted, I think. The rooms were too warm, perhaps. See, she is already reviving in the cooler air out here."

The girl's breath came fluttering back in a long, quivering sigh. She caught Captain Ernscliffe's arm and half-lifted herself without seeming to notice her mother.

"Oh! Captain Ernscliffe, did you see *it*?" she gasped, rather than spoke.

"Did I see *what*?" he inquired, rather blankly.

"The *horrid* vision that came between me and the flowers and made me faint," she answered, sitting up and looking at him in surprise.

"My dear young lady, there was nothing to see, only the dancers. You were tired and excited, and the heat overcame you. You are unaccustomed to the crush and excitement of balls, you know."

"And *you* saw nothing but the *dancers*?" she said to him, shivering as she spoke, like one in a

chill, and passing her hand before her eyes.

"Nothing, I assure you," he answered, gravely.

"What did you see, Queenie?" inquired Mrs. Lyle, coming forward.

"Oh! mamma, is that you?" Little Queenie reached out her white arms, twined them about her mother's neck, and sank on her bosom trembling and shivering, and moaning faintly: "Oh! mamma! mamma!"

"My dear, my dear, compose yourself. You are nervous and hysterical," remonstrated Mrs. Lyle. "See, you are distressing Captain Ernscliffe very much."

Little Queenie hushed her sobs and looked up at the gentleman, who did indeed look anxious and distressed.

"What was it you saw, Miss Lyle?" he inquired, gently.

"Perhaps you will not credit it," she said, lifting her white, awe-stricken face in the moonlight that flooded the balcony, "but, Captain Ernscliffe, just as I looked up from my flowers to speak to you, the whole scene of the ball faded out into *blackness*, and then I saw a vision come before me in its place."

She paused, shuddered visibly, then resumed:

"I saw a thick, dark wood before me with the rain-drops falling down through the leaves of the trees. I saw a tall man with his back to me, and close by that man was a *grave*—a shallow grave, so shallow that it could not hide the girl that lay within it, for the wind and the rain had beaten away the earth and the dead leaves with which the man had covered her. I saw her awfully white, dead face upturned to the light, and there were cruel black marks around her throat as if someone had choked her—and a purple wound on her brow."

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"My darling, it was only your excited imagination," said Mrs. Lyle, soothingly.

"Oh, no, I saw it quite plainly," answered little Queenie, with a sharp wail of anguish; "and, oh, mamma, mamma, *the face of that dead girl was just exactly like mine!*"

CHAPTER IV.

"I always knew you were a little simpleton, Queenie, but I never thought you could be so foolish and ungrateful as this! No girl in her senses would refuse the chance of spending Captain Ernscliffe's money!"

Three months had elapsed since the grand ball at Mrs. Kirk's, and Queenie Lyle was arraigned before the bar of maternal justice. Little Queenie had spent those three months in a perfect whirl of excitement, pleasure and conquest. And now Captain Ernscliffe, the irresistible, the invincible, had surrendered at discretion, and actually proposed to marry her! And little Queenie Lyle had had the audacity to refuse the honor.

"To think," went on Mrs. Lyle, reproachfully, "how we have humored and indulged you the last three months, and all for this! You have been to all the balls and parties worth going to—you have had nice dresses and laces—and we all thought you would marry off well, and rid your papa of one of his expensive daughters—yet last month you refused that rich old Myddleton! I did not care as much for that, for I saw that Ernscliffe was madly in love, and thought you would be sure to accept him. Yet now you have actually refused him, too, you wicked, ungrateful girl!"

"Mamma, mamma," pleaded Queenie, with a quivering lip, "do not be angry with me. I could not marry Captain Ernscliffe, because I do not love him."

"Then if you do not love *him* you can never love anyone," exclaimed Mrs. Lyle. "He is handsome, accomplished, wealthy; and there's not a girl I know but would jump at *your* chance, Sydney not excepted."

"Sydney *loves* him, mamma—let her marry him."

"She cannot get him—more's the pity. I wish he had fancied her instead of you," said Mrs. Lyle, sharply.

"I wish so too mamma. I am very sorry for Sydney, and for Captain Ernscliffe, too," said Queenie, with a long, quivering sigh.

"You had better be sorry for yourself, foolish girl; you have thrown away the best chance for marrying that you ever will have!" exclaimed Mrs. Lyle, angrily, for she was deeply chagrined at Queenie's willful disregard of her best interests.

To her surprise Queenie threw herself down at her feet and began to sob wildly.

"Mamma, I am sorry for myself," she moaned, faintly, "so sorry that I wish I were dead!"

"For shame, Queenie, to go into such a passion because I scolded you! Get up and stop making a baby of yourself," said her mother severely.

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Little Queenie dried her eyes at that sharp reproof and went on with her packing, which Mrs. Lyle's entrance had interrupted, for they were to sail for Europe that week, and the house was "topsy-turvy" with their preparations.

Her mother sat moodily watching her as she folded silks and laces, and packed them away securely in the great Saratoga trunk.

"What have you in that box, Queenie?" she inquired, seeing the girl put a box in the trunk with a half-conscious glance. "You look as if you were smuggling something."

Queenie blushed violently, and Mrs. Lyle saw that she trembled as she answered falteringly:

"Nothing of any importance, I assure you, mamma."

"Let me see," said Mrs. Lyle, resolutely, and she took the box from the trunk and lifted the lid. "Why, what have we here? Flowers—withered flowers! Queenie, why upon earth are you keeping these dead, ill-smelling things? Throw them out of the window."

"Oh, no, mamma," cried Queenie, blushing very much and trying to take the box from her mother's hand.

But Mrs. Lyle held on to the box and took out three bouquets of withered flowers, and three cards that lay in the bottom of the box. She read aloud:

"From an unknown admirer of Miss Queenie Lyle."

"Oh dear, dear," said Mrs. Lyle, impatiently; "now I begin to understand. These flowers, which were sent by some impudent fellow, have made a fool of you, Queenie. You have been building a romance over him, and that is why you have no eyes for better men. Tell me the truth now, Queenie; do you know who sent you these flowers?"

"How should I know, mamma?" asked the girl, evasively, and turning her crimson face away from her mother's keen scrutiny. "You see he writes himself unknown."

"Well, known or unknown, here is an end to *that* foolishness," said Mrs. Lyle, crossing the room and tossing the luckless flowers out of the window. "I did not know you were so silly and romantic, Queenie, as to carry a bunch of dead flowers to Europe."

Queenie stamped her little foot on the floor, and her eyes flashed fire.

"Mamma, you had no right to throw my flowers away!" she passionately exclaimed. "Papa would never have intermeddled with my affairs like that!"

Mrs. Lyle dropped into a chair and buried her face in her hands.

"To think that I should have a child that would treat me so disrespectfully," she sighed.

"What has mamma been doing to my little pet?" asked Mr. Lyle, entering quietly and unexpectedly, as he always did.

There was an awkward silence for a moment; then Queenie said, with her sweet face turned away:

"Mamma has been scolding me because I would not marry Captain Ernscliffe."

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"Your papa would do well to scold you also," flashed Mrs. Lyle. "After all your father's goodness to you, and your pretense of loving him so well, to think that you would throw away your chance of helping him in his old age. I have no patience with such folly!"

"Papa, *you* are not angry with me, are you?" asked his daughter, turning her soft, beseeching eyes, now swimming in tears, upon his kind yet troubled face. "I could not marry Captain Ernscliffe, papa, because I do not love him."

"Love," sneered Mrs. Lyle, scornfully. "Love is the last thing to be considered nowadays!"

Papa drew the tearful pleader down by his side on the lounge, and smoothed away the disheveled golden ringlets from the flushed little face.

"No, dear, I am not angry with you," he said. "It is true that my business affairs are tottering on the verge of failure, and if you had accepted the captain he might have helped me to tide over the crisis, but I would not have you sacrifice yourself, my pet, for I would be loth to part from you even if you went willingly and happily to another home. But let us hope for the best. Now that your Uncle Rob is about to take my expensive family off my hands for a year, I may be able to save some money and get straight again."

Three days later Mrs. Lyle and her three fair and charming daughters stood on the deck of the *Europa* bound for their long and anxiously anticipated continental tour.

CHAPTER V.

"How I miss them all," Mr. Lyle said to himself often and often in the long year while his family were absent, and he went home every night to his solitary supper and lonely newspaper. "I would give anything to see my little Queenie, or even to get a letter from her. Strange that she does not write to me. And mamma, too, in her brief letters never says a word about Queenie, though she must know that I want to hear something about my little one. She always says that the girls are well and enjoying themselves, but she never goes into particulars."

It was quite true. The Lyles were traveling from place to place, and Mrs. Lyle, never fond of writing, always dropped the briefest of notes to her husband, and invariably informed him that he need not reply, for they were constantly on the wing and could not tell him where to direct his letter so that it would reach them. She spoke of the girls casually, never naming them in particular save once in her first letter when she said that "Robert was much disappointed, and even vexed at Queenie's defection."

Mr. Lyle puzzled a great deal over those words at first, and at last concluded that Mrs. Lyle referred to Queenie's rejection of Captain Ernscliffe.

Robert Lyle was a younger brother of Mr. Lyle, and had inherited a large fortune from a deceased uncle. He was an invalid, and spent most of his time abroad from whence many fine presents found their way to his elder brother's family in America. [Pg 12]

Mr. Lyle felt rather vexed that Robert should have blamed little Queenie for her course in regard to Captain Ernscliffe.

"The child is too young to be forced into a loveless marriage," he said to himself. "I hope she will marry money some day, for I know how sad the lack of it is, but I hope it may be a love-match, too."

The longing for his little girl was very strong upon him one night as he sat in his quiet library trying to interest himself in the daily paper—so strong that he laid the paper down, and rested his head a little wearily on his hands.

"It is six months since they went away," he said. "How long it seems, and how much I want to see my little Queenie. It is strange, but ever since she was born I have loved her better than the other children."

Something like a quivering sigh sounded faintly through the room. He looked up quickly, but he was quite alone.

"I am growing fanciful in my old age and solitude," he thought, and dropped his head again upon his hands.

Again that soft, low sigh went trembling through the room.

This time some strange instinct drew his eyes to the window, and he sprang to his feet with a smothered cry. A sweet, white face, framed in golden hair, was pressed against the window-pane looking at him, with dark eyes full of love and sorrow—the beautiful face of his absent daughter, Queenie.

"She has come home—my darling!" he cried joyfully, and rushed to the window and threw up the sash.

But in that moment the lovely young face had disappeared.

"Queenie, my love—where are you?" he called. "Do not tease your poor old papa!"

But silence and darkness answered him only. He went out into the garden and wandered about in the shrubbery, calling, softly.

"Queenie, Queenie!"

But echo only answered him.

He went back sadly into the house and thought over the perplexing mystery.

"She is dead," he said, at last; "I have seen her spirit. She has come to me from far-off foreign lands to bid me an eternal farewell. Oh, Queenie, Queenie, my lost darling!"

And from that night Mr. Lyle began to grow old and broken. He could neither eat, nor sleep, nor rest until he heard from his wife again.

In a month one of her short, careless epistles came to hand. She said, as usual, that the girls were well and enjoying themselves very much, and added that Georgina had caught a beau, and was apt to make a splendid match.

"She is living, then, my little pet!" exclaimed the doting old father, in delighted surprise, "and yet I surely saw her spirit face looking in upon me that night. It was a warning—or a token of sorrow."

And the burden of heaviness still clung about his heart, and the shadow brooded in his kindly blue eyes until Mrs. Lyle wrote at last that they were coming home on the *Europa* the next month. [Pg 13]

It was a dark and stormy night when the Lyles came home again. Mr. Lyle had not known when the *Europa* would be in, so they took him by surprise when they drove up to the door that night. It was verging on to midnight and the domestics were all asleep, but Mr. Lyle was still up, poring over an account book.

"This is a joyful surprise!" he exclaimed, as he led the way to the drawing-room and turned up the gas that he might look at their sweet faces clearly.

Mrs. Lyle fell on his neck and embraced him, and Sydney, then Georgina, glided forward and touched his cheek with their lips. He looked behind them for the little one whom he had thought

would be first to embrace him.

"Queenie—where is Queenie?" he asked.

Mrs. Lyle, slowly drawing off her gray kid gloves, looked at him in some surprise.

"Bless the darling—is she not asleep?" she said. "It was so late and stormy that we expected you would all be in bed and asleep."

The rain beat dismally outside, the wind howled like a demon in despair. Something of the chill and coldness outside seemed to strike to the man's heart as he said quickly:

"The servants are all asleep—but Queenie—she is with you, of course?"

"Why do you say *of course*, papa?" said Sydney. "Did Queenie come down to the steamer to meet us in this dreadful storm?"

Mr. Lyle looked bewildered.

"Sydney," he exclaimed hoarsely, "did not Queenie come home with you from Europe?"

"Why, Papa, Queenie did not go with us, you know," said Georgina, coming forward, and laying her hand on his arm. "She came back to stay with you. Is she not at home?"

Mr. Lyle dropped back into a chair, and wrung his hands like one distracted.

"My God!" he exclaimed. "You torture me with your inexplicable words. I tell you I have never laid eyes on Queenie, living, since I bade her good-bye on the deck of the *Europa* a year ago."

"My God!" screamed Mrs. Lyle, falling down upon the floor, while Sydney and Georgina looked like statues of horror, "what has become of my little Queenie?"

"Papa," said Sydney, in a trembling voice, "there is some dreadful mystery here. Queenie did not go to Europe with us. After you bade us good-bye that day on the steamer, she cried and wept, and almost went into hysterics, begging mamma to let her go back and stay with you, instead of going to Europe. She was so unmanageable that mamma consented at last, and she and her trunks were put on shore, and we went aboard without her. Did she not come home to you?"

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"No, never," groaned the wretched father, like one demented. "I have never seen her since that day. Oh, Queenie, my lost darling, where are you?"

For a moment there came no answer to the question. They stood around spellbound with horror, while a peal of awful thunder reverberated outside and seemed to shake the house from its foundations. The next moment the door was burst violently open, and the dripping figure of a woman rushed into the room.

"*Queenie!*" burst from the quivering lips of the unhappy father.

Yes, it was Queenie, but oh, how terribly changed! Her streaming golden hair, matted with mold and dead leaves, hung wet and cold over her shoulders. Her dress of dark silk was stained with great patches and wisps of dead autumn leaves. The tight bodice, open at the top, exposed her throat, which—oh, Heaven!—was marked round and round with the purple and red print of finger-marks as though she had been strangled.

Her face was white as death, showing the plainer for its whiteness a mark upon her brow above her eyes—the horrible purple print of a man's boot heel on the tender flesh, from which a thin stream of blood trickled down on her ghastly face. A fearful—fearful apparition, strangely unlike little Queenie of other days. Yet it was Queenie, for she staggered blindly forward, and panting out: "Papa, papa, forgive!" fell in a lifeless heap at his feet.

CHAPTER VI.

At little Queenie's sudden and terrible appearance Mrs. Lyle and the two elder sisters screamed aloud in fright and horror, and even the agonized father recoiled a moment from the dreadful-looking creature that lay at his feet to all appearances dead.

Directly, however, with a strong revulsion of feeling from dismay and terror to pity and tenderness, he bent down and lifted the white face of his daughter on his arm.

Her head fell back helplessly, and the wet and matted locks of gold trailed over the velvet carpet, drenching it with rain-drops. The long, dark lashes lay close upon the marble-white cheeks and no breath fluttered over the pale, parted lips to show that life still dwelt in the frame of the hapless girl.

A cry of agony broke from the lips of the poor father whose fondest affections had been concentrated on the daughter now lying lifeless in his arms.

"Oh, God! oh, God! what fearful mystery is here? Queenie is *dead*; and oh! those *horrible* marks upon her throat and brow! Someone has *murdered* my little darling!"

Again the frightened shrieks of the women rose above the dreadful tumult of the storm outside. They huddled together by the marble hearth, shuddering as though afraid to approach that dreadful-looking object that had come upon them with the face of the little Queenie they had alternately scolded and petted in the past. Mr. Lyle looked at them with a keen reproach and pain in his heavy eyes.

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"Queenie is *dead*," he said to them, in a hollow, broken voice. "Why do you stand aloof from her?"

His lips were white, and he trembled so that he could scarcely hold the still form that lay so helpless in his arms. But even as he spoke, her lips parted in a faint and scarce audible sigh, the eyelids fluttered slightly and grew still again.

"No, no, she *lives!*" he cried, rapturously. "Quick, quick! let us take her to her room and apply restoratives."

He lifted her in his arms and the women mechanically followed him as he bore her to her room and laid her down upon her little white bed. Then he turned around with the dazed look gone from his white face and a gleam of resolution there instead.

"There is some dreadful mystery here," he said, in deep, low tones. "The servants must not know of this. Let them think that she came back with you from Europe. Sydney and Georgie, you may retire to your rooms. Your mamma and I will do all that is necessary."

Frightened and weeping the girls went away to their rooms and the fearfully stricken parents went to work to restore life in the exhausted frame of poor little Queenie.

They bathed and dressed the wound upon her brow, laved the fearfully discolored throat with arnica, wrung and dried the dripping golden tresses, and lastly Mrs. Lyle removed her soiled, wet garments and robed her in a pretty nightdress. All the while the hapless girl lay still and motionless, without a sign of life save an occasional quiver of the eyelids, and a faint, scarce perceptible throbbing in her wrist.

"My dear, you are tired and overcome," Mr. Lyle said to his wife when they had done all that was possible. "Go to your room and rest. I will stay here and watch by our little girl."

Mrs. Lyle leaned her head on his shoulder and burst into hysterical weeping.

"Oh! what does it mean?" she moaned, wringing her hands. "*Where*, oh! *where*, has Queenie been this past year?"

"My dear, we shall know when she revives, if she ever does. Go now and rest," he answered, pushing her gently from the room.

He went back to his lonely vigil and watched the weary night through by that silent form upon the bed. Now and then he rose and poured a few drops of wine between the pale, unconscious lips and sat down again with his finger upon the fluttering, thread-like pulse. At length, between the dark and the dawn, Queenie opened her eyes upon his face, sighed, and murmured:

"Papa!"

He bent over her anxiously.

"You are better, darling?" he said.

"I am better," she answered faintly.

There was silence a little while after that. She lay quite still with her large, hollow eyes fixed wistfully on her father's pale and troubled face as he bent over her, holding her white and wasted hand in both his own. Everything was very still about the house. The storm outside had spent itself, and only now and then the fitful muttering of the "homeless wind" reminded one of the war of the elements that had raged so fiercely a few hours ago.

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Mr. Lyle's voice, hoarse, trembling, agonized, broke strangely upon the utter stillness:

"*Queenie, where have you been all this long, dreadful year?*"

Queenie turned her face and buried it in the pillow, and a low sob of utter agony answered him only.

Again he repeated the question, this time more firmly and resolutely.

"Oh! papa, *must* I tell you?" she moaned, without lifting her face from its friendly refuge.

"Yes, Queenie, I must have a full explanation of your mysterious absence, for I fear it covers wrong or guilt. Secrecy is seldom without sin," he answered, in a firm but heart-wrung voice.

His daughter wrung her white hands, moaning and weeping.

"Oh! papa, I *cannot, cannot* tell you," she exclaimed.

Mr. Lyle took the white hands that were wildly beating the air, and held them firmly in both his own.

"Be calm, Queenie," he said, "and listen to me. There can be no question of *cannot* between you and me! You have deceived us all and spent a year away from us. You return to us wretched and alone, with the marks of cruel violence upon your person. What are we to think of you, Queenie, if you refuse to explain the mystery? How can we receive you back with a secret, perhaps a shameful one, in your life? I must have your vindication from your own lips, my poor child. Answer me, Queenie, where have you spent this missing year of your life?"

She wrenched her hands away and looked about her wildly.

"Let me go—I cannot stay here! Oh! why did I ever come?" she wailed. "I was mad, mad!"

He laid her forcibly back upon the bed. She was too weak to resist him, and lay panting and moaning in wild despair.

"Queenie, you torture me," he said, hoarsely; "I must have the truth from you. Tell me, dear, has

anyone wronged you? If it is so, I will have the villain's heart's blood!"

She shivered and trembled where she lay held down by his strong hands.

"Too late," she moaned, in a voice half-triumphant, half-despairing. "I have taken vengeance into my own hands—I have," she broke off shivering and sobbing, with a look of awful horror in the white face with the terrible, purple print of a boot-heel on the marble brow.

"Tell me all, dear," he said, his voice sharp with anxiety and foreboding.

She looked up, trembling and shivering, and wailed out:

"Papa, be merciful—spare me, spare me!"

He made no answer. His head was bowed on his hands, his face hidden. Queenie looked at him and saw with a sudden sharp pang how strangely his clustering locks had whitened in the past year. She raised herself up and threw her arms around him, laying her cheek against his shoulder.

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"Papa," she whispered, mournfully, "look up—I will tell you all—but only to *you, you alone*, dearest and best of fathers—can I reveal the *terrible* secret that has ruined my life!"

With her cheek against his shoulder and her hand locked in his, Queenie Lyle poured forth in burning words the story of that missing year—the saddest story to which her father had ever listened—yet he made no comment, uttered no word, until she had finished and thrown herself down at his feet with the wailing cry:

"Papa, can you *ever* forgive me?"

He did not try to lift her up as she lay there. He only said in a deep, intense voice, with a lightning flash in his deep eyes:

"Queenie, you have forgotten to tell me one thing—*his name*."

She shuddered from head to foot.

"Papa, it is the only thing I must keep from you—that hated name! What matters it? Is he not beyond the reach of your vengeance?"

"True, true," he answered with a strong shudder. "Oh, Queenie, my poor child, would to God I had died before this terrible thing came upon me!"

She crept nearer him and rested her bowed head on his knee, all her glorious, golden tresses sweeping to the floor.

His heart ached as he saw that bright head lying there bowed low with shame and disgrace.

"Papa," she whispered, in a voice like saddest music, "papa, do you *condemn* me?"

He was silent a moment, struggling with the keenest agony he had ever known. Then he answered very gently:

"My poor Queenie, I forgive you." Then added in the words of the great Teacher of men: "Let him that is without sin cast the first stone."

And the first beams of the newly risen day shone into the room and crowned his gray head like a halo of light.

CHAPTER VII.

"Yes, Queenie was quite sick for more than a month after we returned from abroad. She is not strong yet, but she has promised to come down into the drawing-room for a little while this evening."

It was Mrs. Lyle who spoke, in the calmest, most composed tone in the world. She was leaning back in her chair, richly dressed in silk and lace and fluttering her fan as she talked to Captain Erncliffe who leaned over the back of her chair, tall, handsome and stately, the most distinguished-looking man in the room.

Mrs. Lyle was giving a small reception after her return, and had bidden the *creme de la creme* of society only, to welcome her home.

There were beautiful women in plenty present, and none but had a flattering smile for Captain Erncliffe, but though he smiled and chatted with all, he still kept looking over even the fairest heads toward the door for one absent face while his heart thrilled with anxiety and expectation.

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She came at last, and though he had been watching for her so long he scarcely knew her when she entered. He had expected to see a little, fairy-like creature, with a sunny smile and falling ringlets, and cheeks like pinkest rose leaves. Instead, there entered a tall, pale, graceful girl, clad in a dress of white lace ornamented with knots of purple, golden-hearted pansies. The crimson lips were set in a proud curve instead of a smile, and the dark fringe of her lashes swept so low that they almost shadowed her cheeks. Her golden hair was confined in a thick braid and wound about her head like a coronet, making her seem as stately as a young princess.

She was changed, greatly changed, from a year ago, and yet none who looked at the fair, calm face, with pride sitting regnant on the broad, white brow, would have dreamed that the pathos

and pain of a terrible tragedy had been wrought into her life and had seared her heart and soul as with fire.

Friends and acquaintances crowded around her and it was many minutes before she found her way to her mother's chair where Captain Ernscliffe still stood with his heart beating so fast that he thought she must have heard it. It seemed to him as if everyone in the room must read in his face the secret of his love for Queenie Lyle who had rejected him a year ago with all the thoughtless lightness of girlhood. But no, his face was perfectly calm to all appearance, and as the girl gave one timid, upward glance at him she thought he had forgotten or outlived the pain of his rejection.

"I scarcely dared hope that you would return home as you went," he said after the first formal greeting. "I feared some French count or English lord would claim you as his own."

She blushed, and her eyes fell until the dark lashes rested on her burning cheeks.

"I was not so fortunate as to claim the admiration of any of the nobility," she answered carelessly. "Georgie outshone us all. She is to be married to an English lord in a month from now."

"I am very glad it is not you who are to be married to him," he answered laughing, but with an undertone of sincerity.

Other friends claimed her for awhile, but by-and-bye his restless glance found her out sitting by a window alone for the moment, and looking tired and a little sad.

"You are not strong enough to stand the heat of the rooms," he said kindly. "Come out in the garden and walk in the moonlight with me."

She took his arm and they went out in the garden. It was summer, and the flowers were blooming in profuse sweetness. The air was heavy with the odor of the roses and honeysuckle. They sat down upon a rustic seat with the full flood of brilliant moonlight falling on Queenie's uncovered head and lovely white face.

"You have grown more beautiful than ever, Queenie," said her companion admiringly.

She did not answer, but he fancied that he heard a faint, quickly smothered sigh.

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Impulsively he took into his own the small hand lying cold and listless in her lap.

"It has been a year since I saw you, Queenie," he exclaimed, "but I find the old love rising in my heart as passionately as if we had only parted yesterday. Dearest, have you ever repented of your cruelty to me?"

She looked up at him, and her eyes were full of a fathomless sadness and vague regret.

"Ah! yes," she said, and her voice was almost a wail of pain. "I have repented, Captain Ernscliffe, I have been sorry often and often for my blind mistake!"

He held out his arms, drawing he scarcely knew what hope from her agitated words.

"Queenie, come to me," he cried. "Let atonement follow repentance."

But she drew back, trembling and frightened.

"I—oh, I did not mean that," she said, "I cannot—*it is too late!*"

"Queenie, do not be cruel to me again," he pleaded, carried away by the rush of his wild passion. "If you knew how I have wearied for you since you went away, how blank my life has been, you could not be so cruel! You would give yourself to me out of sheer pity and tenderness."

"But I do not love you," she said.

"I will teach you to love me, Queenie. I love you so well that I could not help winning your love in return if you only gave me the privilege to try. Say yes, my beautiful darling, and make me the happiest of men!"

She sat still with her head bowed and her hands locked together in her lap like one thinking intently. At length she said, without lifting her head to look at him:

"I do not believe I can make you happy, Captain Ernscliffe, but I will be your wife if you want me."

When the reception was over and the guests all gone, Queenie sought her father and found him alone in the library.

"Papa," she said, abruptly, laying her hand on his arm. "Captain Ernscliffe has proposed to me again!"

"You refused him, of course, Queenie," he answered, looking at her with the grave sadness that always rested on his features now.

Her eyes fell, and a crimson flush crept slowly over her features, but she answered steadily:

"*Au contraire*, papa, I have accepted him."

"Queenie!"

"Papa!"

"Why have you acted thus? You do not love him?"

"No, papa, but it will be a fine match for me!" she answered, with a hard little laugh, and a slight ring of sarcasm in her voice.

He looked at her almost angrily.

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"Queenie, I have never intended—never contemplated the possibility of a marriage for you—since—since you came back home. I took you back and forgave you, kept your secret, and forced your mother and sisters to receive you and overlook that dreadful blank year whose secret I would not reveal to them. But I cannot—you must not expect it—allow you to deceive an honest man."

"Oh, papa! papa!" she fell on her knees and looked up at him imploringly, "for sweet pity's sake, have mercy on me! Keep my secret and let me marry Captain Ernscliffe! I need another home—mamma and the girls are so cold and hard to me—I will be a good wife to him—I will indeed! He shall never know."

"Ah, Queenie, if your sin should find you out!" he said.

"It will not, it *cannot*," she said, with a shudder; "it is buried *too deep*. And I have prayed—oh, how I have prayed, papa—and God has forgiven me!"

"God has forgiven you, but *men* would not," he said.

"*You* forgave me, papa."

"Because you had been sinned against, and because I love you so dearly, and pitied you also. But, Queenie, Captain Ernscliffe would recoil from you in horror if he knew what I know."

"Papa, he shall *never* know," she cried, clasping his knees with her round, white arms, and lifting her wild, streaming eyes to his face. "I will try to make him happy; and he wants me so very much. You will only make him unhappy if you come between us."

A gleam of relenting came into his eyes. He had loved her so dearly even since her innocent babyhood, and now, despite her fault, despite the hidden tragedy in her young life, the father's heart bled for her, and sweet pity stood sentinel over her past.

"Queenie, do you think you are doing right?" he said, appealing to her honor.

Alas! her terrible wrongs and deep despair had steeled her heart against all appeals.

"Right or wrong," she said, almost defiantly, "I shall marry him, unless you tell him my secret, papa. And if you do, what good will you accomplish! You will only break his heart."

"Go, then, unhappy, willful child," he answered, sternly, "go; but if shame and sorrow come of your folly, remember the fault is on your own head."

"I accept the responsibility," she answered, with a hard, steely ring in her voice.

He turned away with a groan and went abruptly out of the room.

"She is changed almost beyond belief," he said to himself. "That dreadful tragedy has warped her whole nature and made her reckless and heartless. Unless some softening influence is brought to bear upon her she will be lost forever!"

Queenie was about to leave the library, when a rustling noise made her look around, and the next moment Sydney Lyle stepped from behind the heavy curtains at the window, where she had been an unsuspected listener to the conversation.

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Sydney looked brilliantly beautiful in a ruby-colored satin, trimmed with Spanish lace. A cluster of rich, scarlet roses were fastened in the dark braids of her hair, and diamonds blazed on her neck and arms, but they were scarcely brighter than the fire in her dark eyes as she seized Queenie by the white shoulder and shook her roughly.

"Queenie Lyle, you little wretch!" she exclaimed, in a low voice of concentrated rage and passion, "how dare you promise to marry Captain Ernscliffe?"

Queenie shook herself loose from the cruel grasp that had left ugly red marks on her smooth, white shoulder, and answered defiantly:

"What business is that of yours, Sydney?"

"You shall not marry him!" Sydney continued, passionately. "You are not fit to marry any man; but I care not whom you wed so that it be not Captain Ernscliffe."

"I shall marry no other," answered Queenie, stung into defiance by Sydney's overbearing look and manner. "I shall marry Captain Ernscliffe as surely as I live, Sydney, and you cannot prevent it."

"Can I not?" hissed Sydney, furiously. "What if I tell him to ask you for the secret of that *missing year* of your life?"

Queenie looked back at her calmly and quietly.

"You will not dare to do it," she said. "If you did I would tell him that you wanted him for yourself."

"He would not believe you," flashed Sydney.

"You dare not risk it, Sydney," said Queenie, defiantly. "As for me, I have promised to marry Captain Ernscliffe at the same hour that Georgina marries Lord Valentine, and I shall surely keep my word."

She swept from the room without pausing to listen to the reply of her infuriated sister.

CHAPTER VIII.

Whether Sydney Lyle was frightened or not by her sister's threat she made no effort to interfere with the marriage, whose appointed day was swiftly approaching. Captain Ernscliffe was a daily visitor at Mr. Lyle's, but Sydney kept her room, or was constantly absorbed in fashionable gayeties, so that she saw but little of Queenie and her lover.

But though Sydney had apparently given up the contest, she still preserved a tacit feud with Queenie, refusing to speak to or notice her in any way, and haughtily repelling the questions and remonstrances of the family on the subject.

Lord Valentine, the lover of the fair Georgina, at length arrived, and the cards of invitation were issued for the double wedding, which Mrs. Lyle had determined should be quite a brilliant affair.

Mrs. Lyle was jubilant over the prospect of marrying off two of her girls so advantageously; and Mr. Lyle, in the midst of his trouble and anxiety over Queenie, was still conscious of a certain sense of relief, for there had been a coldness and estrangement between Queenie and the other members of the family ever since her return, and the atmosphere of home had seemed charged with electricity that threatened at any moment to burst into storm. So that none, except, perhaps, Sydney, were sorry when the eventful night arrived, and the two brides were dressing in their respective rooms, Georgina attended by her mother and Sydney, and the single maid employed by the family waiting on Queenie.

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The unhappy girl was keenly conscious of the tacit slight, but she did not seem to notice it by word or sign, and after her toilet was completed she sent the maid away, saying that she wished to be alone a little while.

"Everything is perfect," she said, surveying herself critically in the mirror. "I am a shade too pale, but then they allow that to brides, I believe. Ah, me!"

She walked up and down the room, her small hands locked before her, her beautiful face as white as death, a look of deep unrest in her large, violet eyes.

There was a slight tap at the door. She knew it at once for her father's familiar knock.

"Enter, papa," she said.

He turned the door-handle softly and came in.

"I have come to see if the bride looks pretty," he said, veiling his emotion under an affectation of lightness.

"You are the only one who cares to know," she answered, with a ring of bitterness in her sweet voice.

He stood silent, surveying her with sad yet admiring eyes.

She wore the rich brocaded silk that her uncle had sent her a year ago from Paris, and which she had laughingly declared then should be her wedding-dress. Its rich shining folds trailed far behind her, and the soft folds of the bridal veil fell over it like a mist. Her wreath and the knots of flowers that looped up her dress were of natural orange blossoms, the gift of her lover. Their fragrance pervaded the room deliciously. She wore a magnificent set of diamonds, the bridal gift of Captain Ernscliffe.

Young, beautiful, elegantly attired, she made a picture on which the eyes might feast and never grow weary, and none would have guessed how heavy was the heart beating under the satin corsage, or that the fearful elements of a tragedy had been woven into that life that seemed yet in its earliest spring.

Her father looked at her a moment, then silently opened his arms, and she as silently glided into them, heedless that the bridal veil was disarranged as she laid her fair head down upon his breast.

"Papa," she murmured, with quivering lips, "*you* love me, you are kind to me in spite of—of—all."

"God bless you, my little daughter," he said, solemnly, and touched his lips lightly to her brow.

It was the first time he had kissed her since she had come back. He had forgiven her, and been kind to her, but the loving caresses that had been showered on the little Queenie who went away had never been given to the Queenie who returned. This silent, gentle kiss seemed to have all the solemnity of a farewell.

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"Papa, I feel strangely," she said, putting her hands to her brow; "my head whirls, my—oh! oh! God, oh, God, what is that?"

With a wild and ringing shriek of horror she tore herself from his arms, and stood pointing at the window with one jeweled finger, her blue eyes dark and dilated, her face transfigured with

terror.

That frightened shriek penetrated to Georgina's room across the hall. The bride and her mother and sister all made a rush for Queenie's room, apprehending some dire calamity.

They found her standing in the centre of the floor, her face transfigured with terror, her shaking finger pointed at the window, while she wailed aloud in accents of remorse and despair:

"*The dead! The dead!*"

"Queenie, Queenie, you rave!" her father exclaimed, catching her arm as she held it forward, still pointing at the window.

She turned around and clung to him, sobbing wildly:

"A ghost was there, papa—a horrible ghost!"

"No, no, dear, there was nothing—I saw nothing. Queenie. There is no one at the window," he answered soothingly.

She gave a fearful, shuddering look at the window.

"It is gone, now, papa; but I tell you I saw a ghost at the window—one from the dead came and looked at me—*his* ghost, papa," she moaned, hiding her face on his shoulder.

"Whose ghost was it, Queenie?" asked Georgina, curiously, as she stepped forward in her elegant bridal robe. "Whom did you see?"

"Do not tease her, Georgie—stand back and give her air—see, she is about to faint!" exclaimed her father, a little shortly.

The bride stepped back with a murmur of discontent. She thought it exceedingly rude in her father to snub the prospective Lady Valentine.

"Oh! for mercy's sake, Queenie," exclaimed Mrs. Lyle, rushing forward with a bottle of *eau de cologne*, "don't give way to hysterical fancies now when it is almost time for the ceremony to begin! You saw nothing at the window but the moonlight; come, come, compose yourself! Your toilet will be totally disarranged!"

She fell to work bathing the limp, nerveless hands and cold brow of the girl, while Sydney and Georgina stood coldly aloof—the bride because she was afraid of ruffling her delicate plumage, and Sydney because she would not have lifted a finger to save Queenie if she had lain dying before her.

In the midst of the tumult the maid rushed in.

"Oh! Mrs. Lyle," she exclaimed, "the company is arriving. Mrs. Preston's carriage is at the door, and Mrs. Alden's and Mrs. Howe's."

"Oh! dear," exclaimed Mrs. Lyle, "was there ever such a *contre temps*? Not a soul in the drawing-room to receive them! Sydney, you must go down, I cannot leave Queenie in this state."

Sydney curled her lip in a disdainful smile and went.

The marriage was to take place at home, and the drawing-room was profusely decorated with flowers. A beautiful arch of white flowers was arranged where the bridal couples were to stand, and wreaths and bouquets were variously disposed about the room.

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Sydney in the white heat of anger that filled her heart felt sick and faint as the overpowering fragrance pervaded her senses.

Yet she had to stand up and receive the guests and smile and talk as if it were the happiest evening she had ever known.

She had refused to become one of the bridesmaids, so when the bridal party with their long string of lovely attendants entered the room and stood before the bishop, she drew back into an obscure corner that no one might see the jealous pain and hatred in her heart disfiguring her handsome face.

Georgina was married first, taking precedence of Queenie by virtue of her own four years seniority, and her betrothed's superior rank. Then the newly-wedded couple stepped quietly back, and Captain Ernscliffe and his radiantly-beautiful bride took their place; the solemn words were spoken, the ring slipped over her slim finger, and they turned to receive the congratulations of their friends.

One of the servants came bowing and smiling into the group carrying a magnificent bouquet of white flowers.

"For Mrs. Ernscliffe," he said, presenting it, "with the compliments of a friend."

She took it into her white hand with a faint smile.

"It is rarely beautiful," she said, and lifted it to her face and inhaled the strong, sweet odor of the costly flowers.

Something more pungent than the innocent breath of the flowers entered into her brain as she inhaled the fragrant incense. She threw up her hands, and without a word or cry, the smiling bride fell lifeless at her husband's feet.

CHAPTER IX.

No one suspected the agency of the beautiful and odorous bouquet in the sudden and tragical death of the fair young bride. It lay upon the floor where it had fallen when she fell, and in the grief and excitement of the moment no one thought of picking it up. Who would have thought that death could lurk in the fragrant breath of so beautiful an offering? So the lovely destroyer lay unheeded where it had fallen, and in the morning it was removed by the servants, who saw in it only a withered bouquet that littered the rich carpet.

But its mission was accomplished, and when Lawrence Ernscliffe lifting the drooping head of his new-made bride, he saw only the marble mask of death on that peerless face that a moment ago was wreathed in smiles. But he could not believe it, and when the physician who was hastily summoned gave the verdict so often wrongly given in cases of sudden death, that heart-disease had caused the calamity, the groan of agony that broke from the strong man's lips was heart-rending.

"She cannot be *dead!*" he cried, falling on his knees and clasping the beautiful form to his wildly-beating heart. "Oh! God, give her back to me, my darling, my own!"

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"Queenie, my little pet, my precious child, speak to me," cried the gray-headed old father, bending over her in agony.

"My daughter, oh, my daughter!" shrieked the mother, and Georgina wailed aloud, both of them forgetting their coldness and estrangement, and remembering only the little Queenie they had loved and petted and teased so long ago, and who now was dead.

Alas! they might have stood aloof as silent and as cold as Sydney stood, for all the answer they won from those pale lips that the bridegroom kissed so passionately, as though those agonized caresses could have beguiled her back to life and love again.

One by one the bridal guests stole away and left them alone with their dead, the silent domestics crept about closing windows and doors, and dimming the brilliant lights; the banquet stood untasted under the glitter of flowers and lights and silver, the music was hushed, the garlands drooped low, and the house of feasting was turned into the house of mourning. The fairest daughter of the house of Lyle lay dead.

Mr. Lyle fell down in a fit after the dreadful certainty of his loss became manifest to him. He was removed to his chamber, attended by skillful physicians, but their potent art was of no avail. Entire consciousness never returned to him again. He lay through the long hours of the night tossing restlessly on his pillow, and babbling of the dead girl who lay in the chamber above, deaf to his agonized appeals as to those of her lover-husband. They thought he was delirious, he talked so strangely.

"I knew she would die," he said. "Her spirit face came and looked at me through the window one night—it was when she was away"—a shudder shook him from head to foot—"I knew it was a token of her death! Ah! but I forget—did she not tell me it was herself that came, full of love, and pity, and sorrow, and looked at her poor papa, sitting lonely for lack of his little girl? Queenie, Queenie, where are you? Come back, dear! Papa forgives you! He will take you home again out of the cold and wet, and the dark, stormy night."

He started up and held out his arms to clasp her to his heart, but instead he encountered the form of the bereaved bridegroom who sat by the side of his bed. They had persuaded, nay, almost forced him away from the side of the dead bride to the relief of the suffering living. He sat there half dazed with grief and horror, hearing dreamily the strange ravings of his father-in-law—ravings that he scarcely heeded then, but which burned themselves into his memory, and were recalled in after years with inexpressible pain.

"Ah, Ernscliffe, it is you," said the poor father, when the yearning arms that sought for Queenie touched him instead. "Are you waiting for her, too! You must not blame her very much. She was very young and temptation found her an innocent victim. You remember the woman in the Bible who was forgiven much—because she loved much? Ernscliffe, you will not be hard upon little Queenie—you will forgive her—for she also loved much!"

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The physician tapped his forehead significantly with his forefinger.

"Do not heed him—he raves," he said.

"Queenie, Queenie," called the poor sufferer, "come back, dear, I forgive you, but you must ask God to forgive you, too. Get your Bible, pet—read what Christ said."

Sydney, standing near the foot of the bed, looked strangely at her mother. The dying man, as his restless glance roved about, saw that look, and beckoned her with a warning finger.

"Come nearer, Sydney—you were cold and hard to her when she came home—you, and mamma, and Georgie. Women are always hard to each other. How could you be so cruel to the little one?"

He paused a moment, as if for reply, but Sydney turned her pale, changeless face aside, and Mrs. Lyle was sobbing too wildly for words. He went on babbling to himself on the one theme that held his thoughts:

"She was such a sweet child—was she not, mamma? So lovely, and so loving! I can see her now with her golden curls flying on the breeze and her light feet dancing over the turf! Little Goldilocks, we used to call her sometimes. Goldilocks, Goldilocks, come, and kiss me. Papa forgives you!"

Georgina, who had stood apart weeping against Lord Valentine's shoulder, came forward and fell on her knees by the bed, thrilled to the heart by the tender recollections his words awoke.

"Oh, papa, papa," she sobbed, "poor, little Queenie!"

He reached out and laid one trembling hand on the fair head still crowned with the orange wreath. His words, though they seemed to the physicians but the purposeless ravings of a disordered fancy, burnt themselves upon her memory as if written in fire.

"Georgie, forgive her—she was more sinned against than sinning—and she went mad and avenged the wrongs—remember that when she comes back."

"Queenie is *dead*, papa," sobbed Lady Valentine.

"Dead—who said that Queenie is dead?" he asked, looking vacantly about him.

The physician came forward and forced a composing draught upon him.

"Do the vagaries of illness often assume such forms as this?" inquired Sydney's clear voice from the foot of the bed, where she stood supporting the form of her hysterical mother.

"As what, miss?" inquired the physician, politely.

"These strange and dreadful fancies about—about my sister," she answered, flushing slightly. "His words, if *rational*, would imply so much."

"But taken as the ravings of a disordered fancy they imply nothing," answered he, quickly. "He is not conscious of what he says. The shock of your sister's sudden death has simply assumed some other form to his delirious brain. Who can fathom the mysterious workings of a mind diseased?"

Sydney glanced furtively across at Captain Ernscliffe. He was listening, and his heavy, grief-filled gaze met her strange, inscrutable one. [Pg 27]

"Do not distress yourself, Sydney," he said, very gently, "it is only the raving of a mind distraught. Of course we know that our lost darling"—his voice broke and quivered over the words and he paused a moment and repeated them—"of course we know that our lost darling was as pure as the snow. She never could have sinned."

"Who says that she sinned?" exclaimed Mr. Lyle, rousing slightly from the stupor stealing over him. "Who says that she sinned? Let him among you that is without sin, cast the first stone!"

He fell back exhausted on his pillow, and never spoke again. With the first faint glimmer of the dawn the flickering spark of his life went out—went out so gently that they could scarcely tell what moment the soul was released from its earthly tabernacle.

His heart had been a tender one, more tender than is often found in man, and his youngest daughter had been his idol all her life long. Her protracted absence and her terrible return had strained the chords of his heart almost to breaking—her sudden death had snapped them asunder. Two days later they buried the two who had been so fondly united in life, side by side, in a green and quiet graveyard, away from the noise and tumult of the great, crowded city, and Lawrence Ernscliffe, as he stood by the grave, calm to all outward appearance, though pale as sculptured marble, when he turned away left all the heart he ever had to give buried in the low mound that held his lost little Queenie.

And night fell, chilly, moonless and starless. The "homeless winds" sighed over the two graves new-made in the green churchyard, and the summer rain wept over them in the darkness, as though

"The heart of Heaven were breaking
In tears o'er the fallen earth."

CHAPTER X.

But, hark! who are those that disturb the peace that broods like the wing of an angel over the city of the dead?

Under cover of the darkness and the rain, two dark, cloaked forms steal along the graveled walk and pause beside the spot where the dark, fresh-smelling earth is heaped in swelling mounds over the hapless father and daughter.

The light of a bull's-eye lantern, flashing transiently over the form and face of one, shows a tall, straight form, and features as handsome as those of a Greek god. He speaks:

"To your work, Perkins! They were so cursed long putting her into the ground that I feared my plot would fail! Hasten now. There is not a minute to lose. As it is, we may be too late!"

The man called Perkins produced a spade from under his cloak, and set to work, cautiously but rapidly throwing the earth off of one of the new graves.

"Are you sure you are right now, Perkins? I believe I should kill you if you made a mistake!" said the handsome man with the lantern, grinding a terrible oath between his white teeth. [Pg 28]

"You'll not have the chance to wreak your dev'lish temper on me," said Perkins, in a familiar tone, as if addressing one with whom he was thoroughly acquainted. "I'm sure of what I'm doing. I saw

them put her into this very hole this evening."

"Hurry up, then. What do you stop to talk for? Make your strokes as light as possible. You might be heard!" said the lantern-bearer, irascibly.

Perkins redoubled his exertions, but it seemed an age to his impatient employer before the dull, horrible thud of the spade announced that the coffin was reached.

"You'll have to help me git the coffin out," said Perkins. "It will be no easy job in this darkness and the pouring rain."

It was no easy job, as he had said, but their united efforts, with the usual appliances for such work, at length enabled them to raise it out of the grave and set it on the ground beside them. Even as they did so, a dreadful sound mingled with the sob of the wind and the putter of the rain. It was a low and smothered moan from within the coffin!

"Great God, Perkins, wrench the lid off!" exclaimed the other, excitedly. "She revives!"

Again and again the low moan echoed within the coffin, having a horrible sound from within that prison-house of death, and fevering the blood of the waiting man who swore audibly at Perkins, whose swiftest efforts seemed like the progress of a snail to his impatient mood.

"Now, sir," said Perkins, at last, as panting, and perspiring, he threw off the lid of the elegant casket, "now, sir, there's your game!"

The man flashed the lantern light forward. It shone on a beautiful white face, fixed in unconsciousness, now, the dews of horror standing thick and wet on the brow, the lips bleeding where the pearly teeth had bitten them in anguish, the small, dimpled white hands clenched in the lace upon her breast that was frayed and torn with her frantic struggles at finding herself in that awful prison. But blessed unconsciousness had supervened, and she looked death-like indeed to the eyes that beheld her.

"Looks like she might be gone, sure enough, this time sir," said Perkins, uneasily.

"If she *is*, I'll kill *you*, d—n you!" cried the man. "I'll not be balked of my revenge like that. I'll glut it on somebody!"

Even while speaking he bent down and laid his hand upon her heart.

"No, she lives; I feel her heart beat faintly," he said. "Quick, Perkins, the cloak! It rains on her."

"The rain will revive her," said Perkins, as he unfolded a long, dark waterproof cloak and handed it to his companion.

The man lifted Queenie's slight form, and wrapped the long cloak over the bridal robe in which she had been buried.

"Now, then," he said, putting a thick roll of bank-notes into the man's hand, "cover up the grave, and remove every trace of this night's work. And—*remember*, one word of *this* to a living soul, and I'll send your black soul to the devil!"

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"Mum's the word, sir!" answered the man, beginning to lower the empty coffin back into the grave.

His employer turned without another word and passed swiftly away through the rain and the darkness to the carriage that waited for him near the gates, bearing the unconscious girl in his arms.

He entered the carriage, deposited the still unconscious Queenie on a seat in a recumbent attitude, and holding her head in his arms, was whirled rapidly away through the murky night. For an hour or more he rode thus, and the carriage stopped at length before a cottage embowered in trees on the banks of a broad, dark river. He lifted his burden, stepped through the gate, and the carriage whirled away.

Hurrying up the steps, he paused on the low, ornate piazza that ran around the house, and rang the bell.

The door was opened by a neat-looking woman of middle age, who held a lamp above her head.

"Ah! it is you," was all she said.

"Yes, it is I; and I have brought back your mistress, Mrs. Bowers, as I said I would, though you *did* have the impudence to insinuate that I had made way with her," he answered, in a tone of rough pleasantry.

"You are none too good to have done it," she answered, with a certain cool and familiar impertinence.

"Confound your impudence—lead the way to her room," he said, carelessly. "She is ill and needs attention."

Mrs. Bowers went up the stairway and opened the door into a large, airy room, exquisitely furnished and draped with hangings of white lace over rose-colored silk. Costly pictures and statuettes adorned the walls, and all the appointments were of elegant design, and evidently selected regardless of expense.

Mrs. Bowers held back the sweeping lace canopy of the low French bed, and the man laid his fair burden down upon it, after removing the dark cloak.

"What ails her?" asked the woman, starting as a low moan broke from the lips of the only half-

conscious girl.

"I told you she was ill," he said, curtly. "She has been in a swoon. Get restoratives."

Mrs. Bowers obeyed him, and was soon bathing the pale face and limp, nerveless hands, with refreshing perfume.

Directly Queenie started up, passed her hand across her brow and looked about her. An expression of loathing swept across her face.

"Are you glad to find yourself in your old quarters, my dear?" asked the man, sardonically, from the window to which he had retreated.

She started as if someone had struck her a terrible blow, and looked across the room. Fear, horror, despair, were all blended in the look she cast upon his handsome, satanically smiling face.

CHAPTER XI.

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Mrs. Bowers, seeing that her mistress had revived, lighted a brilliant jet of gas and went out. Queenie did not even notice her departure so intently was her gaze fixed on the man at the window, who stood there calm, *nonchalant*, even smiling, standing the scathing fire of her beautiful eyes like a soldier.

"So," she said, at last, and there was surprise and regret both commingled in her tone, "so you are not *dead!*"

"No thanks to you, little tigress," he answered, with a fierce, yellow light flaring into his black eyes. "You did your best to further that end."

"I might have foreseen how vain was the endeavor," she retorted, in passionate anger, and quoted an old saying: "They cannot be drowned who are born to be *hung.*"

He laughed in mockery at the bitter insinuation, but years after, when the light of Heaven shone on him through the grated bars of a prison cell, and he heard outside the horrible sound of the hammers driving the nails into his scaffold, he remembered the words with wonder, and thought she must have been gifted with "second-sight," as the Scotch called the gift of prophecy.

"Now I know it was you that sent me the flowers," she said. "Why did you do it? They were poisoned!"

"No, only drugged! It was a subtle drug I bought in the east long ago—a drug warranted to produce a long and sudden sleep perfectly resembling death."

"Again I ask you, why did you do it?" she said, and her voice was full of wonder.

"I wanted to get you into my power once more. That was the safest plan to effect it. I let them bury you, and then I resurrected you."

"What did you want of me? You wearied of me before. Why not have let me go in peace?"

She tried to speak calmly, but her voice trembled with some inward resentment, and there was a passion of hatred in her dusky eyes that might have killed him where he stood. A rage as deadly as hers leaped up in his eyes in answer.

"Because I *hate* you!" he said, wickedly.

"We always hate those whom we have wronged," she replied, and her whole form trembled with her passionate indignation.

"I hate you because of that cowardly blow in the dark," he said angrily. "But for that I might have let you go free, though I pitied Captain Ernscliffe for being deceived by you."

"Villain!" she exclaimed, "I have not deceived him!"

"You have not?" he sneered. "Did you not withhold from him the story of that year which he supposed you to have spent in Europe? Did you not allow him to think you an innocent woman?"

She sprang to her feet and stood facing him, her dark-blue eyes dilating, her cheeks flushing, her small hands clenched tightly in her breathless anger. An artist's pencil might have handed his name down to immortal fame could he have put on canvas that striking scene—the beautiful room, and the man in his splendid, insolent, satanic beauty, standing before that lovely incarnation of pride and passion, with her glorious veil of golden hair falling loosely about her superb form, and the shining folds of her costly bridal robe sweeping far behind her on the rich velvet carpet.

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"I *am* an innocent woman," she said, proudly, and the light shone on her lifted face and the earnest fire in her eyes. "I *am* an innocent woman! I have done no wrong, though I am a betrayed, unhappy, and insulted victim! I have been sinned against, but I have not sinned!"

He laughed, cruelly, mockingly, insultingly.

"Why do you laugh?" she said. "*You* know that it is true. You deceived me and betrayed me, but was I to blame? I carried the marriage certificate in my breast as a precious thing! I thought it was true as Heaven, I thought I was pure as the snow! And I *am!* How could *your* sin touch me?"

Again he laughed mockingly.

"Your mind is strangely warped," he said. "But if you were innocent in the one thing, how about the blow in the dark? Was there no sin in that?"

"I deny that there was sin!" she said, with passionate defiance in her look and tone. "It was simple justice—'a blow for a blow.' You drove me mad with the horror and cruelty of all I learned! It seemed to me that I was given back from the grave to rid the world of a monster!"

"You failed," he said, derisively.

"Yes, to my sorrow," she answered. "But, ah! Leon Vinton, surely a day of reckoning will come to you. The justice of God will not always sleep. I was not permitted to take your punishment out of His hands who has said 'Vengeance is mine; I will repay.' It will come, it will come!"

"You prate of God's vengeance," he said, sneeringly, "but it suits you to forget that the preachers call him also a God of mercy, and love, and forgiveness!"

"Forgiveness!" she echoed, wildly. "Neither God nor man could forgive you, Leon Vinton! You have committed an unpardonable sin. You have broken my heart, you have tried to kill my soul, you murdered me! Can I ever forgive *this*?"

She swept back the golden waves of hair that shaded her white brow and showed him the livid scar of a deep wound beneath them.

"It is your hellish work!" she said. "You ground your cruel boot-heel into the brow your false lips had kissed a thousand times; you strangled my life out with the hands that had caressed me uncounted times! Oh, my God, can I ever forgive or forget my wrongs?"

"I will kill you the next time more surely, curse you!" he hissed, in ungovernable rage, and striding forward, he caught her white arm rudely, almost crushing it in his iron grasp. "Cease, girl, not another word!"

She wrenched herself out of his grasp and answered, defiantly:

"Let me go, then, if you cannot bear my reproaches. Let me return to my husband."

A sneer curled his thin lips as she spoke with an unconscious accent of tenderness on the words "my husband." [Pg 32]

"Your husband, as you call him, shall never know that you are not mouldering yonder in Rose Hill Cemetery. You shall never look upon his face again, Queenie Lyle."

"Mrs. Ernscliffe, if you please," she said, drawing her graceful form erect with a defiant dignity.

"Mrs. Ernscliffe, then, if it pleases you better," he answered, mockingly. "Though why you care for the name I do not know. You do not love the man."

"I *do* love him," she answered, firmly, her fair head slightly drooped, and a burning blush crimsoning her cheeks.

"Since when?" he queried, sneeringly. "You did not love him when he asked you to marry him. I heard you tell him so."

"You heard me!" she exclaimed, in surprise.

"Yes, I was a witness to that moonlight wooing. I have seldom lost sight of you since you returned to your father's house, and resumed the *role* of innocent maidenhood."

"A spy!" she said, scornfully.

"Yes, if you put it so," he answered, coolly. "We need not be particular about terms."

She looked at him as if he were something wonderful. The effrontery of his wickedness almost paralyzed her. She clasped her hands and lifted her blue eyes.

"Oh, just Heaven," she said, "why does thy vengeance tarry in smiting this monster?"

"Permit me to commend your dramatic ability," he said, with a mock-courtly bow. "Your tones and gestures would make your fortune on the tragic stage."

She sank into a chair and dropped her face into her hands. She was very weary and physically exhausted, having eaten nothing since the day of her supposed death, but she felt no hunger now, though she was faint and thirsty.

"Your tirade appears to be over," he remarked, with his evil sneer.

She looked up.

"Tell me one thing," she said, trying to speak calmly. "What do you want of me? Why did you care to get me back, when we both hate each other?"

The glare of that hatred of which she spoke flamed luridly up in his dark eyes.

"That is the very reason that I brought you back," he answered; "because I hated you, and because I intended to make your life one long, insufferable weariness to you until you die."

Again she looked at him with wonder. Her gentler nature could not fathom the cruel vindictiveness of his.

"Oh, Leon," she gasped, "you would not be so cruel? Think of all that I have suffered at your hands already. Let me go, I beg you! I am so young, I may make something of my life yet, if I can only go back to the good, true man I have already learned to love and honor."

The words seemed to madden him.

"Never!" he shouted, hoarsely, with a terrible oath. "Never! I hate Lawrence Ernscliffe—I have an old grudge against him. I will have my revenge on you both. You shall stay here, locked in these four walls, a hated prisoner, as long as you live. Mrs. Bowers shall be your jailer, and here you shall dwell, eating your heart out in abject wretchedness and misery unutterable. Do you like the picture? *Au revoir, Mrs. Ernscliffe!*"

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CHAPTER XII.

Queenie heard the key grate in the lock and sprang up, uttering wild shrieks of passion and despair, almost beside herself with the horror of her new situation.

But no response came to her frenzied screams and cries. Perhaps those gilded walls had echoed such wails of agony before, and the hearts of those who heard them had grown callous with long familiarity.

She ran up and down the room like one mad, alternately shrieking and beating upon the locked door, until she fell upon the floor, conquered by sheer exhaustion.

She lay there awhile, then sprang up restlessly again.

"I will endure it no longer," she said, passionately; "I will throw myself down from the window and kill myself!"

Full of that wild, suicidal resolve, she ran to the window and pushed up the sash.

The night was far spent, and that awful darkness that comes just before dawn obscured everything, its blackness intensified by the drizzling rain that still poured steadily down.

Queenie fell upon her knees with the rain beating in upon her white face and long, flowing hair, and clasped her little hands together as her father had taught her to do when she was but a toddling baby-girl.

"Oh, God!" she prayed, lifting her lovely, despairing face to the dark sky as if to catch a glimpse of the all-merciful Father to whom she appealed. "Oh, God, pity and forgive me for sending my soul uncalled for before its divine Maker. And, Heavenly Father, whatever of wrong I have committed, do Thou pity and pardon it. That sin with which I stand charged Thou knowest I would have died a thousand deaths rather than willfully commit it, and——"

She paused, overcome by agonized recollections, and rising, peered out into the darkness below.

"In the morning when he comes out into the garden," she said, "he will find my poor, crushed, bleeding body lying beneath this window. Surely, then, when his murderous hate has driven me to self-destruction, his revenge will be complete!"

She placed her hand on the sill of the window, and leaned forward for the fatal spring that was to end her earthly sorrows.

How slight a thing can distract our attention even in the most absorbing moments of our lives.

Queenie's hands fell upon a cold, wet mass of leaves, and a gust of intoxicating perfume blew into her face. She immediately drew back.

She had suddenly remembered that some thickly twisted vines of ivy and sweet-scented honeysuckle were trained up to her window in the second story.

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A thought, as sudden as an inspiration, darted into her mind.

Instead of dashing her brains out on the hard ground below, why not escape down this ladder of vines to love and happiness again?

"I will do it," she said to herself. "I will go back to my husband. I will tell him I was stolen from my grave, and that I revived in the fresh air, and life came back to me in its full tide. Oh! how glad he will be to see me—my poor Lawrence. He loved me so dearly!"

In the swift revulsion of feeling from despair and desperation to love and hope again she gave way to a burst of hysterical tears.

"I must not stay here to weep," she said, at length, brushing the crystal drops away from her cheeks. "I must be far on my way to my husband before he discovers my escape."

She took up the thick, hooded waterproof cloak that lay on a chair, and wrapped it around her.

"This will never do," she said, seeing the long train of her splendid dress sweeping from beneath the hem of the cloak. "I must not be seen going into the city in this plight."

She took off the cloak and tucked up the long train and pinned it securely around her, resumed the waterproof, and climbed up into the window.

"Farewell, Leon Vinton," she said. "Pray God I may never look on your evil face again!"

She took a firm hold of the thick body of the vine with both hands, and with a slight shudder swung herself forward into the darkness.

The vine swayed and creaked with her weight, and for one dreadful moment she thought she

should be precipitated to the ground to the death which a moment before she had courted, but which now, in the new dawn of hope, she shunned. The shower of rain-drops, shaken down from the leaves into her face, almost took her breath away. The wild wind tossed her from side to side like a feather as she clung to her frail support.

"I shall surely be killed," she said to herself in terror.

But no—the delicate reed to which she had trusted her existence did not fail her. She waited breathlessly a moment, then feeling that it still held secure, she cautiously slipped one hand and then the other down to a lower hold on the body of the vine. In that way, with many frightened heart-beats, with sore and bleeding hands, and at infinite pains, she at length accomplished the descent, and stood upon the ground enfolded like a mantle by the thick darkness and pouring rain.

At the gate she paused again, and looked up at one window in a wing of the house where a night-light glimmered faintly.

"Farewell, Leon Vinton," she said, again. "May the vengeance of God be swift to overtake and punish you for your awful sins!"

She opened the gate softly and stepped out into the wet and slushy road, wetting her thin, white satin slippers and silk stockings through and through at the first step. She did not care for it, she scarcely felt it, her heart was beating so quick and fast with joy.

"I am free!" was the exultant cry of her heart. "I am free—I am going back to my husband. I shall tell him how fondly I have learned to love him since I promised to be his wife. I will cling so closely to his side that Leon's vindictive rage can never touch me!"

She pushed on steadily through the mud and water, her long garments speedily becoming soaked with the watery elements and greatly impeding her ease and rapidity of motion, while her heart began to beat wildly with terror at the darkness, the desolation and loneliness of the country road.

"I am very tired," she moaned, after traveling what seemed to her a long distance. "It is five miles to the city. I must have come two miles at least. I wonder if I can hold out to get there. My feet are so heavy with the mud and the water that I can scarcely lift them. I must sit down here and rest myself one minute—only *one little minute!*"

She dropped down like a log on the grass by the side of the road, and the first pale beams of the watery dawn just breaking in the east, showed her deathly-white face just fading into unconsciousness.

CHAPTER XIII.

When Queenie threw herself down upon the wet grass in a weariness so utter that she could no longer hold her aching limbs upright, she had thought that a minute of rest would put new strength into her exhausted frame, and enable her to pursue her journey.

But exhausted nature could bear no more. Her unbroken fast of nearly three days, and her wet and draggled condition combined to weaken and depress her. Her limbs trembled under her, and when she fell down for one minute's rest, a deep unconsciousness stole upon her, wrapping her senses in lethargy. Her last conscious thought was one of agonized terror, lest ere she revived her enemy should discover her escape, and set out to trace her.

While she lay there mute and still, the dawn began to grow brighter in the east, the rain slackened, and a few pale beams of sunshine striking upon the scene, showed that she had fallen almost at the gate of a little farm-house from whose chimneys the blue smoke curled cheerfully up, showing that the inhabitants were already up and about their daily labors.

Presently a middle-aged man, in the rough, coarse garb of a farmer came out of the house and strode down to the gate, whistling a merry tune, and snapping and cracking the great leathern whip he carried in his hand.

As he stepped outside the gate his cheerful whistle suddenly ended in an exclamation of terror.

His glance had fallen on the still form lying just outside the gate, with its lovely, white face and closed eyes upturned to the light.

He stood still a moment, looking down at her in awe and consternation.

"What a pretty young un," he said, aloud, "And she's dead, I mistrust—stone dead!"

The next moment he leaned over the gate and called loudly:

"Wife, wife, come out!"

The door opened and a middle-aged, pleasant-looking woman appeared. She was flushed as if she had been over the fire, and held some small cooking utensil in her hand.

"Well, Jerry," she said, "what do you want now?"

"Come out and see," he answered.

"Well, but I can't leave the cakes," said she, intent on her housewifely cares; "they will burn."

"Tell Jennie to mind the gridiron," he said, "and do you come out to me."

She went in and reappeared after a minute, coming down the path with her homely check apron thrown over her head.

"What now, Jerry?" she said, half-pettishly, half good-naturedly. "What is lost this morning? A pity I have to mind the farm-tools as well as the frying-pans!"

Jerry, whom this home thrust betrayed to be a good-natured, shiftless fellow, dependent on his better-half's more orderly ways, looked up to laugh, then checked himself, awed by the presence of that still form at his feet.

"There's naught misplaced this time, my dear," he said; "you shouldn't be forever twitting a poor, careless fellow with his faults."

"What is't amiss, then?" she said, as she came up to the gate.

"Look *there!*" he answered, pointing down. "A poor tramp dead in the road!"

The good woman looked, started, and her healthy, red cheeks turned white.

"Oh, my Heavenly Father!" she ejaculated. "Who is't, Jerry?"

"How should I know, woman?" asked her husband. "I've but just stepped outside the gate and found her."

"And is she really, truly *dead*, Jerry?"

"She looks like it," he said. "But stoop down and feel of her heart, Jane. See if it beats."

The woman came out of the gate, and bending down, put her hand half-timorously inside of Queenie's cloak and felt her heart.

"Yes—no—yes, it does beat just the leastest bit," she said. "Poor creature! Take her up and carry her into the kitchen, Jerry. Perhaps we may revive her."

"That's like your good heart, Jane," said the farmer, as he lifted up the limp form and conveyed it into the kitchen.

A rosy, exceedingly pretty, dark-eyed girl who was busily frying corn-cakes over the fire came forward with an exclamation of surprise as he laid his burden down upon the lounge that stood in one corner.

"Never mind the cakes, Jennie," said her mother. "Come and lend a hand to save a poor creetur as your father found perishin' in the road." [Pg 37]

"What can I do, mother?" asked the girl.

"Take them muddy things off her feet, and rub the poor creetur's limbs dry," said the good woman, busying herself in removing the wet cloak, "I declare to gracious!" she said, after a moment. "How blind men are. Jerry called her a tramp. Look at them rings on her fingers! Look at that dress, fine enough for the finest bride! Is that the way tramps dress, Mr. Thorn?"

"She's of the finest quality, mother," said the girl called Jennie. "Her slippers are white satin, her stockings pure silk, and worked all over with flowers."

"Never mind the shoes and the stockings, Jennie," said her father, "but rub the little un's feet. See how cold and blue they are."

Thus adjured, Jennie brought a warm flannel cloth, and began to rub the icy little feet of the wayfarer, while her mother brought strong camphor and bathed the pale face; now and then applying a bottle of ammonia to her nostrils.

Under this vigorous treatment, and the revivifying heat of the room, the patient's heart began to beat quicker, and a faint, thread-like pulse to flutter in her blue-veined wrist.

"Poor soul!" exclaimed Mrs. Thorn. "I *do* wonder how she came to be out in such a storm? All in her party dress, too! She'd be as pretty as a pink, with her eyes open, and a bit more color in her cheeks."

The farmer now approached with a cup of warm coffee and a teaspoon.

"Belike she needs summat to warm her up," he said. "Take the spoon, Jane, and force a wee bit of coffee between her lips."

Mrs. Thorn did as requested, but with no visible result for the better. The patient still lay with closed eyes and lips, showing no sign of life, save in the tremulous beat of her heart and the faint, faint pulse of her wrist.

Mrs. Thorn still worked patiently over her, but at the end of an hour looked disheartened.

"I mistrust that this is a case for the doctor," she said; "we have done what we could, but all to no use."

"I could bring a doctor, but who's to pay him?" said the farmer. "We have no money, Jane, and Jennie's out of work."

"The lady could pay him, herself," suggested Jennie. "There's them rings on her fingers worth a mint of money."

"Yea, that's so," said the mother. "Go and get the doctor, Jennie. The lady will die, I'm afraid, if she lays in this state much longer."

"I'll go and bring Dr. Pillsbury, then," said the farmer, going out, followed by repeated injunctions from his wife to hurry.

"There's not a minute to lose," she said. "Even now it may be too late to raise the poor creetur to life again, so low as she has sunk."

CHAPTER XIV.

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Farmer Thorn stepped out of the gate, and was about to proceed on his way, when his attention was arrested by the rather unusual sight of a gentleman tearing madly along the road on a fine black horse.

The farmer was so impressed with the parting injunction of his wife as to the necessity of a physician's immediate presence, that a wild fancy that this hurrying horseman might belong to the medical fraternity darted directly into his mind.

He accordingly lifted his hand as a signal for the impetuous rider to pause.

The gentleman checked his impatient steed, and inquired with a smothered oath.

"What the deuce is your business with me? I'm in a devil of a hurry!"

"I mistrusted you might be a doctor?" said the farmer, inquiringly.

"The devil! Who's sick?" was the exceedingly civil rejoinder.

"A strange lady that we found in the road this morning. She's like to die," said Mr. Thorn.

In the twinkling of an eye the rider was off his horse, with the bridle thrown over his arm.

"Yes, I'm a doctor," he said, briskly. "Here, tie up my horse, and let me see the patient at once."

Mr. Thorn was so impressed by the confident air of the man that he readily obeyed the somewhat arrogant command, and Mrs. Thorn and Jennie were somewhat surprised at his quick return, accompanied by an utter stranger.

"I met a doctor right at the gate, wife," he explained; "so I did not go for Dr. Pillsbury."

"Here's your patient, sir," said Mrs. Thorn, turning back the gay patchwork counterpane, in which she had carefully enveloped the unconscious Queenie.

What was her surprise to see him fall upon his knees and clasp his hands, while his dark, handsome features became luminous with mingled joy and sorrow.

"Oh, my dear sister, my sweet, unhappy girl!" he exclaimed, "is it thus I find you. Oh! madam, is she indeed dead?" he inquired, turning sadly to Mrs. Thorn.

"Her heart beats just a little, sir," said Mrs. Thorn, looking at him in surprise.

"Do you know the lady, sir?" asked Jennie Thorn, a little timidly.

The man turned around, and looked at the farmer's exceedingly pretty daughter with a furtive look of admiration. Instead of answering her he spoke to the farmer.

"Your daughter, I suppose, sir?"

"Yes, sir, my daughter Jennie," said the farmer, with a glance of pride at his pretty daughter. "She's been out at service this three years, sir, but at present she's out of a place."

"Ah!" he said, politely; then turning back to the motionless form before him, he said: "Yes, Miss Jennie, I know this lady. She is my own sister. Unfortunately she is insane—driven mad by an unhappy love affair. She persists in dressing herself in white and calling herself a bride. This morning, just before daybreak, she escaped from us, and I have been seeking her everywhere. It was a fortunate chance that led me here."

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"Do you think that she will revive, sir?" inquired Mrs. Thorn, who was watching the patient anxiously.

He turned and laid his hand over the girl's heart, knitting his brows with an air of medical wisdom.

"Oh, yes," he said, confidently. "There is life here yet. She is weak and exhausted, having eaten but little for several days. Have you tried forcing a little wine between her lips?"

"No; we had none," apologized the farmer; "we are but poor folks."

Pretty Jennie Thorn blushed and looked away at her father's frank admission. She felt ashamed of their poverty before the haughty glance of the handsome stranger.

The man took a little cut-glass flask with a golden stopper from his pocket. It was full of wine, and he lifted Queenie's head on his arm, poured a few drops between her pale lips and suffered them to trickle down her throat. He repeated the operation several times, then laid her head gently back on the pillow.

"You will soon see her rally now," he said, looking at Jennie with a smile. "And now I must be making arrangements to take my poor little sister home again."

A startled cry came from the lips of the invalid.

The man's last words had penetrated her reviving senses.

She raised herself on her arm and looked about her at the unfamiliar room and the strange faces around her.

"Leon Vinton, *you* here?" she exclaimed in a piteous tone. "Oh, Heaven, where am I?"

"We are all friends, miss," said Mrs. Thorn, soothingly. "You fell exhausted by the roadside, and we took you in and cared for you until your brother came along and found you here."

Queenie's eyes flashed scornfully into Leon Vinton's face.

"Does *he* say that he is my brother?" she demanded, pointing her finger at him and looking at Mrs. Thorn.

"Yes, miss," answered the woman.

"He lies!" exclaimed Queenie, passionately, gaining strength with her anger. "I am nothing to him, nothing! He is trying to deceive you that he may get me into his power!"

Leon Vinton sighed mournfully, and shook his head as he looked around at the girl's auditors.

"Ah, my friends, I told you she was mad," he said, sadly. "You see she denies her own brother!"

"You are *not* my brother, villain!" exclaimed Queenie, angrily; and looking round at the others, she said: "My good friends, do not believe this man—I am no relative of his, and he is trying to deceive you, and get me into his power to torture my life out! Oh, sir, I appeal to you, and to you, madam, also, to protect me from this villain. Drive him forth this moment from this honest house whose pure air he pollutes with his foul presence!"

The farmer and his wife began to cast dark looks at Leon Vinton, so impressed were they with the earnestness of the girl's words and looks. They began to think it was the truth she spoke instead of the ravings of madness. The arch villain soon saw that they were inclined to doubt his word, and threw fresh earnestness and eloquence into his dramatic manner.

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"Oh, my darling, unfortunate little sister," he cried, dropping on one knee beside her, and trying to take her hands in his, "how it grieves me that your distraught mind should take me for the accursed villain who has destroyed your happiness forever—me, your devoted brother, whose whole life is devoted to your service!"

"Villain! wretch!" exclaimed Queenie, "out of my sight before I try to kill you! Oh, will no one drive the monster away?" she wildly cried.

"She grows violent," said Vinton, looking sadly around him. "I must remove her from here before her frenzy leads her to harm some of you. Have you any kind of a comfortable trap that I could take her home in?" he inquired, looking at the farmer.

"I will not go with you!" exclaimed the unhappy girl. "I am going home to my husband. You shall not prevent me! Oh, sir," she cried, turning her streaming eyes on Mr. Thorn's face, "you will not suffer this man to take me away from here! I assure you, I am no kin of his, and that he is seeking my destruction. Grant me the shelter of your roof, and your manly protection against this villain's arts, till I can send word to my father and my husband to come for me."

Mr. Thorn looked at the agonized face of the beautiful girl, and he could not believe that she was insane. There seemed too much "method in her madness." He cast a suspicious look on Vinton, and answered firmly:

"Be calm, lady. He shall not take you away without proof of what he says about you. I will protect you!"

"Oh, father! how can you presume to doubt the gentleman's word?" exclaimed Jennie Thorn impulsively, for the man's handsome face and consummate acting had quite won her young, impressionable heart over to his side.

Leon Vinton cast a grateful look upon her, throwing so much impressiveness into his look that she dropped her eyes and blushed deeply. In that moment the villain saw the impression he had made upon her innocent heart, and the simple, trusting girl was from that instant marked as his victim.

"Sir," he said, turning to the farmer, and speaking in an imperious tone, "do not you know that I can take legal means to punish you for thus depriving me of the custody of my insane sister?"

"I do not believe she is insane," said the farmer, doggedly. "Neither do I believe that she is your sister. And you can't take her away from here without proving your right."

"Well said, husband!" exclaimed Mrs. Thorn, approvingly, for her motherly heart was full of sympathy for the distressed girl, who had so touchingly implored her protection.

Queenie cast a look of heartfelt gratitude upon these homely friends, who had espoused her cause in so outspoken a way; but simple Jennie Thorn exclaimed quickly:

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"Oh, mother! oh, father! I'm sure the gent speaks the truth. The lady *must* be crazy; for how else could she be wandering in the night and the storm, in her white dress and thin satin slippers?"

"Hold your peace, girl. This is a matter for wiser heads than yours!" answered her father, rather shortly; and Jennie subsided into silence, not, however, without receiving the reward in another beaming look of gratitude from the dark eyes of the man whom she was defending.

Mr. Vinton tried another tack. Finding the farmer's sense of justice impregnable to threats, he

put his hand in his pocket, and withdrew it filled with gold pieces. He held them toward the man with a significant look.

"Put your gold back, sir," said the farmer, sturdily. "We are poor folks enough, but gold can't buy our honor!" and though he was but a poor tiller of the soil, his mien was princely as he thus defended his honor.

Leon Vinton's brow grew black as night. He muttered some inaudible curses between his teeth. Only his sense of policy restrained him from knocking Mr. Thorn down.

"What am I to do?" he said, with an air of great perplexity. "Here is my poor sister lying here needing the care of her friends, and the comforts and luxuries of her home. Yet you will not permit me to exercise my right to remove her."

"Prove your right, sir," said the farmer, firmly; "that's all I want you to do."

"And if I prove my right to remove her you will suffer me to do so?" asked Leon, after a moment's earnest thought.

"Why, of course, sir. I'd have no right to detain her after that."

"He cannot prove his right!" exclaimed Queenie, who had lain silent for some minutes.

"Have you an errand boy?" asked Vinton, disregarding the interruption.

Mr. Thorn went to the door, and called "Jotham," and the boy-of-all-work shambled in.

"Do you know a cottage on the banks of the river, two miles from here, Jotham?"

"Ya'as, sur," said the boy, broadly.

Leon Vinton wrote these words on a slip of paper:

"Take the carriage and come here immediately."

He directed the note to Mrs. Bowers, and gave it to the boy, with instructions to deliver it at the cottage by the river.

CHAPTER XV.

The time passed slowly enough to the impatient Vinton while the boy-of-all-work was gone on his mission to Mrs. Bowers. He paced up and down impatiently, now and then casting surly looks of hatred and revenge upon the honest farmer who had dared to defy him and protect his trembling victim.

Mrs. Thorn, seeing that Queenie was better and did not need her attention, busied herself in setting the neglected breakfast upon the table. She put on the smoking coffee, the hot corn-cakes, the fried bacon and eggs, the fresh butter and milk, and invited her visitors to partake of the homely fare. [Pg 42]

Leon Vinton declined the invitation by a surly nod, but Queenie, who had been watching her movements eagerly, readily signified her consent.

"I am very hungry," she declared, "for owing to the wickedness of yonder man, I have not tasted food for several days."

"Oh, my poor, demented little sister," exclaimed the hypocritical Vinton, "would to God your reason might be restored!"

Queenie only cast a look of scorn upon him as she took her place at the breakfast-table. Her heart was infused with fresh courage owing to the noble conduct of the farmer and his wife in repelling the persecutions of Leon Vinton.

She determined to get the farmer to go into town for her father, and she resolved that these kind people should be most liberally rewarded for the resolute course by which they had secured her happiness. So inspired was she by this brilliant hope, and so strengthened by the warm coffee, that a faint flush came into her cheek, and her blue eyes sparkled with excitement and animation.

"Your breakfast has set you up quite a bit, ma'am," exclaimed Mrs. Thorn, admiringly. "You don't hardly look like the same woman we took up for dead in the road."

"Your kindness has put new life in me, madam," answered Queenie, gratefully. "It is the hope of escape from this man that fills me with joy and lights up my face with gladness."

"Poor dear!" exclaimed the woman, turning a look of scorn on Vinton as he still moodily paced the floor.

"Ah, madam," exclaimed he, catching that look, "in a little while, when my sister arrives and corroborates my story, you will see how much you have wronged me in giving credence to the senseless ravings of this poor lunatic."

Even as he spoke there was a stir and a bustle at the door. The farmer hastened to open it, and Mrs. Bowers, elegantly dressed and visibly excited, rushed in. Leon Vinton sprang to meet her.

"Oh, my dear sister!" he exclaimed, "I have found our poor little one!"

Mrs. Bowers took the cue at once.

"Oh, brother!" she cried, theatrically, "you fill me with joy! What tortures, what agonies I have endured in the fear that she was dead!"

She rolled her eyes around the room, and seeing Queenie sitting near the fire, ran up and vigorously embraced her.

"Oh, my poor, unhappy darling," she cried, "how could you grieve your poor old sister so?"

Queenie pushed her off frantically like the mad creature they accused her of being.

"You are not my sister," she cried, angrily. "Go away Mrs. Bowers. You cannot impose on these good people with your shameless lies! They would not believe Leon Vinton and they will not believe you. They are friends to me, and they will help me back to my husband."

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Mrs. Bowers threw up her hands and looked at her coadjutor in villainy sadly.

"You see she is still as mad as a March hare," he answered, "and would you believe it, Alice, dear, our little sister has so imposed on these good people with her cunning insanity, that they actually believe her stories, and look upon me, her devoted brother, as a perjured villain seeking her destruction. They will not even permit me to remove my poor, demented sister home without proof of my assertion."

Mrs. Bowers looked around at the farmer and his wife with an air of indulgent pity.

"Oh, my good people, is it possible that you have been so weak as to let this cunning maniac deceive you? But no wonder—for insanity has baffled wiser heads than yours or mine. It is quite natural she should deceive you, as I do not suppose you ever saw a crazy person before. But now let me assure you that my brother has told you the simple truth. This is our own sister, and she has been a year insane. She escaped from us this morning before daylight, and he has been seeking her everywhere. I have come in the carriage, and I suppose you will not now raise any further objection to our removing her to her home."

"I will not go with you!" exclaimed Queenie, filled with terror lest the woman's specious acting should deceive the simple country people. "Every word you have uttered is a base falsehood! I am nothing to either of you—nothing! Go away and leave me in peace!"

In her wild excitement she sprang up and shook her hands violently at Mrs. Bowers. Her loose, disheveled hair, her flashing eyes, her waving hands made her look like a wild creature. Mrs. Bowers pointed at her triumphantly.

"You see for yourselves that she is mad," she said. "She is going off into one of her violent and dangerous fits, and she is just as apt as not to catch up a knife from the table there and kill one of you. Oh, for God's sake, brother, take her and put her in the carriage!"

Leon Vinton advanced to do her bidding, but Queenie fought him off like a young lioness at bay.

"Oh, good people!" she cried, "help me, for Heaven's sake! Do not suffer this villain to take me!"

"I have given you full proof now that this is my sister," exclaimed Leon Vinton to the farmer. "I warn you if you interfere with me further it will be at your peril!"

The farmer and his wife had been completely deceived by the spirited and natural acting of Mrs. Bowers. They began to believe that they had indeed been deceived into believing the artful ravings of a violent maniac.

Therefore, when Queenie called on them for help they only stood aloof, regarding her frightened, excited aspect with newly-awakened fear.

"Ha! so you are now convinced of the truth," exclaimed Leon Vinton, triumphantly, seeing that they made no effort to molest him.

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"Yes, sir, we are," said the farmer, in a conciliatory tone; "and I wish to make my apology to you for the trouble I've put you to. The young girl's acting was very nat'ral, but I see now that you told the truth about her."

"I told you so, father!" exclaimed Jennie, triumphantly.

"Tut, tut, Jen—hold your tongue, you impudent girl!" exclaimed Mrs. Thorn, sharply.

Queenie had dropped into a chair at the farmer's renunciation of her claims, and, hiding her face in her hands, burst into a passionate fit of weeping. Mrs. Bowers stood by her making a pretended effort at consoling her, but her pretended brother paid no heed to the wretched girl. He looked at Jennie's bright, pretty face, and then turned to her father.

"I think you said your daughter was out of a place, at present," he said, blandly. "Do you wish to secure another one for her?"

"Yes, we do," was the ready answer. "We have to put her out to service, for we cannot afford to keep her at home. She must earn her clothes and a bit more to help us along at home."

"I think my sister needs just such a girl about the house, to help her with the housekeeping," said Leon Vinton; and, turning to Mrs. Bowers, he said: "Do you think Miss Jennie would suit you?"

The woman stared at him in surprise for a moment, but he gave her a significant glance, and she answered with apparent frankness:

"Yes, I think I should like to have her very much."

"Very well, then," and, turning to the farmer he inquired if his sister could have Jennie, naming a liberal, but not too large compensation, for fear of exciting suspicion. He did not ask the girl,

herself, for he had already read her consent in her beaming eyes. She was perfectly fascinated by the handsome stranger, and was ready to go anywhere that she might daily see him and hear his voice.

Before the farmer could speak, Queenie sprang to his side, and laid her delicate white hand, all sparkling with jewels, on his coarse sleeve, lifting her blue eyes pleadingly to his face.

"Oh! sir," she said, "you think me mad, but for Heaven's sake be warned by me! Do not suffer your pretty, simple girl to stray into the snare this man and woman are setting for her. If you give your consent you will rue it in dust and ashes, when you see her innocence betrayed and her virtue lost."

Leon Vinton glared at her fiercely as the farmer hesitated.

"Come, decide, at once," he said. "The carriage is waiting, and she can accompany us if you are willing. Of course you need pay no attention to the ravings of that poor maniac."

Mr. Thorn looked at his daughter. Her face was bright with smiles, for the artful villain, with his tender glances, had made her believe that he was deeply enamored of her charms.

"Do you want to go, Jennie?" he asked, doubtfully.

"Oh, yes, father, if you'll let me," she said.

"She may go for a month, then, and if she don't like the place she may come home again," said the farmer. [Pg 45]

Queenie said no more. She saw that her enemies had triumphed over her this time, and her heart was almost broken. She made an ineffectual struggle to escape through the door, but was captured and borne struggling to the carriage, followed by her pretended sister and the pretty Jennie, who was falling so unconsciously into the pit spread for her unwary feet.

CHAPTER XVI.

Jennie Thorn was delighted with the beautiful furnishing and elegant ease of the cottage by the river.

Mrs. Bowers proved to be one of the most indulgent of mistresses, and the girl's position speedily became a sinecure as far as work was concerned.

At first she was given a few light tasks to avert suspicions, and lead her to think that everything was right. Then Mrs. Bowers began to flatter her, and one day she said:

"You are too pretty and refined, Jennie, to stay in the kitchen with that vulgar cook. You shall stay in the parlor and be my companion."

Nothing could have pleased the vain little creature better, for she thought that her master would respect her more in her new situation, and also that she would have more frequent opportunities of seeing him than had fallen to her lot in her menial position. She accordingly consented with ill-concealed delight.

Leon Vinton had played his cards very cleverly to win the farmer's pretty daughter.

She saw him very seldom at first, as he spent the greater part of his time in town, only visiting the cottage two or three times in the space of a week.

On the occasion of these visits Jennie saw but little of him, but some glance of his eye or tender smile made her heart beat fast and kept him in her thoughts when he was away.

But when the little maid was promoted to the parlor, Leon Vinton began to appear at home more frequently.

He lounged about the parlor with his cigar and newspaper, and chatted a great deal with his pretended sister and her pretty little companion.

Very often Mrs. Bowers would leave the room, and remain away for hours, leaving the handsome man and susceptible girl alone together.

On one of these occasions he threw away his cigar, and took a seat by Jennie. She looked up from a trifle of sewing in her hand, and then, with a deep blush, let her glance fall to the rich velvet carpet.

Mr. Vinton looked at her admiringly. Mrs. Bowers had presented her with a fine dark-blue cashmere dress, and with soft, white laces at throat and wrists, and a few bright-colored ribbons, the little country girl looked quite the lady. Leon Vinton confessed to himself that she was wonderfully pretty in her new surroundings. They suited her beauty much better than the homely, humble farm-house had done. [Pg 46]

"Jennie," he said abruptly, "do you know that the probationary month which your father allowed you with us is at an end to-day?"

She started, and looked at him, the pretty pink color fading from her cheeks, a look of alarm in her dark eyes.

"Yes, I know," she faltered, "and you—you're not pleased with me, and you're going to send me

home to father, I suppose."

He smiled at the piteous quiver in the girl's voice.

"I'll send you if you want to go," he said, laughing.

"I don't want to go. I like to stay here with—with your sister," she answered, quickly.

"Well, I don't blame you," he said. "This kind of life is better suited to you than that. You're too pretty and dainty, by George, to be working around in people's kitchens!"

She did not answer, save by a blush and a smile of gratified vanity.

"Little Jennie," he said after a moment, "how would you like to live here always, and never have any work to do—nothing to do but adorn your beauty with silks and laces, and jewels, and ride and walk and amuse yourself!"

She clasped her toil-worn little hands, and looked at him with beaming eyes, and a happy smile on her red lips.

"Oh, I should like it above anything!" she breathed, gladly.

He took her hand in his, then dropped it with a slight frown. It was hardened and enlarged by honest toil, and not pretty like her face. He was used to velvet hands, white as the lily, for he seldom descended to women in her station of life. She did not see the slight curl of his lip, for he turned his head away, and when he looked back he was smiling, and there was a beam of tenderness in his eyes.

"Jennie, dearest," he said, "you can have all that, and what is better, you can have one fond, devoted heart to adore you if you will only speak the word."

She looked up blushing and smiling.

"You mean," she said, and then paused.

"I mean," he answered, "that I will lavish every luxury and pleasure upon you if you will only accept my love."

The simple, untutored country girl did not for a moment comprehend his meaning. She turned to him with clasped hands and a face full of joyful emotion.

"Oh, sir," she said, fervently, "you know that I shall only be too happy and thankful to be your wife!"

"The devil!" exclaimed the villain to himself. "The little simpleton thinks I meant marriage."

It suddenly dawned on him that there could be no question of love with this honest little country girl without marriage.

He determined to humor her fancy.

"So you will be my wife, my sweet one?" he inquired.

"Yes," she replied, "I will marry you if father is willing."

Mr. Vinton suddenly assumed an expression of deep concern.

"Ah! my little darling," he said, as he bent down and kissed her ruby lips, "that is just where the trouble comes in. If I marry you now, as my ardent love prompts me to do, I cannot ask your father to give you to me, for our marriage must be a secret, unknown to any but ourselves." [Pg 47]

"Why so?" she inquired, looking disappointed.

"I cannot tell you the reason now, Jennie," he replied, evasively. "There are several things which would prevent our marriage if I declared our intention beforehand; but there is one reason I can give you. My sister, though she is fond of you in her way would never consent to it. She is very proud, and she wishes me to marry a rich woman of her choosing. If I openly defy her she has the power to keep me out of my fortune and make me a poor man."

Jennie was too simple and innocent to be undeceived by that transparent lie.

"Darling, after this explanation you will surely consent to a private marriage—will you not? Remember how well I love you," pleaded the wretch.

"How could we manage a secret marriage?" asked Jennie, blushing with delight at his fond words.

"Easily enough. You can tell my sister that you wish to go home and spend a week with your parents. Then I can take you to the city right away and marry you. We can spend a week traveling about and enjoying our honeymoon, after which I can send you back here, and Mrs. Bowers will think that you have been at the farm the whole time. By-and-bye, when my affairs get straight, we will declare our marriage to everybody. By George, how surprised they will be then! Now, my dear little wife that is to be, will you consent to my plan?"

Jennie hesitated a moment, then murmured a timid and joyful "yes."

CHAPTER XVII.

The summer sunshine waned, the summer roses faded, and the "melancholy days—the saddest of the year," hurried swiftly on. The chilling winds howled drearily about the river cottage, but long ere the last autumn leaf was whirled from the tall trees standing round about like giant sentinels, the fickle fancy that Leon Vinton had felt for the farmer's dark-eyed daughter had perished like the frailest flower of the summer.

"The illusion was soon over," he said to himself. "It was the briefest fancy I ever had. But that was her own fault. She was too easily won. The game was not worth the candle."

Simple little Jennie had been living in a "Fool's Paradise" ever since the mock-marriage which the deceiver had duly caused to be celebrated. Ostensibly she remained as the companion of Mrs. Bowers, and that kind lady appeared to be perfectly blind and deaf to all the strange things that went on around her.

If Jennie had not been the most innocent of women she could not have failed to know that Mrs. Bowers was perfectly cognizant of her secret, and was only laughing in her sleeve all the while that she appeared so stupid and good-natured to the new victim of her employer.

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"I am heartily tired of the little fool," he said to her one day in confidence, when the autumn days had given place to the freezing ones of winter; "I wish I could get rid of her."

"Your fancy was soon over this time," remarked Mrs. Bowers.

"Her own fault," grumbled the wretch. "In the first place she was too lightly won. In love more than half the pleasure lies in the pursuit, and 'lightly won is lightly lost.' She is changed now, also. How rosy and bright she was at first—how pale, how altered, how plain she is now!"

"She is *ill*," said Mrs. Bowers, in a significant tone.

"The deuce!" exclaimed Leon Vinton, angrily. "Why, then, I surely *must* get rid of her. But how to do it—that's the question!"

"Tell her the truth—that she is not married at all—and send her home to her parents," said the woman, heartlessly.

He did not reply for a moment, but paused to light a cigar and place it between his lips. Then he threw himself back on the lounge where he sat, and remarked indifferently:

"Yes; I suppose I shall have to do that. There will be a scene, I suppose."

Mrs. Bowers merely laughed in reply, as if he had uttered the most harmless jest. She was thoroughly wicked and heartless, and cared not a jot for the miseries of the whole world.

"Well, the sooner the better," went on Vinton, heartlessly. "I believe I'll go and have it out with her now."

He arose as heartlessly and indifferently as if he were going about a mission of happiness instead of being about to strike the cold steel of despair into the young heart that trusted him so fondly.

Jennie was sitting by a window in the parlor looking out at the great, blinding flakes of snow that whirled through the air and covered the ground with a pure white carpet.

She looked pale, but very pretty in a black dress with scarlet trimmings, and a scarlet shawl was draped about her shoulders, partly concealing her form.

As Mr. Vinton entered the room her dark eyes turned from the window and rested on him with a very fond and loving smile.

"You've come at last," she said, in a tone of joy and relief. "Where have you been all this long week?"

"In town," he answered, laconically, as he dropped into a chair near her.

A look of disappointment came into her eyes. She rose and went to his side, winding her arms about his neck, and pressing her lips on his brow.

"I've missed you so much," she said, lovingly. "I sha'n't let you leave me so long again."

"I shall not ask your leave!" he answered, sharply, and muttering an oath between his teeth as he rudely pushed her off.

The movement was so sudden that she nearly fell. It was only by catching the back of a convenient chair that she steadied herself. She turned a white, frightened face toward him.

"What's the matter?" she said. "Are you angry with me, Leon?"

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"I'm sick of your baby fondness," he answered brutally. "Have done with it."

Jennie fell back into her chair as if shot, and looked at him with reproachful eyes.

"You're angry with me," she said, plaintively; "and I had something to tell you—something very particular."

"Tell it, then," he answered, with a frown as black as night on his handsome face.

The trembling young creature before him remained silent for a few minutes, so utterly confounded was she by the unaccountable change in her husband. His manner had always been the perfection of gentlemanly refinement before. This sudden change to coarse brutality amazed and frightened her. When she spoke her voice was low and broken, and her eyes rested on the carpet.

"I waited to tell you, Leon," she said, with a scarlet blush, "that—that we will have to make some

change soon. You'll be obliged to tell Mrs. Bowers that we are married, or take me to some other place. If you don't she'll find out our secret pretty soon. We are compelled to make a change!"

"I have been thinking so myself," he answered, coolly.

"You have," she said, with an accent of gladness. "Then what do you think we had better do?"

"I think you had better go home to your mother," he answered, brutally.

She looked up at him in surprise and doubt.

"You mean to own our marriage, then, do you?" she asked, and there was a faint suggestion of hope in her tone.

"No, by George! I don't," he answered quickly.

"You don't," she exclaimed. "Then how can I go home? They would—they would think I had disgraced myself. Father would turn me out of doors!"

"I'm very sorry for you, then," he answered, coolly. "I see no other resource for you."

"Leon, I don't know what you mean!" exclaimed Jennie, in surprise and pain at his careless words and utterly indifferent manner; "you are not one bit like yourself. What makes you talk so strange to your own wife?"

She looked up at the handsome man with the tears of wounded feeling starting into her eyes, but all unconscious of the terrible blow that was to fall upon her defenseless head.

"You are not my wife!" he replied, with a dark and threatening frown.

"*Not your wife!*" she cried, turning as white as death. "Oh, Leon, you surely are going mad! What do you mean?"

"I mean what I say," he answered, curtly. "It's time you knew the truth, Jennie. You are not my wife—never have been! The marriage ceremony was read over us, to be sure, but it was only a mock-marriage to quiet your scruples. The pretended preacher was a friend of mine—the wickedest blade in town—with a soul as black as the devil!"

She sat still and looked at him, her eyes wild and frightened, her face as white as the snow which whirled past the window. At last she spoke, but her voice was low and thick, and did not seem like her own.

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"You're joking with me, Leon—you *can't* mean it?"

"I *do* mean it—it's the truth," he replied, coolly; "come, now, Jennie, don't take it hard. We've had a pleasant time—have we not? And now you can go home to your mother. I am tired of you, I confess it; and I'm going away myself—to Europe, I think. So of course you can't stay here. My sister would turn you out of doors as soon as she found you out. Go home to the farm, and there's a hundred dollars to help you through your trouble."

He tossed a roll of bank-notes into her lap with a complacent air as if his munificent generosity condoned everything.

The girl had been sitting quite still, looking at him with a terrible pain frozen on her pretty young face, but at his concluding words she sprang up and tossed the roll of notes into the fire as if it had been a serpent. Her dark eyes blazed with passion and her voice shook with rage as she wildly confronted her base betrayer.

"Oh, you devil!" she cried, "I would not touch one cent of that money to save your soul from the torments of hell! My curses be upon your head! May the Lord *never* forgive you for this cruel sin! May you die by the hangman's rope!"

The handsome villain laughed mockingly, and turning on his heel walked out of the room.

As he passed through the hallway he heard the sound of a heavy fall. Glancing over his shoulder he saw that his victim had fallen senseless upon the floor.

He walked on and entered the room of Mrs. Bowers, his housekeeper, and not his sister, as he had pretended.

"I have told her," he said, "and she has fainted—as they mostly do. I am going away now, and I shall be absent a week. You must try and get her away from here before I come back!"

"Oh! you wicked man," said Mrs. Bowers, laughing, and shaking a finger at him. "Where shall I send her?"

"To the devil for aught I care!" said the gentleman, smarting with the recollection of Jennie's curse and the burning of his hundred dollars. "I care not where she goes so that I am rid of her. But take good care of the other one. Do not suffer her to escape."

He tossed a roll of bills into her lap and walked away humming a tune. In a few minutes after she heard him riding off down the road to the city. She locked her money carefully away in a drawer, then went up to the parlor where poor Jennie lay insensible upon the floor, and sitting down in an easy-chair, carelessly regarded the poor girl whom she had pitilessly helped to ruin.

It was a long time before the unhappy girl revived from her deep swoon, but the housekeeper made no effort to restore her to life though the thought crossed her mind more than once as she sat there that she might die without assistance.

"And no matter if she does," said the heartless woman to herself. "It would be all the better for her and for all parties concerned."

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But it was not to be as Mrs. Bowers thought and almost wished. Life came back to the poor girl with a long, fluttering sigh, and the first thing she saw when she looked up was the angry face of the woman glaring down upon her.

"So you're alive, are you?" she said fiercely. "Why didn't you die and hide your shame and disgrace in the grave?"

"Ma'am?" faltered poor Jane, blankly.

"I say why didn't you die and hide your shame and disgrace in the grave?" repeated the housekeeper, angrily. "Ah! I've found you out, Jennie Thorn! I took you in my house for an honest girl, but you've ruined yourself and disgraced your poor old parents; I'll not keep such trash in my respectable home. Out of my house you go before night!"

The poor girl rose and looked out of the window. The cold winter twilight was already falling and the great, white flakes of snow still filled the air.

"Oh! Mrs. Bowers," she said, piteously, "it is night already, and where could I go?"

"You should have thought of that sooner," said the pitiless woman. "It's too late now. Go get your cloak and hat and put them on."

Almost stunned by her sorrow Jennie mechanically obeyed her imperious command.

"Now, leave here!" said the housekeeper.

"Oh! Mrs. Bowers," cried the wretched girl, "let me stay at least until morning! Indeed I am not what you think me! I was deceived by a mock-marriage, and I thought myself an honest wife until Mr. Vinton told me just now how cruelly he had betrayed me. Oh! for God's sake have pity on me, and don't turn me out to-night in the cold and the darkness!"

For all answer Mrs. Bowers caught her by the arm and rudely dragged her along the hall to the front door.

"You can't deceive me with your trumped up lies, you shameless thing!" she said. "Go now, and never let me see your face here again."

She opened the door and pushing the poor, weeping, betrayed and deserted girl out into the blinding storm, slammed and locked the door.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Over the broad, dark river, and the snow-covered earth the cold winter moonlight lay in great, silvery bars of light.

The terrible snowstorm of two days before was over. The sky was clear and starry, and no trace remained of the storm save the deep, white carpeting of the beautiful snow.

Midnight was tolling from the great bell in the city, but Queenie Erncliffe sat at her window staring out at the night with wide, sleepless eyes.

On a couch at the opposite side of the room lay Mrs. Bowers snoring audibly. She had slept in Queenie's room ever since the night she had effected her escape and her constant vigilance had entirely frustrated any other attempt of the kind.

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While Jennie Thorn had been dwelling in her Fool's Paradise, our heroine had been suffering all the horrors of imprisonment and despair.

She had heard very little of the farmer's pretty daughter since the day she came to live there, but she knew she had remained with them, for she had seen her a few times walking in the garden beneath her window, prettily, even richly dressed, and she knew too well what that meant. She felt very sorry for the poor girl who had been so deaf to her words of friendly warning.

Queenie was sadly altered for the worse since these long months of imprisonment and wretchedness. Her garments hung loosely about her attenuated form, her cheeks were thin and hollow, and her once bright eyes were dim with weeping, and looked too wild and large for her small, pathetic, white face. Her days and nights were passed in sleepless wretchedness, much to the annoyance of the housekeeper, who declared that she could not rest well while her refractory charge kept the light burning as she did the long nights through, for she could not bear to have darkness add its additional gloom to the horror of her thoughts.

While she sat and stared wearily out at the midnight scene, the housekeeper snored herself awake and began to complain.

"Mercy's sake, girl, go to bed, and put the light out. I declare I cannot sleep a wink with the gas shining in my eyes!"

"You have been *snoring* uninterruptedly for several hours!" answered Queenie, coldly. "How do you suppose I can sleep when you keep up such a noise with your breathing?"

"Well, I never!" exclaimed Mrs. Bowers. "This is the first time I was ever accused of snoring!"

Queenie did not speak for a moment. Presently she turned her head around and said, abruptly:

"Mrs. Bowers!"

Mrs. Bowers, who was falling asleep again, gave a grunt in token that she heard.

"What has become of that pretty girl you brought home from Farmer Thorn's?"

"She went away two days ago," was the sleepy reply.

"With Leon Vinton, I presume," said Queenie, scornfully.

"No, she went alone."

"Betrayed and abandoned, no doubt," said Queenie, bitterly.

"Something like that, certainly," answered the housekeeper, carelessly, and with that she turned over and went to sleep again, leaving Queenie to her own reflections.

They were not pleasant ones, certainly. The room was chilly, and she took up a shawl, wrapped it about her shoulders, and went back to her lonely vigil, pressing her forehead against the pane while she looked out into the cold winter night.

"Oh, to be out there in the night, and the cold, and the darkness," she murmured. "Oh, to feel the breath of freedom on my brow once more, and hope within my heart!"

"How lonely, how dreary everything seems," she went on. "How dark and dreary the river looks except where the bars of moonlight touch it with brightness; how ghostly and skeleton-like the trees appear, tossing their naked arms in the breeze; how weird and melancholy the silent, deserted earth looks at midnight!"

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Suddenly she started and uttered a low cry.

She fancied that she had seen a dark form darting cautiously about the garden beneath the windows.

She looked out again, and for a moment she thought herself mistaken, but directly the dark form of a man appeared from behind a tree, and skirting a strip of moonlight with cautious footsteps, disappeared in the shadows.

"What can that man be after?" she thought. "It is not Leon Vinton. Whom, then, can it be? Perhaps a burglar."

She continued to watch for him, and presently she saw him take up his station under a tree near the gate as if watching or waiting for someone.

"It must be a burglar," she said to herself. "He is waiting for his accomplice to come that they may rob the house. Shall I wake Mrs. Bowers and tell her?"

She mused a moment, still watching the dark, mysterious form lurking under the shadow of the trees near the gate.

"No, I will not tell her," she concluded. "What does it matter to me? I care not what they do. Perhaps they may enter this room, and by some means I may effect my escape."

Her heart began to beat at the thought, and the light of hope came into her beautiful eyes, brightening her whole face.

She continued to watch the mysterious figure, expecting every minute to see his accomplice appear on the scene; but the hours passed slowly by and the man still remained at his post alone.

At the first peep of dawn he went away, leaving Queenie perplexed and doubtful.

"Who can it be?" she asked herself. "It seems quite evident that he is not here for the purpose of robbery. What, then, is he after? Can it be some friend of mine?"

The thought overpowered her with joy.

"Oh, why did I not raise the window and give him some signal?" she thought.

Then she remembered that the windows had been tightly fastened down by Leon Vinton's orders, so that she could not raise them.

"I have suffered my hopes to lead my reason astray," she thought then, with sudden despair. "Of course it is not anyone to help me. No one knows that I am living except Leon Vinton and the wicked woman sleeping yonder. Papa, Lawrence—all of them, think my body lies at this moment mouldering in the grave. Oh, Lawrence—oh, papa! what would I not give to see you again!"

She little dreamed that the father she loved so fondly had died of a broken heart over her loss.

She thought of him every day and longed to see him almost as she longed to see the husband from whose side she had been torn at the very altar by the vindictive malice of Leon Vinton.

The next day from her position at the window she saw the same dark figure of a man pass up and down before the cottage at intervals at least a dozen times. A broad, slouch hat was pulled over his brows, effectually concealing his features from Queenie's sight.

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"The mystery deepens," she thought, "the man, whoever he is, evidently is watching this house. But with what object, I wonder?"

At night he appeared again, and passed the long, cold hours pacing up and down the garden until dawn.

Every day for four days the man kept up this restless espionage. It seemed to Queenie that he neither ate nor slept, so constantly did he appear at his post. She became greatly interested in the mysterious watcher.

"Mrs. Bowers," she said one night, "where is Leon Vinton?"

"In town, I suppose," said the housekeeper.

"When is he coming back?"

"To-morrow, I suppose. He has been gone a week and he said that he would return in that time. Do you want to see him?"

"No, indeed—I hope I shall never see him again!" said Queenie, shortly, turning back to the window.

The next day while she was watching the mysterious man as he paced up and down the snowy road opposite the house, she saw Leon Vinton ride up to the gate, dismount and tie up his horse.

Involuntarily she looked over at the mysterious stranger. He was rapidly crossing the road toward Leon Vinton.

A gust of wind blew off his broad, slouch hat, and a startled cry broke from Queenie's lips.

She had instantly recognized the man!

It was Farmer Thorn!

She instantly comprehended the object of his daily and nightly espionage.

He was watching for Leon Vinton that he might avenge the wrongs of his daughter.

Clasping her hands in breathless agitation, Queenie waited for the *denouement*.

Leon Vinton opened the gate and passed inside. Farmer Thorn, having replaced his hat, walked in behind him.

The next moment Leon Vinton felt a grasp of steel upon his arm.

He was whirled violently around face to face with the enraged man whom he had wronged, and felt the muzzle of a pistol pressed against his breast.

"Accursed villain!" shouted the farmer, in a voice of thunder, "thus do I avenge a daughter's wrongs!"

Queenie heard the terrible words, followed by a loud report, saw a wreath of blue smoke curling upward, and Leon Vinton fell like a log on the snowy path. With a terrible shudder she saw his life-blood spurting out, dyeing the pure snow with a terrible scarlet stain.

Farmer Thorn looked down at his victim, spurned him with his foot, and replacing the pistol in his breast, walked rapidly away. At the same moment the front door opened hurriedly, and Mrs. Bowers ran out, followed by a servant. Both of them ran screaming down the path to the side of their master.

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CHAPTER XIX.

Weakened and shocked by the terrible scene she had witnessed, Queenie hid her face in her hands and fell back on her sofa. She lay there trembling and agitated, and musing on the sudden end of the wicked Leon Vinton.

Presently the door was pushed open and Mrs. Bowers entered in such high excitement that she forgot to lock the door behind her.

"Oh!" she cried out, "did you hear the pistol shot? Leon Vinton is dead!"

A sudden impulse decided Queenie to conceal her knowledge of the fact.

She sprang up in apparent wild excitement.

"Is it possible?" she cried. "I heard a pistol-shot a moment ago. Who killed him?"

"I cannot tell you," said Mrs. Bowers. "I heard a shot, and ran to the window just in time to see a man going out of the gate. He had a wide hat on, and I couldn't make out his features."

"You shall never learn his name from me," thought Queenie to herself, for her whole sympathies were with the wronged father of the poor, betrayed Jennie.

"But there laid poor Mr. Vinton, stone dead, in the path," continued Mrs. Bowers, excitedly. "Look out of the window there, and you can see it all for yourself."

Queenie glanced out of the window and drew back with a shudder.

"Oh! it is horrible," she said. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to send for the coroner," said Mrs. Bowers. "That's the proper thing to do. I must go right away and do it. Dear, dear, who was that murderous man, I'd like to know? I'd have followed after him, and, mayhap, caught him, only I was so flustrated I didn't know what to do first. The mean, murderous villain!"

She bustled out so full of excitement that she forgot to lock her prisoner's door.

Queenie started up full of joyful emotion.

"Now is my chance!" she exclaimed, "Leon Vinton is dead, and Mrs. Bowers has no right to detain

me. I will leave this dreadful place at once."

She opened the wardrobe and took out a long waterproof cloak and hood, putting them on with trembling hands.

Then she exchanged her thin shoes for thick walking boots, and doubled a dark-brown barege veil over her face.

Thus equipped she opened the door and ran down the steps to the hall with her heart beating almost to suffocation.

In the doorway she paused. Mrs. Bowers was standing in the path by the side of the dead man, and Queenie was afraid she would attempt to detain her.

"I must make a run for it," she thought, and suiting the action to the word, she flitted down the steps and ran at break-neck speed down the path, past her living and dead persecutors, and sprang through the gate and out into the road.

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Mrs. Bowers heard the patter of her feet and the rustle of her garments as she rushed past her, and looking up she recognized the girl, and recollected instantly that she had forgotten to lock the door after her.

"Come back, you jade!" she screamed, "come back this instant!"

But the fugitive hurried on without looking back, and Mrs. Bowers in a rage set out in a headlong pace after her.

But the good lady was not as young as she had once been, and she found herself rather heavy on her feet. But panting and blowing she raced on in the useless pursuit, until suddenly both her feet slipped from under her, and she measured her length on the icy ground.

Muttering some words rather spirited in their meaning, and not often heard on feminine lips, the wicked woman rose from the cold earth, and shaking her fist after the fast retreating figure of her whilom prisoner, began to retrace her steps to the house, rubbing sundry bruises on her person as she went.

"The keen-witted little wretch!" she thought, "how quick she was to take advantage of my momentary forgetfulness. But after all, Vinton is dead, and what do I want to keep her for? I shall have to leave here, anyway. Mayhap, it's better as it is."

Thus consoling herself, she returned to her watch over the dead man who lay in a crimson pool of his life-blood across the snowy path, his eyes glaring glassily, his handsome face set in the expression of fear and horror that had settled on it when Mr. Thorn's terrible denunciation had been thundered in his ears.

Meanwhile Queenie ran on in her headlong flight until her limbs began to tremble beneath her. Throwing a glance over her shoulder, she saw that she had outrun her pursuer so far that she was no longer visible. She slackened her pace then, and began to walk at a slower and more reasonable gait.

"I may take my time now," she thought. "Mrs. Bowers is too old and slow to overtake me. Besides she can have no interest in keeping me a prisoner since Leon Vinton is dead. She will have enough to do to take care of herself."

She pushed back her veil, showing a face so bright with hope and happiness, that it was hardly recognizable for the pale and dejected countenance that had looked from the window of the river cottage an hour ago. Joy had fairly transfigured it.

She walked along unconscious of the keen, cold, wintery air in the rush of happy thoughts that crowded over her.

She would go home to her father first. She would tell him everything—he should break the news of her return to her husband.

"I cannot tell Lawrence the *whole* truth," she said, shuddering. "I would rather die than that he should know the terrible secret! He is so proud and he told me once he would not marry a woman with the faintest shadow of disgrace upon her name. I have deceived him, and I must never let him know now, for I love him, and it would kill me to have him put me away! I will tell him something plausible, though I will not tell a direct lie if I can help."

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Poor little Queenie!—once so innocent and transparent that her very thoughts could be read in her eyes—her terrible misfortunes had taught her strange subterfuges and deceit.

"I wonder if there will be any trouble about proving my identity," she thought; "I have heard of such things, and it *will* appear very strange to them at first. Papa will take me for a ghost, as he did the night I went and looked at him through the window when he thought I was traveling in Europe. Poor Uncle Rob! I wonder if he was sorry much when he heard I was dead."

She passed the farm-house where the Thorns lived, but the doors and windows were both closed, and the only sign of life was a faint blue smoke curling up from the chimney.

"I should like to stop and see what has become of that poor, willful girl," she said to herself, "but I am so impatient I cannot spare the time."

She walked on faster as she neared the great city. Her impatience redoubled by the thought that every step brought her nearer to her loved ones.

"I wonder if they will be glad to see me," she thought wistfully; "I know papa *will*! Poor old

darling, I could never doubt *him*! I do not know about Georgie and mamma. *They*, perhaps, were relieved that I and my terrible secret were buried together—they may be sorry to see me resurrected. But of one thing I am certain. Sydney was glad when she thought I was dead. She will hate me more than ever when I go back. But I shall not trouble any of them, I shall have my husband—he is all I want. He shall take me away from here to some other place where I can forget all the terrible past in my new happiness."

All the while she was thinking she was walking quickly on, buoyed up by the joyous anticipations. At last, foot-sore and weary, she entered the great city and walked on until she stood in front of her father's handsome residence.

Trembling with passionate joy, and with her heart beating so that she could hear it in her ears, she went up the steps and rang the bell.

The door was opened to her by a strange man in livery instead of the female servant who had formerly answered the bell.

Her first sensation of surprise and disappointment was succeeded by an amusing thought.

"Mamma and Sydney are grander than ever. They have set up a man-servant."

"Is Mr. Lyle at home?" she timidly inquired.

The man stared at her a moment in blank surprise; then getting his wits together, replied respectfully:

"The Lyles don't live here now, miss."

"Where have they removed? Can you tell me?" she inquired, thinking that perhaps her mother's and sister's extravagance had caused her father's failure at last, and that they had taken a cheaper house. [Pg 58]

"Mrs. Lyle and Miss Lyle, and Lady Valentine are all in Europe, ma'am," he answered, wondering what made the bright, pretty face turn so pale as he gave her the information.

"And Mr. Lyle—you can tell me where I can find *him*?" she inquired, eagerly.

The polite servant looked as if he thought the girl was out of her mind. After a blank stare into her lovely, eager face, he said, surprisedly:

"Mr. Lyle—why, ma'am—*he's dead*, you know!"

If the man had struck her the cruelest blow in the face she could not have recoiled more suddenly. She stepped backward so quickly, and with such a wild, low cry of pain that she would have fallen down the steps if the man had not thrown out his arm and caught her.

"Oh, ma'am, don't take it hard," he said, in a voice of respectful sympathy. "Was he any relation of yours?"

She turned her beautiful face toward him with the whiteness of death upon it.

"When did he die?" she asked, unheeding his question.

"The same night that his daughter died—you've heard of that, ma'am, have you?" asked the man, who seemed rather of a gossiping turn.

"Yes, I've heard of that," she said, in a hollow voice totally unlike her own.

"Well, Mr. Lyle, he died that same night of a broken heart, folk said. She was his youngest daughter, and his favorite. They were both buried the same day."

"Dead, dead!" she murmured.

"What did you say, ma'am?" asked the man, not hearing the low words.

"Nothing," she answered. "I thank you for your information," and staggered down the steps into the street again.

"Dead, dead!" she kept moaning to herself as she staggered along the street in white, tearless despair. "Papa is dead! and died of a broken heart for me. Oh, I was not worth such devotion!"

Her mind was so full of this terrible blow that had fallen upon her that she could think of nothing else, until suddenly she saw that the brief winter twilight was settling fast over everything. Then a terror of the night and cold took hold of her. She thought of her husband.

"They are all gone—papa and the rest," she murmured; "I have no one but Lawrence now. I will go to him."

The thought seemed to invest him with added tenderness and dearness. She hastened her footsteps, and before long she stood in front of the splendid mansion where Captain Ernscliffe lived, and which he had refurnished in splendid style for his fair young bride. The windows were closed as if the house was deserted, but she went up the steps and rang the bell. A woman servant answered the summons.

"Is Captain Ernscliffe at home?" asked Queenie, in a faint and trembling voice. [Pg 59]

CHAPTER XX.

The woman whom Queenie had addressed, and who had the appearance of being the housekeeper, stood still and looked at the young girl a moment without replying.

"Is Captain Ernscliffe at home?" repeated Queenie, in a tone of wistful eagerness.

"What do you want of Captain Ernscliffe?" asked the woman, rudely, as she stared suspiciously into the troubled, white face of the beautiful questioner.

Queenie drew her slight figure haughtily erect.

"My business is with Captain Ernscliffe," she said, in a cool, firm tone that rebuked the woman's impertinent curiosity. "Can I see him?"

"Oh, yes, certainly," said the housekeeper, with a palpable sneer. She was offended because Queenie had failed to gratify her curiosity.

"Show me in at once, then," said Queenie, making a motion to step across the threshold.

But the woman held the door in her hand and placed herself in front of it.

"You'll have to travel many a mile from this to see him," she said, maliciously.

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Queenie, turning pale. "Is he not at home? I will wait here until he comes then."

"You'll wait many a month then," was the grim reply of the offended woman.

"I do not understand you," Queenie answered, passing her small hand across her brow with a dim presentiment of coming evil. "Will you please tell me where I can find Captain Ernscliffe?"

"You'll find him across the Atlantic Ocean, somewhere in Europe, ma'am!"

She fired the words off like a final shot and looked at Queenie, prepared to enjoy her chagrin and amazement, but she was almost frightened by the expression of terrible despair that came over the beautiful, young face.

"In Europe," she said in a voice so low and heart-broken the woman could scarcely hear it. "Are you *quite* sure?"

"Quite sure, ma'am. He went away to travel a week after his wife's death, and may not return for years."

She made a motion to shut the door, intimating that the conference was ended, but Queenie leaned up against it so that she was compelled to desist.

"Can you give me his address that I may write to him?" she said.

"Well, I never!" ejaculated the housekeeper, staring at her in amazement.

Queenie only repeated her words more plainly.

"I know no more of his whereabouts than the dead!" was the answer. "He expected to be traveling all the time." [Pg 60]

A smothered moan of pain came from the white lips of the listener.

"Have you done with me?" asked the woman, impatiently.

Queenie looked out into the street. It was almost dark, and a sleety mist was beginning to fall. The lamp-lighters were going their rounds lighting up the gas-lamps at the corners of the streets, and belated pedestrians were hurrying homeward.

With a shiver she turned back to the portly, comfortable figure of the woman rustling on the door-sill in her black silk dress, quite unconscious that she was holding the door against her mistress, and the mistress of that elegant brown stone mansion on whose threshold she stood.

"You are Captain Ernscliffe's housekeeper?" said Queenie.

"Yes, and I am left in charge of the house during his absence," answered the woman, briding with a sense of her importance.

"I am a friend of Captain Ernscliffe," said Queenie, timidly. "Will you let me stay here to-night? I am homeless and penniless!"

The housekeeper favored her with a stare of scornful incredulity.

"Captain Ernscliffe's friends are all rich people," she said, with a toss of the head. "He don't have any acquaintance with *tramps*!"

"I assure you that I am not a tramp," answered the young girl, quickly. "I have been very unfortunate in arriving in this city and finding my friends all dead or away. If your master were here he would certainly give me shelter this wintery night."

"It's more than I'll do, then," said the housekeeper sharply; "come, young woman, don't tell no more lies! Captain Ernscliffe don't know you, but I *do*! You're a burglar's accomplice, and you want to get into the house that you may open it to your friends in the night and rob the house."

"Indeed you are mistaken," said Queenie earnestly. "Oh! *do* let me stay! If you don't I shall perish of cold in the streets to-night and my death will be on your hands. You may lock me into a room if you are afraid of me—only give me shelter."

It had been on her mind to declare herself the wife of Captain Ernscliffe, and force the woman to admit her into the house that was virtually her own. But a moment's reflection showed the utter

futility of such a course. No one except those who loved her would give credence to such a wild, improbable tale; no one would believe that the grave had given back its dead unless she could offer more substantial proof than she had at command. This woman before her would have laughed such an assertion to scorn.

"Come, move on," she said roughly, at the same time seizing the girl by the shoulder and pushing her from her position against the door. "I can't shelter the likes of you, and I won't stand here in the cold wasting breath on you a minute longer."

Queenie turned as the woman pushed her toward the steps and looked her in the eyes.

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"You may be sorry for this some day," she said.

"Ha, ha," laughed the heartless housekeeper, "sorry indeed! Sorry that I didn't take a tramp into the house to rob my master."

"Will you let me stay?" said Queenie, once more looking over her shoulder as she was wearily descending the marble steps.

If the woman's heart had not been made of stone it must have melted at the anguish in that sweet, white face, but she only reiterated her refusal more angrily.

"I am friendless and penniless," pleaded Queenie, still hoping to melt that icy heart. "Think what may happen to me in the streets at night!"

"Go! go!" exclaimed the hard-hearted creature, fiercely.

"I will go," said Queenie, drawing her cloak about her, and preparing to breast the wintery storm. "I will go, but remember, madam, that you may one day repent this! It is quite, quite possible that I may one day turn you from these doors as you have turned me to-night."

For all answer the woman slammed the door in her face, and fiercely locked it.

Queenie was left alone standing on the wet pavement in the wintery night, locked out of her husband's house like a thief, a waif and a stray by night, while over her loomed the great brown-stone palace that a few months ago had been splendidly refitted and furnished in velvets, tapestries, gildings and bronzes, for her pleasure. It was hers—her husband's—therefore her own. Yet she turned away from its inhospitable doors, homeless, friendless, penniless—worse than all, *hopeless!*

"Where the lamps quiver
So far in the river,
With many a light
From window and casement,
From garret to basement,
She stood with amazement
Houseless by night."

CHAPTER XXI.

It is some time since we have seen Mrs. Lyle and her elder daughter.

We must seek them now in one of "the stately homes of England."

They are the guests of Lady Valentine at her elegant residence in the most fashionable quarter of London.

Nearly four years have elapsed since we first met the Lyles and heard the spirited discussion over little Queenie's first ball and Sydney's old green silk dress.

Sydney and Georgina would not need to scrimp little Queenie's share of finery to bedeck themselves now were she living.

Georgina's husband is wealthy and indulgent, and "Uncle Robert," the beneficent friend of their earlier days, has charged himself with Sydney's support ever since her father died until recently, when she has married a wealthy man.

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Mrs. Lyle lives with Georgina, and still enjoys the whirl of fashionable life as much as ever—indeed more than ever, for now there is no vexing question relative to the girls' finery disturbing her placid mind.

It is a chilly morning in mid-winter, and the three ladies are sitting in a pleasant morning-room, Georgina, grown plump and indolent, idly reclining in an easy-chair, with her dimpled white hands lazily folded over her silken lap, Mrs. Lyle perusing a morning paper, and Sydney gazing restlessly out of the window—watching, perhaps, for her husband—the honeymoon is not a month old yet, and she is naturally impatient at his absence.

Into this quiet scene enters Lord Valentine and tosses some cards into his wife's lap.

"Tickets for La Reine Blanche to-night," he says.

All three ladies utter a cry of delight.

"At last," exclaims Mrs. Lyle, in a spasm of anticipation.

"Yes, at last," laughs my Lord Valentine. "The great American actress will play at the theater to-night, and we shall have a chance to see if she is really as great an *artiste* as Madame Rumor reports."

"Here is a paragraph regarding her now," says Mrs. Lyle, and taking up the paper, she reads aloud:

"The beautiful and gifted young American actress, Madame Reine De Lisle, will make her *debut* before a London audience to-night in the great emotional play of 'Romeo and Juliet.' The fame of this wonderful *artiste* has preceded her to England, and all lovers of the drama are on the *qui vive* for the first appearance of La Reine Blanche, as her admirers call her."

"La Reine Blanche," said Lord Valentine's little sister, looking up from her volume of history as she sat in a corner by the fire. "La Reine Blanche—that means 'the white queen.' They used to call Mary Queen of Scots La Reine Blanche, because she was so fair and lovely, and because she wore a white dress when she was in mourning. I have just been reading about her in my history. I wonder if this great actress is beautiful also?"

"She is said to be the most beautiful blonde in the world, Alice," said Lord Valentine, smiling down at the little school-girl.

A slight cloud has shadowed the brightness of Lady Valentine's face while little Lady Alice is speaking. She leans toward her mother, and says in a slightly lowered voice, but one which is distinctly audible to Sydney:

"Alice's French recalls my own, mamma. Have you ever thought what the name of this great tragedy *queen*, if rendered into English, would be?"

"*Reine De Lisle*," repeated Mrs. Lyle, musingly.

Then she gives a great start.

"It would be—ah, it would be Queen Lyle!"

"Exactly," says Georgina. "Quite an odd coincidence. Is it not?"

She leans back in her seat with a thoughtful look on her pretty pink and white face.

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Old times and old interests crowd into her mind with the memory of her younger sister. Time has thrown a veil over Queenie's faults and follies, and Georgina recalls her now with a softening remembrance, and half regrets the scorn she cast upon her when she returned to them so strangely.

"But ah! that missing year," she asks herself, as she has done many times before. "Where was it spent?"

Sydney had risen at the first mention of Queenie's name and swept out of the room. Neither time nor change had softened her hatred and resentment against poor little Queenie.

She had hated her beautiful sister while living, and she hated her, even in her grave, so bitterly that she could not endure the mention of her name even now when years had come and gone.

CHAPTER XXII.

"Let us go home, mother, I am tired already. The play is sickening; I always thought so."

It is Sydney who speaks, and her voice is full of restless discontent.

She is in a box at the theater, looking brilliantly beautiful in black velvet and diamonds.

The place is packed from pit to dome; but in the dazzling rows of fair faces, there is not one handsomer than hers, even now when it is marred by that look of impatience, almost anger, that rests upon it like a threatening cloud upon a summer sky.

Mrs. Lyle, a passionate lover of the drama, turns a look of dismay upon her handsome daughter.

"Oh, not yet," she said quickly. "I would not miss seeing the play through for anything!"

"You have seen it often enough before," objects Sydney. "But if you are determined to stay I will go alone, if Lord Valentine will put me into the carriage."

"Don't go yet," says Lord Valentine, turning his eyes a moment from the stage to glance at his sister-in-law a trifle impatiently. "At least wait until Ernscliffe comes."

"He does not appear to be coming at all. I will not wait for him," Sydney answers, and the look of discontent deepens into downright vexation.

At that moment the box door opens and a gentleman comes up behind her chair.

Georgina turns quickly.

"Ah, Captain Ernscliffe, you are just in time," she says. "Here is Sydney trying to persuade us to go home before the play is half over. Perhaps you can induce her to wait."

Sydney looks up to him and a tender smile curves her crimson lips.

"You are late," she murmurs.

"I was detained," he answers, carelessly. "How are you enjoying the performance of the great actress?"

Her lip curls scornfully.

"Not at all. I am tired of the whole sickening thing. Will you take me home?"

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"Is the balcony scene over yet?" he asks.

"Oh, no," Lady Valentine answers; "only the first act."

"Do you really want to go, Sydney?" he asks.

"I really want to go," she answers, rising and drawing her opera cloak about her white shoulders.

He gives her his arm in silence, and leads her away, puts her into the carriage, and they are whirled rapidly homeward; but when he sees her safely inside Lord Valentine's handsome house he turns to go back.

"You will not leave me?" Sydney says, pleadingly, and laying her white, jeweled hand on his black coat sleeve.

"I wish to see the play out," he answers, with a touch of impatience in his voice.

"I assure you it is not worth seeing. The acting is merely mediocre. Madame De Lisle has been greatly over-rated," she urges, with a tone of anxiety in her voice, as she looks down, almost afraid that he will detect the falsehood she is telling in her eager face.

"You make me more curious than ever," he answers, lightly. "I must certainly see her and judge for myself. Perhaps the wonderful beauty over which men rave so much has blinded the judgment of the critics. *Au revoir!*"

He frees himself from her clasp gently but firmly, and runs down the steps.

Sydney stands as he has left her, the rich cloak falling from her shoulders, her hands clasped before her, a tearless misery looking forth from her dark eyes.

"I have lied to him and gained nothing by it," she murmurs, in a passionate undertone. "He will go back there, he will see that terrible resemblance that shocked us all, and he will be reminded of the one whom I wish him to forget. Oh, it is a dreadful coincidence! The same name, the same face, the same voice! If we had lost her in any way save by death, I could have sworn that it was Queenie herself that I saw to-night dancing on the stage at *Lady Capulet's* ball."

Captain Ernscliffe hastened back to the theater, anxious to be in time for the second act, which is a favorite with all admirers of "Romeo and Juliet."

Lord Valentine glances around as he enters the box and drops into a chair.

"Ah, Ernscliffe," he says; "just in time. The balcony scene is on."

Ernscliffe leans forward, scanning the stage eagerly, and quite unconscious that his three companions in the box are regarding him with curious eyes, anxious to note what impression the great actress would produce upon him.

He sees the sighing *Romeo* walking about and soliloquizing in the garden of the hostile *Capulet*, the gentle *Juliet* in the balcony above him. His dark eyes rest on her for a moment; then he gives a violent start.

"Heaven!" he mutters under his breath, and grows pale beneath his olive skin.

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"He can see the likeness, too," Lady Valentine whispered to her mother.

Rapt, spellbound, like one in a bewildering dream, Captain Ernscliffe bends forward, the deep pallor of painful emotion on his dusk, handsome face, his dark eyes fixed on the hapless young *Juliet* in a wild, astonished, incredulous gaze as she leans upon the balcony, murmuring words of love to handsome young *Romeo* in the garden beneath. It was no wonder, for *Juliet*, in her fair, young beauty, her misty, white robe, looped with rosebuds, her floating curls of gold, is the exact and perfect counterpart of Queenie Lyle when he first met her at Mrs. Kirk's grand ball. Not a tone of her voice, not a curve of her lip, not the fall of a ringlet differs from the lovely girl who had won his heart that never-to-be-forgotten night—the peerless bride that death had torn from his arms in the very moment that he claimed her as his own!

Like one in a dream he listened and looked. He heard *Romeo* exclaim in deep and passionate accents:

"Lady, by yonder blessed moon I swear,
That tips with silver all these fruit-tree tops—"

And *Juliet* interrupted in those silver-sweet tones so strangely familiar to his ear:

"Oh! swear not by the moon, th' inconstant moon,
That monthly changes in her circled orb,
Lest that thy love prove likewise variable."

With those words:

"Oh! swear not by the moon, th' inconstant moon,"

Juliet raised her eyes that had been downcast and fixed on her lover, and looked upward as if to

gaze upon the fair orb of which she spoke.

In that moment her dark-blue eyes, shining like stars of the night, encountered the fixed and passionate gaze of the handsome man in the box above her. She started—it was not his dreaming fancy—it was too palpable to all—recovered herself with an effort, and went on in a voice that trembled in spite of her brave endeavor:

"That monthly changes in her circled orb,
Lest that thy love prove likewise variable."

"Great God! It is Queenie herself! Do the dead come back from the grave? I must see her, speak to her!" exclaimed Captain Ernscliffe, in a passionate undertone, as he sprang up and turned toward the box door.

Lord Valentine, who had watched him attentively, caught him by the arm.

"Ernscliffe, are you mad? We all see the resemblance. It is accidental, of course. What would you do?"

Ernscliffe shook off his grasp roughly.

"Yes, I am mad!" he exclaimed, "for I believe that the dead is alive, and that yonder *Juliet* is my lost bride, Queenie Lyle!"

He opened the box door with a shaking hand and rushed wildly out.

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La Reine Blanche went on with her part and acted more brilliantly than ever. She surpassed herself. She seemed under the influence of some strong excitement that lent new power and force to her superb rendition of *Juliet*. The vast and brilliant audience was fairly carried away.

At the close of the second act flowers fairly rained upon her. She was called back before the curtain and the thunders of applause shook the building.

Then the manager came to her with a little bit of pasteboard in his hand.

"Madame De Lisle," he said, "there is a gentleman outside who is so opportune in his desire to see you that I was forced to bring you his card, although I know you always refuse to make men acquaintances."

She took the card and read the name:

"Lawrence Ernscliffe."

"Will you see him?" asked the manager, seeing that she stood silent as if hesitating.

"No, no," she answered. "Tell him he must excuse me—I have to dress for my part in the third act."

The manager turned away and the beautiful actress pressed her lips passionately upon the insensible little bit of pasteboard she held in her white and jeweled hand.

"At last, at last!" she murmured, "yet I must not meet him to-night. I could not go on with my part—it would unfit me for anything. I must postpone my long-sought happiness yet a little longer. To-morrow—ah, *to-morrow!*"

She walked up and down, pressing her hands on her wildly beating heart as if to still its convulsive throbs.

"They say that happiness never kills," she said. "If it were otherwise I should feel afraid—my heart aches with joy—it seems as if it would burst, it is so full of happy emotion!"

She went back on the stage and a timid glance showed her Lawrence Ernscliffe back in the box looking terribly restless and disappointed. She was afraid to meet his eyes again, but she knew that he watched her through every scene, devouring every movement with passionate, yearning eyes.

At the close of the act she saw a lovely bouquet thrown from his hand, and picking it up she discovered a tiny note among the flowers.

When the curtain fell she read the hastily penciled lines:

"MADAME DE LISLE:—FOR God's sake let me see you, if only for a moment. I *must* speak to you; I shall go mad if you don't take pity on my anxiety and grant an interview to

"LAWRENCE ERNSCLIFFE."

Tears came into the eyes of the beautiful actress as she read those lines; but when after another act the same card was handed her, she again refused to see the writer on pretence of dressing for her next appearance.

"To-morrow," she murmured to herself, "I will see him. To-night I cannot, I am utterly exhausted, I *must* have rest."

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When the play was over she came out on the arm of the manager, her maid on the other side of her. As she stepped into her carriage she saw a dark, handsome face regarding her earnestly and a little reproachfully. The closing door sent it from sight, and she was whirled away to her hotel. She did not know that Captain Ernscliffe had sprung into a cab and followed her.

Neither did Captain Ernscliffe know that a mysterious-looking lady, heavily cloaked and veiled,

had gotten into another cab and followed him.

It was Sydney, driven to desperation by her jealous misery.

She had returned to the theater *sub rosa*, and been a witness to Captain Erncliffe's agitated recognition of the actress, and his subsequent persistent attempt to secure an interview with her. Heedless of everything, and rendered reckless by her indefinable dread of some impending evil, she determined to follow him and prevent, if possible, an interview between him and the brilliant actress who so strikingly resembled his lost and lamented bride.

It was midnight when the three vehicles drew up before the grand entrance of the hotel where La Reine Blanche had her elegant suite of apartments. She was crossing the pavement on the arm of her elderly duenna when a light touch arrested her footsteps. She turned and looked into the face of Captain Erncliffe. It was white, wild, eager.

"One word, if you please, Madame De Lisle," he exclaimed, in an eager, agitated voice.

She paused a moment and clung tremblingly to the arm of her attendant.

"That is impossible to-night, sir," she answered in a low, constrained voice. "Call on me to-morrow at noon. I will hear you then."

Without another word she turned and fled up the steps. He stood looking at her blankly a moment, then re-entered his cab and was driven away. He did not notice the heavily-draped figure of a woman that had stood almost at his elbow, and that now ran lightly up the hotel steps, into the wide, lighted hall.

CHAPTER XXIII.

La Reine Blanche went directly to her dressing-room, where her maid divested her of her heavy wrappings and out-door costume, and substituted a dressing-gown of white Turkish silk confined at the waist by gold cord and tassels. Then she took down the burnished golden hair, and prepared to brush and plait it for the night.

As she took up the pearl-handled brush there came a timid, hesitating rap at the outer door. Madame De Lisle started and trembled.

"Admit no one to-night, Elsie," she said, nervously, as the maid turned toward the door.

Elsie came back in a minute with a penciled slip of paper. Her mistress took it, and read these words:

"Will Madame De Lisle accord the favor of a brief interview to a lady who calls on important business?" [Pg 68]

"A lady—at this time of the night!" said La Reine Blanche, lifting her arched brows very slightly.

"Yes, madam, a real lady—at least she spoke and moved like one," replied Elsie, respectfully.

"Tell her I can see no one to-night. I am too weary; she must call another time," said the actress, in an agitated voice.

Elsie turned away with the message, but before she reached the door she was confronted by the lady, who had heard the refusal and entered in spite of it.

She advanced into the room, and stood before the actress, who had risen from her seat and leaned against a chair, her golden hair falling about her like a misty veil.

"Madame De Lisle," said the intruder, in a slightly tremulous voice, "I entreat you to pardon this untimely intrusion. Will you send your maid away, that I may plead my justifiable excuse?"

La Reine Blanche motioned to the maid to withdraw into an inner room at the pleasure of her visitor. Then she looked wistfully at the lady, who had thrown off her concealing hood and cloak, and stood revealed in all her majestic beauty, clothed splendidly in black velvet and sparkling diamonds.

"You are surprised to see me here?" said Sydney, interrogatively.

The actress bowed silently. She seemed like one stricken dumb and incapable of speech.

"You were annoyed this evening by the persistent attempts of a gentleman to obtain speech with you," went on Sydney.

Again Madame De Lisle bowed silently. She seemed like one dazed, and stood regarding her visitor without remembering that courtesy required her to offer her a seat.

"It is of that I wish to speak, madam. I heard you tell him he might call on you to-morrow at noon. I beg you, Madame De Lisle, to recall that permission, and to utterly decline the acquaintance of Lawrence Erncliffe now and forever."

The failing senses of La Reine Blanche seemed to return to her with a gasp. She straightened her drooping figure and looked haughtily at the speaker.

"May I inquire why you proffer such a singular request?" she asked, coldly.

"Is it necessary that I should explain my motive for the request? If I do so, it will be at the

expense of some humiliation to myself," said the visitor, and a faint flush colored her handsome, high-bred face.

For a moment they stood regarding each other fixedly—the handsome brunette in her velvet and diamonds, the lily-white blonde in her sweeping robe and veil of golden hair, looking like a "white queen" indeed.

Then the actress said, in a voice full of veiled passion and almost defiance:

"It would take a strong motive indeed to cause me to decline the acquaintance of Lawrence Erncliffe. Let me know your reason that I may judge if it be potent enough to secure your wish." [Pg 69]

With a swift rush forward Sydney fell on her knees before the beautiful woman.

"Madame De Lisle," she said, pleadingly, "I humble myself before you to beg for my happiness! I love Lawrence Erncliffe; I hoped I was winning his love in return until he saw you on the stage to-night. Your beauty, your splendid acting, above all, your striking resemblance to one he has loved and lost, took his heart by storm. He is carried away by this mad and wicked infatuation. Nothing but a studied coldness from you can check this mad passion. Will you, now that I have told you all, do as I have begged you?"

Something pathetic in the woman's humility touched a pitying chord in the heart of La Reine Blanche. She took her gently by the hand and placed her in a chair.

"You say that I resemble one whom he has loved and lost," she said. "Who was she?"

"She was his bride," answered Sydney, "his bride and my sister. She died at the altar. But I had the better claim upon him. He admired me and I believe he would have loved and married me if he had not inopportunately met her. But, as I have told you, she died. Now, after years, I had almost won his love again when you came here with *her* face and won him from me! It is almost as if the dead had come back."

La Reine Blanche looked at her with a strange smile.

"I have heard it said," she remarked, "that if the dead could come back after a few years they would find their places filled, their names forgotten, and themselves unwelcome."

Sydney gave her a keen glance, half-frightened, half-defiant.

"Madam, that is true," she said. "If my sister could come back to us we could not help being sorry. She was a trouble and disgrace to us while living, and we cannot help feeling relieved that the grass is growing over all her faults and follies."

"You did not love your sister?" said the actress, with her blue eyes blazing like stars.

Sydney looked at her with a flash of hatred in her dusky orbs.

"Madam," she said, "could you love the thing that stood between you and your happiness?"

They looked at each other a moment in silence, and the flashing eyes of the beautiful actress seemed to burn into Sydney's heart. A sudden horrible fear darted into her mind.

"*Has* the dead come back?" she asked herself. "Oh! no, it *cannot* be!"

"You will not answer me," she said, wildly. "Oh, Madame De Lisle, be generous! You have lovers by the score; they tell me you have refused to marry a duke. One heart more or less cannot matter to you. You must not take my Lawrence from me! He is my all!"

"Your *all*!" exclaimed La Reine Blanche, with a curling lip. "Lady, you prate of your love for Lawrence Erncliffe, you tell me that he is your *all*! You tell me what he is to *you*—will you tell me what you are to *him*?"

There was a tone of triumph in her sweet, incisive voice as she confronted her visitor. [Pg 70]

"Madam," said Sydney, proudly and haughtily, "*he is my husband—I am his wife!*"

"His wife! Oh! my God!"

It was the cry of a breaking heart that cleft the midnight air. The actress staggered backward, tried to catch at a chair to save herself from falling, and then dropped heavily to the floor and laid there without a sign of life.

Elsie came rushing in from the next room, frightened at the sound.

"Oh, my poor mistress—you have killed her!" she cried.

"It is nothing but a swoon—she will soon revive," was the contemptuous answer.

But in her heart Sydney prayed, "Oh, that it might be death!"

But the impious prayer was not answered thus. Elsie's energetic efforts soon restored her mistress to consciousness, and lying languidly on a silken divan, she turned her beautiful eyes back to Sydney's face.

"You may retire again," Sydney said to the maid. "We have much still to say to each other."

The maid was about to refuse, but an imperative command from her mistress caused her to retire at once. Then the two beautiful women looked at each other with ominous glances.

"So you *are* Queenie herself? I thought as much," exclaimed Sydney, in a hissing tone of hate.

"Yes, I am Queenie," answered the actress, coolly. "I have come back from the grave, Sydney; but it seems that I have neither name nor place in the hearts that once were mine!"

"No, and *never* shall have!" exclaimed Sydney, passionately, to herself, but aloud she said, in a voice that she strove to render calm and controlled:

"Will you tell me why you are here?"

"I am here to claim my husband!" answered Queenie, promptly and firmly.

If a look could have killed, Queenie Ernscliffe would have been stricken dead at her sister's feet.

"You will have to prove a few things before you accomplish your purpose," she retorted.

"I can prove all that is necessary," was the calm reply.

"Can you justify yourself in the matter of that shameful hidden year in your life of which I shall surely inform Captain Ernscliffe?" asked Sydney, malevolently.

"Sydney, forbear," exclaimed the actress, lifting her hand as if to ward off some cruel blow. "I have borne all that I can bear to-night! You must leave me now. Come and lunch with me to-morrow, and you shall hear the story of that missing year—you shall judge whether I can justify myself in the eyes of my husband."

"Will you promise not to see him until after that?" asked Sydney, anxiously, as she turned to go.

"Yes, I will promise," answered Queenie.

CHAPTER XXIV.

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Sydney could not wait until the hour for luncheon next day. She was terribly afraid that Captain Ernscliffe might by some means secure a meeting with La Reine Blanche, and that the fatal truth might be revealed, to the utter destruction of the frail superstructure of her own happiness.

He had not been back to the house since he had left her to return to the theater the night before, and the most dreadful fancies continually darted through her mind.

It was impossible for her to wait until the hour her sister had specified. As early as ten o'clock she entered the hotel and was shown into the parlor of the great actress.

Queenie was at home. She had just returned from an early rehearsal at the theater, and lay resting on a low divan of cushioned blue satin.

She wore a trained dress of black velvet and satin, with creamy-hued laces at the wrists, and a fichu of the rarest old lace fastened at her throat by a brooch of dead gold. A single cluster of white hyacinth was fastened in with the lace, and filled the room with its subtle, delicious fragrance.

Her abundant, golden hair was braided into a coronet and confined with a comb of pearl. In spite of an almost marble pallor, and a look of terrible suffering, she appeared as lovely as Sydney had ever seen her.

At the entrance of her rival she lifted her head, and with a faint sigh motioned her to a seat near her.

"You come early," she said.

"I could not wait," Sydney answered. "I was too impatient. You have not spoken with—with——"

"*Our* husband!" said the actress, filling up the embarrassed pause with a faint and mirthless laugh. "No, Sydney, I have not spoken with him. I saw him on the pavement this morning when I left the theater, but I drew down my veil and looked another way."

The look of dread in Sydney's dark eyes softened into relief.

"Oh, Queenie," she exclaimed, "if you only *would* go away from here without speaking to him! Think of the consequences that would follow such a revelation—the nine days' wonder over you, the shame, the despair, the utter desolation for me! Oh, Queenie, if you would but go away with your secret untold, and leave my husband."

Queenie's red lips curled scornfully.

"Ah! Sydney," she said, "you were always selfish. You think only of yourself. You would sacrifice my happiness to your own."

"*Your* happiness, Queenie? Ah! what happiness could it give you to be re-united to Lawrence Ernscliffe? You never professed to love him!"

A crimson blush rose into Queenie's cheek. She put up her small hand to hide it; but when it fell to her side again the warm color had not faded. It seemed but to burn the brighter as she said in a low and earnest voice:

"No, Sydney, I never professed to love him. I do not think I loved him when I promised to marry him. And yet, in the few weeks that intervened before he led me to the altar, I learned to love him with as deep and fond a love as the most exacting heart could have asked for. Time, silence and suffering have but deepened and intensified that passion, until it has become like the very pulse of my heart. He is the one dear thing to me, yet you ask me to give him to you."

"You have your art—your profession. Surely you love that," said Sydney, anxiously.

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"It has been but the means to an end," replied Queenie. "It has never filled but half my heart. The other half has never been at rest. It has always been seeking its lost mate. How could I give him up now that I have found him?"

"You mean to take him from me, then?" said Sydney, with a dangerous gleam of hatred firing into her black eyes.

La Reine Blanche did not answer. The blush had faded from her cheeks, and left them deathly pale.

Sydney could read nothing of her thoughts in the blue eyes, half veiled by the sweeping lashes. She moved restlessly in her chair.

"You promised to tell me your story," she said, coldly and sharply. "I am here to listen."

The faded color rushed back in crimson waves to Queenie's face. She looked up into the proud, scornful features of her sister.

"I am going to keep my word," she said, "and yet, Sydney, will you believe me when I tell you that I would rather tell my story to any other person on earth than you? Yes, I think I could sooner tell Lawrence Ernscliffe himself. I do not believe that anyone else would judge me as harshly and unpitifully as you will do—not even a stranger."

She was silent a moment, and lay still, shading her face with one small, white hand that sparkled with diamonds; then, as Sydney made no answer, she said, with a visible effort:

"Where shall I begin, Sydney?"

"At the beginning," answered Sydney, curtly.

"I must go back four years, then," said Queenie. "Sydney, do you remember the day that I sold my painted fan that Uncle Robert gave me to buy a tarleton dress to wear to Mrs. Kirk's grand ball?"

"Yes, I remember."

"*That* was the beginning, Sydney. I saw a gentleman in the store where I sold my fan—the handsomest man I ever saw in my life—tall, dark, elegant. He looked me straight in the face as I left the store, and my foolish heart fluttered into my mouth. You know I was very young and romantic at that time—both things of which I cannot accuse myself now," added Queenie, thinking sagely that her present twenty-one years made her quite elderly.

"Yes," said Sydney, curtly.

"The man bought my fan as soon as I left the store; then he followed me. I did not know these things then, but I learned them afterward. Perhaps you remember that 'an unknown admirer' sent the fan back to me?"

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"Yes," said Sydney, curtly.

"You remember also, Sydney, that every day an elegant bouquet, formed of the choicest hot-house flowers, came to me from the same unknown source?"

Sydney nodded an affirmative answer.

"I was very young and foolish in those days," said Queenie, with a sigh. "I do not suppose that any girl ever lived more silly and romantic than I was. I brooded day and night over the mysterious donor of the fan and flowers. All my secret thoughts were of him. I felt quite sure in my own mind that the handsome man who had looked at me so admiringly in the fancy store was my unknown admirer. I expected daily to meet him somewhere in the haunts of the gay society in which I had become somewhat of a belle. You remember, Sydney?"

Sydney did not answer, and she went on, slowly:

"I did not meet him in society; but after a time we met in a public park. I was walking there alone. I slipped and fell, spraining my ankle severely. A gentleman rushed to my assistance. It was the handsome stranger of whom I had dreamed so much that I had become perfectly infatuated with him. He placed me in a carriage and took me home. You were all out that day, and I never told of that event in my life through some undefined fear of censure. That was where my fault began—in that first act of secrecy."

She paused a moment, and a heart-wrung sigh drifted over her pale and quivering lips.

Sydney sat perfectly still, regarding her with stern, unpitiful eyes, as though they were strangers instead of sisters whom the same mother had nursed on her breast.

"We met again and again," said Queenie, slowly. "Always by accident, it seemed at first, Sydney, and I am quite sure it *was* accident on my part; but I know now that it was by design on the part of Mr. Vinton. He wooed me in the most romantic fashion. Flowers and poetry were the vehicles through which he conveyed his sentiments, until at last grown bolder, he openly avowed his love for me."

"You must have been very forward to have encouraged him to a declaration so soon," said Sydney, with a sneer.

"Sydney, I declare to you I was not. Oh! if you knew Leon Vinton as I do now, you would know that I was not—you would know that the more timid and shrinking the dove the more fierce and unrelenting would be his pursuit," exclaimed Queenie, with a scarlet blush at her sister's cruel charge.

"I knew, of course," she continued, after a moment's thoughtful pause, "home was the proper place for my lover to woo me. I said as much to him. His ready excuse appeared perfectly sufficient in my silly eyes. He told me that he was a foreigner of high birth and rank, exiled from his native land through a political offense and that he had heard that my father was bitterly opposed to all foreigners. He, therefore, felt it to be quite hopeless to seek for the *entree* to my father's house. Little simpleton that I was, I swallowed the whole stupendous lie because it was baited with the one single grain of truth—namely, the well-known fact that my father was bitterly prejudiced against all persons of foreign birth. I believed all he told me, and, worse than all, I believed that I was deeply and devotedly in love with him. That was the blind mistake of my life, Sydney. *Now* I know that I was not in love with the *man*. It was the romance and poetry of his manner of wooing me, the mystery that surrounded him with an atmosphere of ideality that fascinated and infatuated me. I was very young and romantic, as he well knew when he set his artful trap for me. He knew too well how to bait it. It was only the wooing that I loved when I thought it was the wooer."

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Her voice broke a moment, and she buried her face in her hands.

Sydney offered no comment, but sat as still and silent as a statue, regarding her intently.

"Yet, why do I linger over those fatal hours?" resumed Queenie, with a heavy sigh. "They can have but little interest for you. I will briefly relate what came after. You remember, Sydney, how I left you all the day we started to Europe on the pretense of returning to remain with papa?"

"Yes," Sydney answered, in a tone of scorn.

"It was a preconcerted plan," said the actress, dropping her eyes in shame and remorse. "In less than an hour after I left you, Sydney, I met Leon Vinton and was married to him."

"Married to him!" exclaimed Sydney, incredulously.

The blue eyes and the black ones met for a moment—one pair cold and incredulous, the others full of raging scorn.

"Sydney, you are cruel!" exclaimed Queenie, indignantly. "How else should I have gone away with him? I was as pure and innocent as a little child. There was not a thought of evil in my heart. I would have died the most horrible death that could be conceived of before I would have willfully sinned."

"Why, then, did you not confess the truth when you came home?" asked Sydney. "If you were married, where was your husband? Why did you suffer us to think worse things of you?"

"Wait until I have finished my story, Sydney, then you will understand why," answered Queenie, mournfully. "We were married, as I told you," she continued. "We went to live in a beautiful cottage on the banks of the river, about five miles from the city where we lived. My husband appeared to be a man of wealth and taste. My home was splendidly furnished. I had servants to wait upon me, the best of everything to eat and wear. He appeared to be perfectly devoted to me. I had but two things to complain of. One was the utter seclusion in which we lived. He went into no society, and we saw no company—not a single person ever visited us. I rode out in a carriage with Mr. Vinton sometimes. Once we went to the theater near my old home, and an irresistible desire seized upon me to look upon the face of my father once more. Mr. Vinton had always sternly forbidden me to venture near my home, but I eluded him somehow in the crush coming out of the theater, and ran homeward with flying footsteps. I looked into the window, Sydney. It was late, but I saw papa. He was sitting, sad and alone, thinking, perhaps, of his absent dear ones. He looked so old and broken it almost broke my heart."

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CHAPTER XXV.

Queenie paused a moment, and Sydney saw that warm, passionate tears were streaming down her cheeks. The sight awoke no pity in the heart of the elder sister. It seemed to her that her hatred was simply measureless for the beautiful young sister who, living or dead, held Lawrence Ernscliffe's heart.

"Papa looked up and saw me," continued Queenie, brushing away the crystal drops with her perfumed handkerchief. "He took me for a ghost, I think. I ran away and met Mr. Vinton coming after me. He was very angry with me, and I promised him I would not venture near the place again. Poor papa! As I went away I heard him wandering in the garden, calling my name. I longed to turn back and throw my arms about his neck. I often begged Mr. Vinton to allow me to make known our marriage to papa and trust to his kind heart to forgive us, but he always refused angrily. He had a terrible temper—a sleeping devil coiled within his heart."

"You said that you had but two things to complain of," suggested Sydney. "You have named but one."

"The other was Mr. Vinton's frequent absence from me. He spent more than half his time in the city, and I passed more than half my time alone, save for the company of his housekeeper, a wicked woman, whom I cordially detested. When I complained of his long absence, he represented that business detained him from my side, but when I ventured to inquire into the nature of his business, he almost rudely informed me that it was no part of my province to inquire into his affairs. I asked him no more questions, and I do not know to this day what engaged his

time and attention, nor what was the source of his apparent wealth.

"We had been married almost a year," she continued, after a slight pause, "when I began to notice that Mr. Vinton grew cold and careless to me, and his mysterious absences became longer and more frequent. In my loneliness and isolation I began to pine more and more for papa, whose sad and troubled face, as I saw it last, when I looked into the window that night, haunted me persistently. To my surprise, Mr. Vinton ceased to chide me for indulging in my grief, and pretended to be willing to reveal our marriage to papa and beg his forgiveness. In my joy at this assurance, I threw my arms around his neck, and kissed him as fondly as I had ever done in the first days of our union. That evening he ordered out the phaeton to take me home to papa. You know how fond I was of papa, Sydney—you can imagine my happiness."

Sydney only bowed coldly in reply.

"I am going to take you home by a new route,' Mr. Vinton said to me, turning the phaeton into a lonely, unfrequented road. In my joy at going back to papa, I consented without a thought of the oddity of the words. I only said to him: 'Do not make it a longer route, dear Leon. I am so impatient to see papa again.'"

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She was growing more excited now. She rose from her reclining position, and sitting upright, looked at Sydney with scarlet cheeks and burning, violet eyes. She was dazzlingly beautiful in this new phase.

Her fair, expressive face, and graceful, white throat rose from the rich and somber setting of black velvet like some rare flower. Her voice sounded like a wail of the saddest music.

"It was the cruelest lie a man ever told a woman, Sydney!" she went on, clasping and unclasping her white hands together in passionate excitement. "We never went near home. He never intended it. It began to rain soon, and we had no cover to the phaeton. We were passing through a thick wood, and he forced me to get out and stand under the trees under pretense of seeking shelter. Then, oh, Sydney, Sydney, with the chilly rain beating down upon us, and our feet half buried in the thick drifts of autumn leaves, he told me—oh, Sydney, can you guess what horrible thing that villain told me?"

The tears were falling down her cheeks like rain as she looked at her sister, but she, conjecturing the truth at once, answered, promptly and coldly:

"He told you that he had deceived you—that you were not his wife!"

"Yes, Sydney, that was what he told me," answered Queenie, with burning cheeks. "He said that the minister who united us was no more a minister than he was, and had only done it for a lark! He said he was tired of me and did not intend to charge himself with my support any longer, and that I might return to my father."

She stopped a moment and brushed away the tears that were coursing down her cheeks.

"Oh! how can I go on?" she exclaimed.

"I am impatient," remarked Sydney.

"I was fairly maddened by that cruel revelation," continued Queenie. "Oh, Sydney, may the dear Lord spare you from such suffering as was mine in that terrible hour! I went mad! All the softness of womanhood died out of me in the face of that cruel wrong! The instinct of the tigress sprang into my heart. I thirsted for Leon Vinton's blood. I cursed him. I rushed upon him and fastened my little, white fingers in his throat and tried to kill the wretch who had betrayed me."

"A murderess!" exclaimed Sydney, recoiling.

"My hands were all too weak and frail to wreak justice upon the villain," Queenie went on, heedless of her sister's ejaculation. "He pushed me off, he swore at me, he strangled me with his strong, white fingers, threw me down upon the earth and spurned me with his foot—aye, trampled upon me! You saw the purple print of his boot-heel on my brow, Sydney. It is here yet," she said, pushing back the fluffy waves of golden hair from her brow and showing the livid scar.

"After that I remember nothing more for several hours," she went on, seeing that Sydney made no answer, "and he must have thought that he had killed me, for when I came to myself I was lying in a grave, a very shallow grave. I was covered with fresh earth and dead leaves, which the hard and steady rain had partly beaten aside, leaving my face exposed. My murderer had not buried me deep enough. I sprang up out of the shallow hole in which he had laid me, my heart beating wildly with hatred and the thirst for revenge. All the hours of unconsciousness, all the rain and cold that had chilled my body had not cooled the fire of hate, the murderous instinct that possessed me. It seemed to me that nothing could wipe out my wrongs except Leon Vinton's blood."

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"And this is the innocent little child that used to be my father's pet!" exclaimed the listener, with a shudder.

"Yes," said Queenie, mournfully. "It seems strange, does it not? I, who only four years ago was the petted child of my father's heart—now I am dead to all that once knew and loved me. I have gone wrong. I have wandered into strange paths. I have buried peace and joy. I have broken my father's heart—all for the sin of one man—*man* did I say? Nay, rather a devil in the guise of an angel of light!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

If Sydney's heart had been less hard than marble she must have pitied the beautiful, unfortunate young sister so sadly rehearsing the story of her terrible wrongs.

But she uttered no word of sympathy or pity, she did not take the golden head upon her breast and weep over it as a loving sister would have done. She only said, in her cold, hard, jealous voice:

"Go on, Queenie. You went home to papa then?"

"No, I did not. I went back to the beautiful cottage where I had lived in a fool's Paradise one fatal year. Before I reached there I saw *him* standing alone on the banks of the river. I told you I thirsted for his blood. Nothing could have cooled the fire of my terrible hate but his life-blood poured out in a free libation. His back was turned to me, he neither saw nor heard me. I crept up behind him, I—oh, Sydney, do not look at me so! Remember it was not little Queenie, but a woman gone mad over her terrible wrongs. I could not help it. I put my hand on his shoulder and pushed him down into the river!"

"You are even worse than I thought you, Queenie," exclaimed her sister; "yet you—a Magdalen, a murderess—you dared to come back to us and to marry Captain Ernscliffe!"

"I disclaim either of the hard names you have called me, Sydney," her sister answered, defiantly. "I have been deeply sinned against, but I have not sinned. I had no intention of evil when I eloped with Leon Vinton. I thought I was his wife when I lived with him. When I pushed him into the river it was a simple act of justice. If I had gone home to papa and told him my wrongs, and he had killed Leon Vinton, society would have applauded the act and any jury would have acquitted him. It was right for me to punish him. I gloried in the deed."

Sydney made a gesture of abhorrence.

"The only pity," continued the actress, passionately, "is that I did not succeed in my revenge. He rose upon the water once after I pushed him in, and saw me on the bank. Then he shook his fist at me and shouted, with his mouth full of water: 'If I live I will have revenge for this!' Then he went under again, and I ran away and went home to papa." [Pg 78]

"Then he was not drowned, after all?" said Sydney.

"No, he was saved from a watery grave, and forthwith began to dog my footsteps again, though so cautiously that I never dreamed but that he was dead. The night I was married I saw him looking in the window at me, but I took him for a ghost or an illusion of fancy, never for a moment as a living creature. But in the moment that I was made a bride he sent me a bouquet. I inhaled the perfume and fell senseless. It was drugged with a powerful sleeping potion. I was not dead, only asleep and unconscious, when they buried me. Leon Vinton resurrected me that night, and confined me as a hated prisoner at the cottage to which he had taken me a happy, thoughtless young bride. That was his diabolical revenge. He knew where I was all the time, but he waited until the full cup of happiness was pressed to my lips, then dashed it away, and spilled the precious wine forever."

She looked at her elder sister with a tearless agony in her pansy-blue eyes, but Sydney only said, impatiently:

"I am anxious to hear how you happened to become such a noted actress."

"A few months after my supposed death, Leon Vinton was killed by the outraged father of a young girl whom he had basely betrayed. In the consequent excitement my prison door was left open, and I escaped and went back to the city, toiling on through the stormy, winter weather as though it was summer time, in my joy at the thought of going back to my home again."

She wrung her jeweled hands and groaned aloud.

"Oh, Heaven! how little I dreamed of the changes that awaited me in the home from which I had been carried a seeming corpse but a few months before. Papa was dead, the rest of you were gone to Europe; there were strangers in the house. Staggering blindly along, almost overwhelmed by the shock of my father's loss, I went to my husband's home. Alas! he, too, was traveling abroad. My last prop was swept from under me. I was homeless, friendless, penniless and forsaken in the great, heartless city, alone in the streets at night, beaten and tossed about by the wind and storm."

"Oh, if she had but died then!" breathed Sydney, inaudibly.

"Sydney, try to put yourself in my place for a moment. You who have lain in luxury's silken lap all your life—who have never known a sorrow. Think of your wronged little sister alone and friendless in the dark and dangerous streets of the city, buffeted by the wintery storms. Surely, then, you will feel some pity for all that I have endured."

Sydney would not even look at the sorrowful face; her ears were deaf to the tremulous, appealing voice.

"Go on with your story," she said, coldly. "These digressions are wearisome. What happened to you then?"

But Queenie had thrown herself back on the divan, with her white hands over her face, and for a moment a profound silence reigned throughout the room. The little French pendule on the mantel was ticking the hours toward noon, but neither of the two women, in their all-absorbing interest [Pg 79]

in the present, seemed to remember that the actress had made an appointment with Captain Ernscliffe at that hour. Presently Queenie spoke in a faint and mournful voice.

"Sydney, I cannot go on now; I am too faint and exhausted. These painful recollections have wearied and depressed me. Wait a little. I must rest."

"You have come so near to the end of the story, surely you can finish it now," objected Sydney, unfeelingly.

The actress did not speak for a moment; the small hands dropped away from her face, and she lay still, with her long-fringed lashes resting on her white cheek, a look of pain and exhaustion on her delicate lips.

Sydney rose and walked impatiently up and down the floor.

"Sydney," said her sister presently, "there is some wine and glasses on the cabinet there. Will you give me a few drops? Perhaps it may rally my fainting strength."

Sydney went to the cabinet and found a flask of port wine and delicate little crystal glasses.

She poured a little into a glass and looked over at her sister.

Her eyes were still closed, and she looked death-like and pallid as she lay there in her velvet dress and rich surroundings.

A terrible look came into Sydney's face. She put her hand into her bosom and drew out a little vial, unstopped it, and poured a few drops into the wine.

Then she crossed the room to Queenie's side. Her eyes were burning with some inward fire.

"Here, Queenie," she said, "drink your wine."

CHAPTER XXVII.

"Drink your wine, Queenie," repeated Sydney, in a slightly impatient voice.

The beautiful actress struggled up to a sitting posture and looked into her sister's face.

"Good Heaven, Sydney, what ails you?" she said. "You look positively ghastly. This interview has been too much for you. I entreat you to drink the wine yourself."

But Sydney shook her head, although she was trembling like a leaf and her face was ashen white. She could scarcely keep from spilling the wine, the glass wavered so unsteadily in her hand.

"I insist upon it," said Queenie. "You need a restorative as much as I do. Drink that yourself and give me another glass."

A frightened look came into Sydney's eyes. Was it possible that Queenie had been watching her from under the hands that covered her face?

"I—I assure you I do not need it in the least," she faltered; "you looked so ghastly yourself, lying there, that I was frightened, but my nervousness is quite over now. Pray drink it yourself. I am anxious to see you revive enough to continue your story."

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Queenie took the wine-glass in her hand and raised it to her lips.

Sydney watched her with parted lips and burning eyes. Her heart gave a bound of joy as her unfortunate sister touched the fatal draught with her beautiful lips.

They were so absorbed that they had not heard a rapping at the door. Both were quite unconscious that the person seeking admittance had grown impatient and recklessly turned the handle.

But little as they dreamed of such a thing, it was true. Sydney's dreadful crime had had an unthought-of spectator. A man had stood just inside the room and watched her with wild, astonished, horrified eyes.

As Queenie was about to drink the wine he rushed forward and violently struck the glass from her hand. It fell to the floor, shattered into a hundred fragments, the ruby wine splashing over the rich carpet.

The actress sprang to her feet and confronted the daring intruder.

"Lawrence Ernscliffe!" she gasped.

"Lawrence Ernscliffe!" echoed Sydney, in a voice of horror.

"Yes, Lawrence Ernscliffe," he answered, looking at Queenie.

He seemed to have no eyes for anyone but her, although his second wife stood just at his elbow.

"Why are you here?" demanded the actress, haughtily.

The tall, handsome man looked at her in astonishment.

"Madam, you permitted me to call," he said, "and this is the hour you specified. I knocked, but no one came; then I opened the door and entered."

The pride and anger on the lovely face before him softened strangely.

"That is true, I had quite forgotten it," she said. "But then your rudeness in striking the glass from my hand—how do you account for that? What did you mean by it?"

Her beautiful eyes were looking straight into his—the dusky, pansy-blue eyes of the lost bride whom he had worshiped so madly.

His reason seemed to reel before that wonderful resemblance, his heart was on fire with the passion she roused within him; yet through it all he had a vague feeling that he must shield Sydney, that he must not betray her to the beautiful woman whom she had wronged.

His dark eyes fell before her steady gaze, his cheek reddened, his tongue felt thick when he tried to speak.

Sydney's heart was beating almost to suffocation, while he stood thus hesitating. She knew when he struck the glass from Queenie's hand that he had witnessed her dastardly crime.

She wondered if his mad passion for the beautiful actress would lead him to betray *her*—his wife!

In her terror and desperation she grasped his arm and looked up pleadingly into his face.

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Captain Ernscliffe looked down at her—oh! the withering scorn, the just horror of that look.

She shrank back abashed before it, but he slowly shook his head.

She was safe—he could not forget that she bore his name, however unworthily.

"I ask you again, sir," said the actress, in a voice that demanded reply, "why did you strike the glass from my hand?"

"Madam, I—I—pardon me, I was excited, I knew not what I did!" he stammered, not daring to meet her searching gaze.

Suddenly Queenie uttered a cry of grief and terror. A little pet dog had left his cushion in the corner and lapped up the spilled wine from the floor with its tiny, pointed tongue.

Now, after a few, unsteady motions, and two or three whining moans of pain, it uttered one sharp, despairing yelp, rolled over upon the carpet and expired.

After Queenie's one terrified cry a dead silence reigned throughout the room.

Sydney dropped into a chair, trembling so that she could not stand, and put her hands before her face. Her sin had found her out.

Queenie would certainly revenge herself now by revealing her identity. What mercy could she expect from the sister she had hated and tried to murder?

"I understand your reluctance to explain yourself now, sir," said the voice of the actress, falling on her ears like the knell of doom. "You would shield your wife!"

He did not answer. His head was bowed on his breast, his handsome, high-bred face was pale with emotion. She went on coldly after a moment's pause:

"I thank you, Captain Ernscliffe, for the ready hand that struck the poisoned wine from my lips, although my life is so valueless to me that it was scarcely worth the saving. But now will you withdraw and leave me to deal with this lady?"

Sydney glanced up through the fingers that hid her shamed face. What did Queenie mean to do? Was it possible that she would not reveal her identity to her husband?

"Madam," he remonstrated, "you were willing to accord me an interview. Surely you will not send me away like this. I cannot go until I have told you why I am here!"

The resolution in his voice alarmed her. She stepped back a pace and stood looking at him with parted lips and burning eyes, her face as white as marble against the background of her rich but somber velvet robe, her loosened, golden hair falling around her like a veil of light.

"We—I—that is—you can have nothing to say to me that I wish to hear!" she panted. "Pray go—let us part as we met—strangers!"

He looked at her with a strange light in his dark eyes, a warm flush creeping into his face.

Sydney watched him with wild, fascinated eyes. What would he say to this speech of the actress?

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"We have not met as strangers—we cannot part thus!" he answered firmly. "Surely my eyes and my heart cannot both deceive me! La Reine Blanche, you are my lost wife, Queenie!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

You might have heard a pin drop in the room, so utter was the silence that followed Captain Ernscliffe's bold declaration.

Sydney remained crouching in her chair, watching the two chief actors in this drama in real life, with wild, fascinated eyes, feeling that her whole future hung trembling in the balance on the answer that must fall from her sister's lips.

Queenie seemed stricken dumb by the words of Captain Ernscliffe. She stared at him speechlessly, her white teeth buried in her crimson lips, her hands clenched tightly together.

"Queenie, you cannot deny it," he went on passionately, seeing that she could not, or would not speak. "Although I thought you dead, although the last time I beheld your sweet face it was under the shadow of the coffin-lid, yet I could swear that the lost bride whom I deemed an angel in Heaven, still walks the earth under the name of Reine De Lisle!"

Still she did not answer, still she stood there pale and statue-like, all the life that was left in her seeming concentrated in the burning gaze she fixed upon his face.

He ventured to come a little nearer, he touched the white, jeweled hands that were locked so tightly together. He altogether forgot Sydney crouching silently in the great arm-chair. He took up a long, curling tress of the golden hair and pressed it to his lips.

"My darling!" he cried, "speak to me! Tell me by what strange mystery you were resurrected and restored to my heart! Why have you remained so long away from me?"

The touch of his hands and lips seemed to galvanize her into life. She pushed him away and sprang to Sydney's side.

"Madam," she cried indignantly, "what ails your husband? Is he mad? Why does he claim me as his wife?"

Sydney's heart gave one wild, passionate throb of joy. Queenie had declared herself. She would renounce her husband! Taking the cue instantly, she sprang up and fixed a pleading gaze on the beautiful white face of the actress.

"Oh! Madame De Lisle, forgive him," she cried. "You are the living image of his first wife, whom he adored, and who died at the altar. Your perfect resemblance to her has driven him mad!"

He looked from one to the other—the dark, radiant brunette, the lily-white blonde, each so perfect in her type—and his heart sank heavily.

Had they conspired to deceive him, or was this wonderful resemblance to his lost bride but a mere coincidence—a will-o'-the-wisp, an *ignis fatuus*, to lead his heart and his reason astray?

"Cease, Sydney!" he said sternly. "She cannot deny it, she will not utter such a stupendous falsehood. My heart is too true a monitor to lead me astray! It never throbbed as it does now in the presence of any woman on earth but Queenie Lyle!"

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How noble and handsome he looked as he stood there, pleading for his love with all his tender, passionate heart shining in his dark eyes.

The actress gave one look at him, then turned away and walked to the further end of the room.

She could not bear the mute, agonizing appeal in his beautiful, troubled, dark eyes. Sydney sprang to his side and clasped her hands about his arm.

"Oh! Lawrence," she cried. "You break my heart! I tremble for your reason. Oh! pray, pray, come away from here! Madame De Lisle is very angry with you for your persistence in your strange mistake. You intrude upon her hours for study and practice. Will you not come away with me?"

He looked down at her suspiciously, without stirring from the spot.

"Sydney, if indeed I am mistaken," he said, "why are *you* here? If this lady is not your sister, what have you to do with her? Why," he lowered his voice slightly, "why did you seek to remove her from your path?"

Sydney dropped her eyes and turned crimson.

"Oh, Lawrence," she said, "she is not my sister, but she is my rival. I know all that passed last night, I know that she has won your heart from me."

"It was never yours, Sydney," he answered firmly. "I married you because you loved me, and were unhappy without me; but you never held my heart. I have never loved but one woman on earth. I told you that before I made you my wife."

The listener's heart gave one great bound of joy. He loved her still—he had never loved but her. Why should she sacrifice herself and him for the doubtful good of Sydney's happiness?

A great wave of pity for herself and for her true, loyal husband swept over her heart.

She made a quick step toward him as if to throw herself upon his breast, then shrank back into herself, deterred by the agonised appeal in the eyes of Sydney, who seemed to divine her purpose.

"Oh! Lawrence," entreated Sydney, "pray go away from here. Madame De Lisle grows impatient."

The actress swept across the room, turned the handle of the door, and held it open.

"Mrs. Ernscliffe is right," she said in a cold, hard tone, "I am both weary and impatient. I can bear no more. This trespass on my time and patience is inexcusable. Will it please you to go now, sir?"

Lawrence Ernscliffe advanced and stood before her in the doorway. She could not bear the passionate pain and reproach in the beautiful eyes he fastened on her face. Her gaze wavered and fell before his.

"Queenie," he said, slowly and sadly, "you have not deceived me! You cannot deny that you are my own! Your soul is too white and pure to suffer such a falsehood to stain your lips! Yet you will not let me claim you, you are sacrificing your happiness and mine for a mere chimera! I understand it all. Sydney has asked for the sacrifice and you have made it. It is for *her sake!*"

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He bent down, lifted a spray of white hyacinth that had fallen from the lace on her breast to the floor, pressed it to his lips, and silently withdrew.

Queenie closed the door upon his retreating form and turned back to her sister.

"He was right," she said slowly, "I have sacrificed my happiness and his for your sake, Sydney."

Sydney lifted her heavy eyes and looked at her without speaking. Queenie went on slowly: "This is my revenge, Sydney: you have scorned and insulted me, you have branded me with a cruel name, you have tried to poison me—me, the little sister you loved and petted when we were children at our mother's knee! Yet, for the sake of those old days, and the love we had for each other then, I forgive you—nay, more, I make the sacrifice you were cruel enough to ask of me. I resign the one being whom I have sought for years—the one thing dear to me upon earth. I give you the pulse of my heart, the life of my life, the soul of my soul!"

Cold and white as marble in her sublime self-abnegation, she pointed to the door.

"Go," she said, "I can bear no more!"

Sydney obeyed her without a word.

Then the beautiful queen of tragedy, the lovely woman who counted her admirers by the hundreds, knelt down upon the floor, and lifted her white, despairing face to Heaven.

"Oh! God," she moaned, "If indeed I am a sinner, as she said, surely this great and bitter sacrifice for another's sake must win for me the pity and pardon of Heaven!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

The three weeks of La Reine Blanche's London engagement were drawing to a close.

She had achieved a brilliant success. Her beauty and her genius were the themes of every tongue.

Her admirers were legion. She had a score of wealthy and titled lovers. It was even said that a noble and well-known duke had proposed to marry her, and met with a cold and haughty refusal.

The managers of the theater where she was playing tried to secure her for another month. It would be worth a fortune to them, they said, and they allowed her to make her own terms.

To their consternation she utterly declined a longer engagement and announced her intention to retire from the stage.

The managers were astounded. What! retire from the stage in the zenith of her fame, with all her gifts of youth, beauty and genius. It was too dreadful. Yet in spite of their remonstrances she persevered. She canceled at a tremendous cost an engagement she had made with a Parisian manager. A whisper was circulated and began to gain credence that the beautiful *tragedienne* was about to enter a convent and take the veil for life.

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She did not deny it when people questioned her, but she would not tell the reason why she was about to take such a strange step.

She only smiled sadly when they remonstrated with her, but she would never tell why she was about to immure herself, with all her gifts of beauty, youth and genius, in a living tomb.

But there was one thing that was palpable to all who saw her off the stage and divested of the trickery of paint and cosmetics. La Reine Blanche was fading like the frailest summer flower. The lily bloomed on her cheek instead of the rose.

Under her large, blue eyes lay purple shadows, darker and deeper than those cast by the drooping lashes. A look of patient suffering crept about the corners of her lips and hid in her eyes. Her smiles were sadder and more pathetic than sighs, her form grew slighter and more ethereal in its perfect grace, her step lost its lightness and elasticity. Some said that the beautiful actress was dying of a broken heart, others said that she was falling into a consumption.

She heard these things and made no outward sign, but inwardly she said to herself:

"They are both right and wrong. I am dying because I have nothing left to live for. I have toiled and hoped for years. I have studied and practiced to get money to carry me over the wide world in search of the one true heart that was mine only, and now that I have found it I have had to give it away. I cannot endure it; I am not strong enough. There is nothing left me but to die!"

She thought of some sorrowful lines she had somewhere read and mournfully repeated them:

"Much must be borne which is hard to bear,
Much given away which it were sweet to keep.
God helps us all! who need indeed His care;
And yet I know the Shepherd loves His sheep."

Those flying rumors and reports only served to make Madame De Lisle more popular. She was the rage. She played to densely packed houses every night.

Flowers rained upon her. The costliest gifts of jewels and rare *bric-a-brac* were sent to her from such unknown sources that she could neither refuse nor send them back as she would otherwise

have done. There was always a great throng of people waiting to see her step into the carriage every night.

But in all that throng La Reine Blanche never saw but one face. There was one man who always held the same position beside her carriage door. He never spoke to her, he never touched her, but stood there patiently every night, thrilled to the depths of his soul if the hem of her perfumed robe but brushed him in passing.

Some weird fascination utterly beyond her power of resistance always impelled her to meet his glance, and the fire in his beautiful, dark eyes; the passionate love, the terrible pain, the bitter reproach were killing her slowly but surely.

And Lawrence Ernscliffe was going mad. He had no life, no thought, no hope outside the beautiful woman whom he had claimed for his wife, and who had so coldly denied him. [Pg 86]

He haunted her like her own shadow. Go where she would she saw him, look where she would she met only the eyes of the man she loved and to whom she belonged by the dearest tie on earth.

He forgot Sydney utterly, or if he ever remembered her it was only with scorn. Her terrible sin had placed her beyond the pale of his tenderness forever. No reasoning, no sophistry could have convinced him that the beautiful actress was not his own wife whom he had lost in the very moment that made her his bride.

He could not have explained himself. He did not understand at all the mysterious chance which had brought it about, yet he knew in his own heart that the woman whom he had seen in her coffin once had been restored to life again, and that the only bar to their happiness now was Sydney, whom he had married through a simple impulse of pity.

CHAPTER XXX.

It was the last night of Madame De Lisle's engagement. She would make her final appearance before the world in the beautiful tragedy of "King Lear." To-morrow she would retire to the conventional cloister forever.

The theater was so densely packed that there was scarcely standing-room on this her farewell night.

Lord Valentine and his wife and mother-in-law were in his box from which they had scarcely missed a night of the three weeks.

Besides Mrs. Lyle's passionate love of the drama there was a subtle fascination in Madame De Lisle's strange resemblance to her youngest daughter that impelled her thither every night to gaze upon her with eyes that never wearied in looking on her loveliness. She could not have told why it was, but she was vaguely conscious of a troubled tenderness about her heart whenever she looked at the fair young creature and heard the talk of her going into a convent.

"She makes me think of poor Queenie," she whispered to Georgina that night. "I cannot help feeling sorry for her, she is so like what she was."

"The resemblance is startling, indeed," Lady Valentine whispered back, "but don't let Sydney hear you, mamma. She does not like to hear about it."

Sydney made no sign, but she knew very well what they were talking of.

She came to the theater every night, though she hated to be there. Jealousy drove her to look on her rival's face every night that she might also watch her husband.

Poor Sydney! She sat there pale and haggard, and wretched in her white satin and diamonds, looking with jealous, suspicious eyes at the beautiful and gentle "Cordelia," hating her for the fairness that Lawrence Ernscliffe loved. [Pg 87]

Queenie's sacrifice, made at so costly a price to herself, had utterly failed to purchase her sister's happiness.

Captain Ernscliffe had a seat in another part of the house where Sydney could watch his every movement. Her heart swelled with bitter pain and passionate anger as she looked at him. He did not even seem to know that she was there. His dark, melancholy eyes never once moved from the graceful form of the unhappy "Cordelia" as she acted her part on the stage. When the curtain fell he dropped his eyes and never looked up again until his beautiful idol reappeared.

La Reine Blanche had never acted better. She gave her whole attention to her part. She did not seem to see that one pair of eyes had watched her with such wild entreaty and passionate love in their beautiful depths.

There was one box at which she never looked but once, and it was when, in obedience to her husband's command, "Bid farewell to your sisters," she slowly repeated:

"Ye jewels of our father, with washed eyes
Cordelia leaves you: I know you what you are;
And, like a sister, am most loth to call
Your faults as they are named. Love well our father:

To your professed bosoms I commit him;
But yet, alas! stood I within his grace,
I would prefer him to a better place.
So farewell to you both."

Everyone in the house saw her brilliant eyes fixed on Lord Valentine's box as she repeated those words, but perhaps no one but the actress herself saw that Sydney's eyes drooped in shame and confusion, while a scarlet blush stained her cheek.

Ah, she, and no other, comprehended the bitter meaning of Queenie's words as she fixed her blue eyes mournfully on the sister who had wronged her so deeply.

"This is her last night," Sydney murmured to herself, "but is it true that she will go into a convent? I must see her, I must know the truth for certain. I will go round to her dressing-room and ask her."

When the act was over she complained of sickness and asked Lord Valentine to take her down to the carriage.

Lord Valentine complied and left her sitting in the carriage, the coachman mounting to his box.

But in a moment, before the two prancing horses had started, Sydney slipped out of the carriage so noiselessly that the man drove on never dreaming but that she was shut up within.

Then she ran round breathlessly to the private entrance of the theater. She told the man who kept the door that she had an engagement with Madame De Lisle and desired him to show her to that lady's dressing-room.

Two minutes later she found herself alone in the small apartment where the actress changed her costumes for the different acts and scenes.

Queenie had not yet come in. The manager had detained her a few minutes and Sydney had time to draw breath and look about her while she waited for her sister. [Pg 88]

There was not much to see. The room was dingy and sparsely furnished, as the dressing-room of a theater is apt to be.

Costumes were laid over the backs of chairs, and the maid who should have been guarding them was "off duty," gossiping, no doubt, with some humble *attache* of the place. There was little to interest one, and Sydney grew impatient.

Suddenly she saw a letter lying carelessly on the toilet table. She took it up and looked at it.

It was addressed to Madame De Lisle, and had never been unsealed.

"It has been left here during the first act, and Queenie has never seen it," she said to herself. "It looks like my husband's writing. I will see what he has to say to her."

Recklessly, desperately, she tore it open, and drew out the sheet of note paper.

"MY DARLING," it said simply, "meet me at the western door after the first act is over. I *must* see you a moment."

No name was signed to the mysterious note, but Sydney felt sure that it was her husband's writing.

"Queenie has deceived me," she said to herself, angrily. "She is in collusion with Lawrence. I might have known she would play me false!"

She looked about her hurriedly. A long, black silk circular, lined with fur, hung over a chair. She put it on over her white dress, caught up a thick veil, winding it about her head and face, and hurried out to the retired western door.

Outside in the darkness stood a tall, muffled form.

"Queenie, is it you?" he said in unfamiliar tones.

In a moment she realized her mistake. It was not her husband, but in the hope of unearthing some fatal mystery, she said softly:

"Yes, it is Queenie."

These words sealed her doom. The man sprang forward and caught her by the arm.

Something bright and slender gleamed an instant in his upraised hand and then was sheathed in her heart.

As her terrible scream of agony divided the shuddering air, he turned and fled from the scene of his crime.

But poor Sydney, the victim of her own misguided passion lay there dying, with the deadly steel of the assassin sheathed in her jealous breast.

CHAPTER XXXI.

That wild and piercing cry penetrated to many ears. The manager and the actress heard it where

they stood conversing together, and though Queenie did not know that it was Sydney's voice, still she grew pale as death, and an indefinable fear crept coldly around her heart. The manager put her into a chair, for he saw that she could not stand.

"Stay here until I return," he said, "I will go and see what has happened."

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He hurried round to the western door from which the sound had seemed to proceed.

A little knot of theater *attaches* had preceded him. They were gathered round the prostrate form, and one had unwound the shrouding veil from her pale face and exposed it to the air and light. Her dark eyes were staring upward with a look of pain and horror in their starry depths, her face was ashen white, her lips quivered with faint, anguished moans, and her white, jeweled hands worked convulsively at the hilt of the dagger whose deadly blade was buried in her breast.

She looked up at the manager as he bent over her. A gleam of recognition came into her eyes.

"I am dying," she said, in a faint, gasping voice. "Let someone go into the theater and bring Captain Ernscliffe! Don't let anyone else know I am here! Queenie—I mean—Madame De Lisle—must not know! Let the play go on."

At that moment they brought a physician, summoned in haste from his seat in the theater. He knelt down and tried to draw the dagger from her breast, but desisted in a moment and shook his head ominously.

"Tell me the truth," she moaned. "How many minutes have I to live?"

The physician looked down at her with a grave pity in his kindly eyes.

"Only as long as the dagger remains in the wound," he answered, gently. "When that is removed you will bleed to death in a minute."

She clasped both hands around the murderous steel as if to drive it deeper into her heart.

"Let it remain there, then," she gasped, "I have something to say before—I go hence!"

"Great Heaven! who has done this?" exclaimed a shocked voice.

They all looked around. It was Captain Ernscliffe who spoke. He knelt down by his wife and looked at the murderous dagger whose hilt she grasped, with eyes full of horror. The pain in her face softened. She put out one hand to him, and he clasped it in his own.

"Lawrence—I have been—cruelly murdered!" she moaned. "Let someone take my dying deposition."

The manager hurriedly produced pencil and paper.

"I went into Madame De Lisle's dressing-room," she began. "She had not come in, and I waited a little while, wishing to speak to her. Have you put that down?"

The manager replied in the affirmative.

"I saw a sealed letter lying on the table," she went on slowly and painfully; "I was jealous of Madame De Lisle, to whom it was addressed. I thought my husband had written it. I opened it—I—read it."

The physician stopped her a minute to pour a few drops of something between her panting lips. Then she went on:

"It was only a line imploring her to meet him for a moment at the western door. No name was signed, but I was foolish enough to believe it was—my husband."

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Her dark eyes lifted to his a moment with a mute appeal for forgiveness in their dusky depths. He pressed her hand and murmured:

"My poor Sydney!"

She lay still a moment while great drops of dew beaded her white brow, forced out by her terrible suffering.

"Can we do nothing to help her?" Captain Ernscliffe inquired anxiously, as he pillowed the dark head gently on his arm.

The physician shook his head gravely.

"No—nothing," Sydney answered him herself. "Only stay by me—till the last. Let me finish my story."

Captain Ernscliffe wiped the cold dews of death from her brow and she continued:

"I took Madame De Lisle's cloak and put it over my dress, I tied her veil about my head and face, and—and—went to the western door—myself! Oh! God, this dagger, how it hurts my side!"

A few moans of terrible agony, then she went on, gaspingly:

"There was a tall, dark man outside the door—he said: 'Is it you, Queenie?' Then I saw my mistake—it was not my husband! But I—thought—I might learn—some fatal secret of hers—so I answered yes."

She shuddered from head to foot and a groan of mortal agony broke from her white lips.

"That falsehood sealed my doom! He sprang forward without a word, buried this dagger in my breast, and fled. It was Madame De Lisle's enemy. I know now. I received in my heart the stroke that was meant for hers."

She paused, then repressing a groan of pain, said feebly:

"Have you written it all down?"

"Yes, madam," the manager answered.

"Very well. I want you all to go away now—I want to be alone—with my husband. Don't let anyone else know I am here. The play must not be stopped. Let him be all mine a little longer!"

They turned away in wonder at her strange words, and left her lying there supported on her husband's arm—the beautiful woman with the diamonds in her dark hair, and the dagger's hilt above her heart, her white hand grasping it convulsively while she panted forth to him her strange story in the briefest words she could find, for her strength was ebbing fast, and her pain was becoming almost unendurable.

The manager went back to the actress and told her some plausible tale to allay her fears, and, as Sydney had wished, "the play went on." The foolish, fond old "Lear" ranted and raved his little hour, the cruel sisters of "Cordelia"—even poor "Cordelia" herself—all died their mimic deaths upon the stage—little dreaming that a tragedy in real life had been enacted so close and so near, and that poor, erring Sydney lay dead beneath the same roof where the vast throng of people wept and applauded at the superb rendition of Shakespeare's grand creation, "King Lear."

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Yet so it was, for when Sydney had faltered out her mournful story, she looked up at Captain Ernscliffe and said with a quivering sigh:

"I have done now, Lawrence, and the pain is so great I cannot bear it any longer! Will you draw the dagger from my wound and let me die?"

But he shrank back aghast at her words.

"Oh, Sydney, don't ask me! Will you not see them all first, and say good-bye—your mother, your sisters?"

"No, no, I want—none—but you," she moaned, "and, oh, my God, how terrible the pain is! Yet, Lawrence—I will stay yet a little longer—I will try to bear it still, if you will kneel down there and pray for me! I am such a sinner, I am almost *afraid to die!*"

"Do you repent, Sydney?" he asked, gently.

"Do I?" she wailed; "oh, my God, *yes!* I am sorry for it all, now! Tell her I tried to make atonement at the last. She will forgive me. Little Queenie was always very tender-hearted. Pray for me now—ask God to forgive me, too."

He bowed his head and prayed fervently for the welfare of the soul about to be launched upon the shoreless waters of eternity.

When the low "amen" vibrated on the night air, she looked up and said moaningly:

"Have you forgiven me, too, Lawrence?"

He bent and kissed the poor, pale, quivering lips.

"All is forgiven, Sydney," he answered, gently.

"Then call the physician," she moaned. "Let him draw this cruel steel from—my breast! I cannot—bear it—any longer!"

But the physician recoiled as Captain Ernscliffe had done when she told him what she wished him to do.

"I should feel like a murderer," he gasped. "You could not live a minute after the blade was drawn out of your breast."

She turned away from him and put out her hand to the man she loved so madly.

"Farewell, Lawrence," she said. "Think of me sometimes as of one who—loved you—'not wisely, but too well!'"

Then, before they even guessed what she was about to do, she clasped both hands about the dagger's hilt, and with a terrible effort wrenched it from her breast and threw it far from her. Her heart's blood spurted out in a great, warm, crimson tide over the bodice of her white satin dress, she quivered from head to foot, and died with her dim eyes fixed in a long, last look of love on Lawrence Ernscliffe's handsome face.

When the play was over, and the beautiful actress was leaving the theater for the last time, someone touched her arm and detained her. She looked up into the pale face of Captain Ernscliffe.

"Nay, Queenie," he said gently, "you need not shrink from me now. Sydney has confessed all."

She looked up at him in wonder as he drew her hand lovingly within his arm.

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"She has given you up to me, and you know *all!*?" she repeated, like one dazed.

"Yes, Queenie, I know all, and I am yours alone now, for—prepare yourself for a great shock, my darling—your sister, Sydney, is dead!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

"Dead!" exclaimed Queenie, with a start of horror; "oh, no, that cannot be! It is but a little while since I saw her living and beautiful under this roof!"

"Her body is here still, Queenie, but her soul has fled to the God who gave it," he answered solemnly.

She trembled like a leaf in a storm at that grave assurance.

"Queenie, let me take you back to your dressing-room," he said. "Stay there a little while until I come for you."

Utterly unnerved by the shock of his revelation, she suffered him to lead her back. He left her at the door of her room and went out to seek Lord Valentine.

He had just put his wife and mother-in-law into the carriage, and stood talking with the driver on the pavement.

"Yes sir," the man was saying, "you know you brought her out and put her into the carriage yourself, and I jumped up on the box and drove right off. But when I got to Valentine House, my lord, the carriage was empty. Yet I could swear to you, my lord, that the carriage was never stopped an instant between here and home."

"Come with me, my lord," said Captain Ernscliffe, in a whisper, as he touched his arm, "I will explain the mystery."

"Very well. Let the carriage wait until I return," he said to the man as he walked away with his brother-in-law.

Captain Ernscliffe led him back into the theater where Sydney lay still and cold in death, watched by the manager and several of the theater employes. They had lifted the body and laid it on a pile of silken cushions, to remain until it had been viewed by the coroner, who had been immediately notified of the terrible event.

At a whispered request the manager gave the paper containing the dying deposition of Sydney into Ernscliffe's hands, and he in turn passed it over to Lord Valentine.

"Great Heaven! this is terrible," he exclaimed, looking down at the rigid form of his sister-in-law. "What is to be done? Who will break the news to her mother and sister?"

They walked apart, and Captain Ernscliffe briefly told him the truth—that Madame Reine De Lisle was his lost wife, Queenie, and that Sydney's knowledge of that fact had maddened her with suspicion and jealousy, and driven her into the fatal error that had cost her her life.

"It is too wonderful to be true," said Lord Valentine. "I cannot believe that the woman I saw lying dead in her coffin has been so strangely resurrected. Surely, Ernscliffe, this beautiful actress has but traded on her wonderful resemblance to your lost bride, and deceived you and Sydney both. Have nothing to do with this beautiful siren."

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Captain Ernscliffe looked at him half angrily.

"My Lord Valentine," he answered haughtily, "you charge her with that of which she is not guilty. She has not deceived us. She did not seek us; we sought her, and as long as Sydney lived she evaded the truth and would not acknowledge her identity to me, because my second wife had begged her to sacrifice herself for her sake. But come with me. Since you doubt her identity let us see if she will recognize you. If you appear as a stranger to her we may then afford to doubt her."

They went to Queenie's dressing-room and knocked on the door. She opened it and bade them enter in a faltering voice, with her cheeks bathed in tears, her blue eyes downcast and troubled.

"Queenie, look up," said Captain Ernscliffe. "Do you recognize this gentleman?"

The actress lifted her lovely eyes, dimmed with bitter weeping and looked at him. A gleam of recognition shone in her face.

"Yes," she answered, in her sweet, low voice. "It is Lord Valentine, who was married to my sister Georgina the night you married me."

Captain Ernscliffe flashed a triumphant look upon his brother-in-law.

"You see she knows all about us," he said. "Now you cannot but admit her identity. You must believe that she is my wife!"

Lord Valentine grew white and red by turns as he gazed upon the beautiful, queenly woman.

"I admit madam's wonderful beauty, her grace and her talent," he said, slowly, "and I will not deny her astonishing resemblance to your lost bride; but, Ernscliffe, I will not believe this trumped-up story of poor Queenie's resurrection. You are the victim of a monstrous fraud!"

Captain Ernscliffe's eyes blazed with anger.

"You deny that this is my wife?" he exclaimed, passionately.

Lord Valentine was silent a moment. After that brief pause for thought he answered, firmly:

"Yes, I utterly deny it. I will not believe in so stupendous a fraud as this one which is being perpetrated upon you. Madame De Lisle is a beautiful woman, and a great actress; but she is not

the wife you buried years ago in Rose Hill Cemetery."

Queenie lifted her head and looked at him proudly, but she did not speak one word in her own defense. She did not need to do so. She had an eloquent defender by her side.

"Since you think thus," said Captain Ernscliffe, repressing his anger and excitement by a powerful effort of his will, "pray go to your wife and break the news of Sydney's tragic death to her and her mother. You may tell them also all that I have told you, and we will see if they will decide as you have done."

Lord Valentine bowed coldly and went away.

Captain Ernscliffe turned to the beautiful woman, who had fallen into a seat and buried her face in her jeweled hands. [Pg 94]

"Queenie," he murmured.

She looked up at his inquiringly.

"Can you bear to hear the circumstances of your poor sister's death?" he asked, gently.

She bowed without speaking.

For answer he put into her hand Sydney's dying deposition, which Lord Valentine had returned to him.

She read it silently through. It dropped from her nerveless clasp, and she looked at him with a bitter pain in her white face.

"Oh, God, my poor, unhappy sister!" she moaned. "I have been the cause of her death."

"Say rather her own reckless passion was her doom," he answered, solemnly. "Do not accuse yourself, Queenie. *She* did not blame you. She was very sorrowful and repentant at the last. She wanted your forgiveness."

"Oh, my poor Sydney! She went mad for love," said Queenie, weeping.

"As I had almost done," he answered. "For, Queenie, I have been nearly beside myself these last few weeks. I knew you in spite of all your denials, and the bitterness of it all nearly broke my heart. But now I shall have my own again. Sydney wished it, dearest," he added, seeing a look of hesitancy on her face.

She did not answer, and her blue eyes drooped away from his fond glance.

He moved nearer and took her unresisting hand in his.

"Darling, forgive me for pressing it now in your grief and trouble, but tell me, shall it be as Sydney wished? Will you come back to my heart?"

"Perhaps you will not want me when I have told you all I have to tell," she answered, her sweet face crimson with painful blushes.

"There is nothing left for you to tell, my darling. Sydney has told me all," he answered, quickly.

"And you do not blame me? You are not angry with me?" she said, lifting her fair, troubled face with a look of wonder, mingled with relief.

"No, my sweet one. How could I blame you? It was like your sweet, impulsive self," he answered. "But tell me now, Queenie if you will——"

But at that moment the shrill scream of a woman broke the silence of the night, and Queenie sprang to her feet with a sob of grief and terror.

"It is your mother, dearest. She is there with Sydney. Can you bear to go to her, Queenie? Perhaps it may comfort her to have one daughter restored to her in the hour that she has lost another."

"Yes, yes, I will go," she moaned, turning toward the door. He drew her hand into his and led her around to the fatal western door.

Mrs. Lyle was there, down on her knees by her dead daughter, weeping and mourning, and Georgina stood apart, sobbing in her husband's arms. [Pg 95]

Queenie rushed forward and threw herself down by the side of the kneeling woman.

"Mamma, mamma," she sobbed, "let me comfort you a little. Sydney is dead, but Queenie has come back to you to try to fill her place."

Mrs. Lyle shook off the white arm that had been thrown around her neck and sprang to her feet.

"How dare you touch me?" she cried, "you whose siren wiles have wrought my daughter's death? Go away from me, vile imposter that you are! My daughter Queenie is dead."

"No, no, mamma, she lives; she was saved from death! Oh, let me tell you all! I am your daughter Queenie!" cried the actress, in a voice of passionate pleading, lifting her streaming eyes to her mother's face.

"Begone! You are no child of mine!" was the angry reply, as Mrs. Lyle drew away from her, disdainful of her very touch. "Oh, go! go! You have stolen Sydney's husband; you have caused her death; you cannot deceive me also. Will not someone take her away?"

Queenie stood still, with clasped hands and streaming eyes, listening to her mother's cruel words. Then she crossed over to Lady Valentine, who stood within the clasp of her husband's arms

weeping bitterly.

"Georgie," she said, in a tremulous voice, "won't *you* speak to me? Don't *you* know me? Sydney recognized me and owned me for her sister, even though I stood in her way. Surely you will not disown me!"

Georgie lifted her head and looked at the beautiful pleader a moment in silence.

She was not a bad woman, this Lady Valentine, and for a moment an impulse of pity stirred her heart and prompted her to believe this strange story at which her husband had sneered, and which her mother affected to disbelieve.

If she had been left to herself the better impulse in her heart would have triumphed, perhaps. Even as it was a momentary tender remembrance came into her heart as she recalled the night of her father's and sister's death! She recalled his words:

"Georgie, forgive her; she was more sinned against than sinning. She went mad and avenged the wrong. Remember that when she comes back."

"How did he know she would come back?" thought Lady Valentine to herself, in wonder. "We all thought she was dead then. But perhaps dying eyes can see more clearly than others. Poor papa, must I go against his dying charge to me?"

Then she remembered what her husband had said to her a little while ago:

"Georgie, do not forget that you have married into a proud old family. Think of the disgrace to us all if you should own this impostor for your sister! True, she is beautiful and gifted, but what then? She is an *actress*! The men and women of our race do not descend to such. They amuse us on the stage—these clever people. We pay for our amusement, and that ends all. We have nothing in common. Do not allow this clever, deceitful woman to impose on you as she did on your brother-in-law."

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Lady Valentine knew quite well what those words meant.

She was not to recognize the actress as her sister, no matter what she thought.

So she strangled the thrill of pity at her heart, and answered in a cold, hard voice, quite unlike her own:

"Go away, Madame De Lisle. You are no sister of mine!"

Queenie turned from her with a heart-wrung sigh and went back to her mother.

"Mamma, let me kiss you once," she said, "only once, dear mamma, before I go away! I have loved you so, I have hungered for you so these long years while I have been away from you! Let me even kiss your hand, mamma, and I will try to be content. Oh! surely you will show me a little kindness if only for papa's sake, who loved me so dearly!"

But the mother's heart was turned to stone. She thrust away the clinging hands, she spurned the tender, beseeching lips.

"Go away," she harshly reiterated, "you are no child of mine. My daughter Queenie is dead and buried!"

The discarded daughter knelt down by Sydney's beautiful, lifeless clay and took the cold hand in hers, then kissed the white, breathless lips.

"Good-bye, Sydney," she whispered against the icy cheek. "You were kinder to me than they. You sought to kill my body, but they have broken my heart!"

She rose, after one long look of grief and pain, and went back to Captain Ernscliffe.

"I have only you left, Lawrence," she said, mournfully.

"I will be father, mother, sister, husband—everything to you, my darling," he answered, fondly, as he drew her hand in his arm.

"Put me in the carriage now," she said. "I am very weary. I must go home."

"You will have to be present at the inquest to-morrow. Did you know that?" he said.

"Yes, I will be there. Good-night, Lawrence," she said, putting her hand out from the carriage window.

He clasped and kissed it, then after watching the carriage out of sight, went back to where the mourners kept their weary vigil by the side of the beautiful woman who had loved him so fondly and fatally.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

All London rang with the romantic facts that were elicited at the inquest over the body of poor, murdered Sydney, but though the examination was conducted with the utmost strictness, and every available witness was interrogated, no light was thrown upon the matter that could lead to a conviction of the murderer.

Everyone who heard the tragic story of how Sydney came to her death, thought that Madame

Reine De Lisle's evidence would certainly furnish some satisfactory clue to the enemy who had sought her life. To their surprise and consternation, she declared herself utterly ignorant in the matter.

The note which Sydney had read was found on the dressing-room floor but Queenie did not recognize the writing and could not guess the writer.

"If I had found the note myself I should have thought precisely as she did, that it was written by Captain Ernscliffe," she admitted, frankly. "But I should not have gone to meet him, for I had promised my sister to avoid him, and deny my identity to him. I have not an enemy upon earth that I am aware of, neither a jealous lover who might seek my life. I had an enemy once, who was cruel and vindictive enough for any deed of darkness, but he is dead long ago."

They cross-examined her, they tried to trip her in every way, but she never varied in her evidence, and never faltered in her reiterated declarations, so at last they let her go, feeling convinced that nothing but the truth had passed her lips.

So the mystery only deepened, and taken together with the romance and pathos that clung about the story of the resurrected wife and her brilliant career while seeking her husband, it created a perfect *furor* of excitement.

The interested parties had tried to keep it a secret, but the facts had leaked out in spite of them.

Everybody had heard that the great actress was Captain Ernscliffe's first wife, who had died and been resurrected from the grave and restored to life, kept a prisoner for months, then escaped, and been cared for in her friendlessness and desolation by an old actor and actress, who had found her dying in the wintery night when she had escaped from her cruel jailers.

They had taught her their profession, and she had gone upon the stage to earn money to seek her husband.

All this the world knew, and it knew also that the proud Lady Valentine and her mother refused to recognize the actress, and branded her as a lying impostor.

All these facts only added to the interest and admiration that had followed La Reine Blanche wherever she moved.

And poor Sydney was laid away in her grave, while her cowardly murderer roved at large, "unwhipped of justice."

One single clue to the criminal had been found. Captain Ernscliffe had employed the most noted detective of the day to ferret out the mystery.

This man had been thoroughly over the ground of the murder, and had found one trifling clue.

Yet he confidently told his employer that it was an important link in the chain and might possibly convict the murderer.

It seemed a very trifling thing to Captain Ernscliffe, who had not learned by grave experience what simple things might lead to great results.

It was only a woman's handkerchief of plain white linen that he had found outside the western door, wet and soiled where it had lain on the damp earth all night.

Only a woman's handkerchief, but it was marked in one corner with a name—the simple name of "Elsie Gray."

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Queenie started when she heard what the detective had said about the handkerchief. She sent for him immediately.

"Do you believe that there was a woman in complicity with the man who murdered my unfortunate sister?" she inquired.

"Madam, I cannot tell you," he answered. "She may have been in complicity with him or she may have been a chance witness. Anyhow I am bound to find Elsie Gray."

"I can give you this much information about her," was the startling reply. "Elsie Gray was my maid, and she has been missing ever since the hour of the murder."

"Elsie Gray your maid!" exclaimed the detective. "That throws new light on the matter. Can you account for her disappearance?"

"Not at all. She was in the habit of going to the theater every night with me to help me to change my costumes for the different scenes. She went with me that night, but when I went to my room after the first act she was not there. I have never seen her since."

"Had she any grudge against you?"

"None that I am aware of. She was a good-natured, middle-aged woman, and appeared to be attached to me."

The detective took out pencil and paper.

"Will you describe her appearance to me, Mrs. Ernscliffe?" he said, courteously.

Queenie started and blushed at being addressed by her husband's name. She had not yet decided whether she would return to him again or not, but she complied with the detective's request and minutely described her maid's appearance.

He carefully noted it down, bowed and withdrew. He reported what he had learned to Captain Ernscliffe, who bade him go ahead and spare neither pains nor expense until he had discovered

the murderer.

In the meantime the wide-spread notoriety of the whole affair was very distressing to Mrs. Lyle and the Valentines, and to Queenie and Lawrence Ernscliffe as well. They could not bear to remain in London.

Lord Valentine took his wife and mother-in-law to Italy for an indefinite sojourn.

Lawrence Ernscliffe begged his wife to let him take her back to America to the beautiful home he had prepared for her reception three years before.

"It does not seem right to return to you and be happy after—after that terrible tragedy," she objected.

"Queenie, it was not your fault nor mine. Surely you will not doom me to wretchedness for such a scruple as that. You made every sacrifice she asked of you while living, and she would not wish you to immolate our mutual happiness upon her tomb, now that she is dead."

Her own heart seconded his pleading so fully that she could not say him nay.

"I had meant to fulfill my resolve to retire into a convent for life," she said, "but I cannot keep down my heart's rebellious throbs. I will go with you, my husband." [Pg 99]

So it chanced that two weeks later the strangely-reunited husband and wife stood on the deck of a steamer just leaving her moorings for America, and as Queenie turned away from her last look at old England's fading shore, she saw a gentleman hastening toward her—a gentleman so like her poor, dead father, that her heart leaped into her throat.

"Uncle Rob!" she cried, springing forward with her hands extended.

"My little niece, Queenie!" he exclaimed, taking the two little hands warmly into his own.

"This is my Uncle Robert Lyle," she said, presenting him to her husband. "You see, Lawrence, *he* does not disown me!"

The old gentleman looked down fondly into her sweet face.

"Oh! how could they disown you?" he exclaimed. "You have changed but little since I saw you last, and that change has only made you more lovely. I should have known you anywhere, though it is five years since I saw you last. I have heard your sad story, my dear, and I do not doubt its truth for an instant. I would have hastened to you at once, but I was ill and unable to travel."

She flashed a look of silent gratitude upon him from her dusky eyes.

"And by the way," he said, "I owe you a scolding, little Queenie, for your failure to come abroad with your mother and sisters four years ago. It was a great disappointment to me when they came without you. I did not enjoy the year we traveled together half so well as I should if my little pet had been with us."

Queenie stood silent, growing white and red by turn. Captain Ernscliffe stared from one to the other in blank astonishment.

"Surely, Mr. Lyle, I have misunderstood your meaning," he said, "Queenie certainly went to Europe that year with her mother and sisters!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

For a moment there was a blank silence. Robert Lyle stared silently at his niece's husband as though he doubted his sanity, and after a pause Captain Ernscliffe gravely repeated his words:

"Surely I have misunderstood your meaning sir. Queenie certainly went to Europe that year with her mother and sisters."

"If she did I was certainly not aware of the fact," Mr. Lyle answered dryly, for he felt just a little nettled at the other's persistent contradiction.

Captain Ernscliffe looked around at his wife. He started and uttered a cry of alarm as he did so.

She had fallen back against the deck-rail, grasping it with both hands as if unable to stand alone; her cheeks and lips had blanched to an ashen hue, her eyes were wild and frightened.

"Queenie," he said, with an unconscious accent of sternness, "do I speak the truth or not?" [Pg 100]

"Lawrence," she gasped, in a frightened voice, "I thought you knew—did not Sydney tell you? you said she had told you *all!*"

"I meant she had told me all that had transpired between you two in the last six weeks," he answered; "she did not refer to the past only to say that you had been resurrected from the grave by a disappointed suitor who hated you and kept you for weary months a prisoner. What more is there to tell, Queenie?" he inquired, in a voice rendered sharp by suddenly awakened suspicion that as yet took no tangible form.

Through the wild chaos of conflicting feelings that rushed over her she was conscious of a new

feeling of tenderness and respect for poor, erring Sydney.

"She kept my terrible secret after all," she thought. "I believed she had told him everything, but in her desire to atone for her cruelty to me she kept back all that dreadful story, and died in the fond belief that my happiness was secure. She was nobler than I thought. But, oh! what an awful position I am placed in. I thought he knew all and had forgiven me. I meant to tell him everything before I came back to him, and would have done it but for that dreadful mistake. But now, oh, how can I?"

"Uncle Rob is right, Lawrence," she said, speaking with the calmness of despair. "I did not go to Europe with mamma. I meant to go, but at the very last my heart failed me and I begged to remain at home with papa. She gave me my will, though very reluctantly, and I staid behind. Afterward I went out of town on a visit."

"And yet," he said, with a heavy frown, "it was supposed—you allowed everyone to believe that you had been in Europe. Why was that?"

Great crimson waves of color swept into her cheeks at his half-angry words.

"Mamma permitted it," she stammered. "She was so angry and ashamed because I remained behind, and I was, too, after I saw how silly I had been. So when people spoke of it we simply never contradicted it. But you may have noticed that I would never speak of that continental tour—that I always turned the subject when anyone named it."

"Yes, I do remember that," he said. "But you should, at least, have told me, Queenie. It is very strange that you made a secret of such a trifle."

"I am very sorry," she answered, sadly; "I intended to tell you about it before—before I came back to you, but you said when I spoke of it that—that Sydney had told you *all*. I am very, very sorry."

Her eyes fell and rested on the blue waves of the ocean. Her head felt dizzy with the motion of the ship and the waves. It seemed to her as if she could scarcely stand. She seemed to be whirling round and round. Mr. Lyle came forward and took her hand.

"My dear little Queenie," he said. "I am very sorry that my careless words have exposed your foolish, girlish little secret. But forgive me, my pet, and do not look so sad. Captain Ernscliffe, you must not be angry with my little girl. She was very willful and thoughtless in those days, but she has told you she was sorry and meant to tell you all about it."

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One gentle, appealing look from her blue eyes did more to melt the heart of the angry husband than all her uncle's words.

His moody brow unbent; he came back to her side, and, as no one was looking, bent down and kissed away the pearly tears that trembled on her delicate cheek.

"There, I forgive you," he said; "but you must have no more secrets from me, little one."

She shivered slightly, but made no answer, and for this one time the threatened cloud in the sky of their happiness blew safely over, and all was peace between them. Yet the heart of the wife lay like lead in her breast.

Day and night she thought of the terrible secret she was jealously guarding from the eyes of her husband. But after a calm and lovely voyage, in which she had been most tenderly cared for by her uncle and her husband, she found herself once more in the beautiful city where she had been wooed and wedded.

"Uncle Robert, you will go home with us?" she said, as they were getting into the carriage on the wharf.

"Not now," he answered. "You know I told you that it was bad news regarding some of my property here that brought me over to America. I must go to my lawyer's at once and see what can be done. I will come to you in a day or two and see how you like housekeeping," he added, with a laugh.

"We shall certainly expect you," answered Captain Ernscliffe, heartily, as the carriage drove away to the beautiful mansion he had prepared for his bride years ago.

A cablegram from England to his housekeeper had instructed her to prepare the house for the reception of himself and wife.

Now, as they drew up before the grand marble steps, the front door opened as if by magic, and the cruel woman who had turned Queenie away homeless and friendless years before, appeared in the hall, richly clothed in fine black silk, and smirking and smiling upon her master and his beautiful bride as they came up the steps.

Queenie had told him of that cruel deed, and he looked sternly and coldly upon the woman as she came up to them.

"Mrs. Purdy," he said, haughtily, "this is my wife. Look well at her, and tell me if you have ever met her before?"

The housekeeper looked searchingly at the beautiful face, whose blue eyes flashed lightning scorn upon her. In a moment it all rushed over her mind.

That face was too lovely to be lightly forgotten. She grew pale, and commenced to stammer forth incoherent apologies.

"Ah! I see that you remember me," said Mrs. Ernscliffe, curling a scornful lip.

"Madam, I—pardon me," stammered the crestfallen woman, "you were not then his wife. I thought you a stranger, a—"

"Silence!" thundered Captain Ernscliffe. "She was my wife then as she is now. There is no excuse for your infamous conduct. She might have died but for the kindness of strangers—she, my unfortunate wife, turned from her own house without shelter for her friendless head. Go, now, and never let me see you again. Even as you drove her out I will drive you!"

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"No—no," exclaimed Queenie, for she saw how utterly the proud, overbearing woman was abashed. "No—no; I was very angry, but I forgive her now, for I see how she is humbled at remembrance of her fault. Let her stay, and this incident may teach her in future to be guided by the golden rule."

CHAPTER XXXV.

"Queenie, are you ready for your drive?" called her husband from the foot of the stairway. "The phaeton is at the door."

A bright, bewitching face peeped down at him from above—a face as sweet as a rose—with coral lips, and softly-tinted cheeks, and eyes as brightly-blue as violets.

Directly she came fluttering down the stairs, and paused, with her slender, white-gloved hand upon his arm.

"I am ready," she said. "Come, Lawrence, let us go. It is too lovely a day to remain indoors."

"Darling, how lovely you are," he cried. "Let me kiss you once before we start."

She smiled, and linked her arm fondly in his as they went down the marble steps together.

"Lawrence," she said, half-gravely, half-fondly, "I almost begin to believe in my happiness now. At first it seemed such a precious thing, and I held it by so frail a grasp that I feared I might lose you again and fall back into the terrible gulf of despair. But now months have elapsed and nothing has happened to part us, so that it seems possible for me to breathe freely and look forward to a happy future with you."

"Darling, these trembling fears of yours have always seemed strange and unnecessary to me. What could happen to part us now?" he said, as he handed her into the lovely little phaeton, with its prancing gray ponies, and sprang in beside her.

"I do not know. Nothing, I hope," she answered, with a quick little sigh, as she took the reins into her hands and touched up the spirited ponies. "Where shall we drive, Lawrence—in the park?"

"Yes, if you like," he answered, leaning back luxuriously.

It was a beautiful day in May, the air so balmy and delicious that it was a luxury to breathe it.

As they flashed along the shady drives in the park many eyes followed them admiringly, for Mrs. Ernscliffe was conceded by all to be the fairest woman in the city.

To-day she wore a wonderful dress of mingled blue and cream-color, and a hat of azure satin, with a streaming white feather set coquettishly on her waves of golden hair.

The colors suited her bright blonde beauty exquisitely.

Her dark, handsome, dignified husband thrilled with pleasure and pride as he noted the many admiring glances that followed his beautiful and dearly-loved wife.

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"I have had news from England, Queenie," he said, presently.

"From England?" she said, and her delicate cheeks grew white. "Oh, Lawrence, have they found out who murdered Sydney yet?"

"Not yet, dear, but the detective is very hopeful. He is on the villain's track."

"Who was he? What is his name?" she asked, eagerly.

"I do not know. He writes very meagerly, though hopefully. He merely says that he has found your maid, Elsie Gray, and that she has put him on the track of the murderer."

"It is not possible that Elsie Gray was concerned in the murder of my sister!" she exclaimed.

"Oh, no, she was a witness to the deed only—at least I gather that much from his letter. I think she has been pursuing him ever since. The detective says that we may expect startling developments soon."

"God grant that the cowardly criminal may soon be discovered and punished for his awful sin!" she exclaimed, shuddering.

"Queenie," he said, musingly, "have you ever thought that but for the sin of this unknown man we should never, perhaps, have been reunited in peace and happiness? To-day you might have been in the lonely convent cell, while I, perhaps, should have raved in the chains of a lunatic, for, Queenie, I was going mad with the horror of losing you again."

"I have thought of it often," she said, gravely, "and I have thought again and again that it was almost wrong to accept happiness that was bought at so fearful a price to my poor Sydney. Her

death lies heavy on my heart."

"Queenie, we both did what we could to insure her happiness while she lived. I married her because one very near to her hinted to me that the poor girl was dying of a broken heart for my sake. I did not love her, but I sacrificed myself to save her, as you afterward sacrificed us both at her request. And yet those mutual bitter sacrifices of ours availed very little to secure the end she sought. I begin to believe that such terrible self-abnegations are wrong and unjustifiable, and that they never work out good to any."

"It may be true," she answered, thoughtfully, and relapsed into silence, her eyes downcast, her lips set in a half-sorrowful line, while she unconsciously checked the speed of the horses and allowed them to walk slowly along the drive.

Absorbed in thought she did not observe a handsome, fashionably-dressed man coming along the side-path toward them, airily swinging a natty little cane.

"I hope and trust, darling, that you will not allow any weak and morbid fancies regarding Sydney to sadden and depress you," continued Captain Ernscliffe. "I know she would not wish it to be so."

Queenie looked up at him gently with the words of reply just forming on her lips.

But they died unspoken, and she uttered a low cry of fear and terror commingled, while her whole form trembled violently.

She had caught sight of the man in the road who had just come abreast of the phaeton.

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At that moment the man, who had been observing her for some moments, looked at her with a sardonic smile, lifted his hat, bowed deeply, and murmuring familiarly:

"Good-evening, Queenie," passed insolently on.

Captain Ernscliffe grew ashen white. Something like an imprecation was smothered between his firmly-cut lips.

"Good Heaven, Queenie!" he exclaimed. "Is it possible that you know that man?"

She did not speak, she could not. She only stared at him speechlessly, her lips parted in terror, her breath coming and going in quick gasps like one dying.

"Do you know who and what that man is?" he reiterated, hoarsely. "Queenie, it is Leon Vinton, the most notorious gambler and *roue* in the city! And he dared to speak to *you*! What did he mean by it? You surely do not know him. Tell me?"

Still she did not speak. It seemed to her that her tongue clove to the roof of her mouth.

She had thought that her enemy was dead—had she not seen him lying cold and still, with his heart's blood staining the snowy earth? Yet there he walked, smiling, evil, triumphant. The horror of the sight struck her dumb.

"You will not answer me," passionately cried her husband. "Very well. I will wring the truth from that insolent villain! I will know why he dared bow and speak to *my* wife. Drive on home, madam; I will follow the villain and make him retract the insult!"

He sprang from the moving phaeton at the imminent risk of his neck, and followed Leon Vinton with a quick stride down the road.

Like one in a fearful dream, Queenie gathered the reins in her trembling hands and drove recklessly homeward through the beautiful sunshine.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

The angry husband followed Leon Vinton's leisurely steps, and quickly overtook him.

Placing one hand on the villain's shoulder with a grasp like steel, Captain Ernscliffe whirled him round face to face.

A malevolent sneer curved the lips of the handsome scoundrel as he recognized his assailant. He tried to shake himself free from that painfully tight grasp, but it was useless. He seemed to be held in a vise.

"Unhand me, sir," he said, in a voice of angry expostulation.

"Villain!" exclaimed Captain Ernscliffe, in a low, deep voice of concentrated passion. "How dared you speak to my wife? Apologize immediately for the insult."

Leon Vinton's face assumed a blank stare of astonishment.

"Does *she* consider it an insult to be recognized by an old friend?" he inquired, in a voice of mocking courtesy.

Captain Ernscliffe's brow grew as dark as night. He shook the sneering scoundrel by the shoulder as though he would have shaken the life out of him.

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"How dare you claim her as an old friend?" he thundered. "You whose acquaintance is a disgrace to any woman. You, the most notorious and unprincipled villain in the city. Retract those words

before I kill you."

"Come, come," answered Vinton, coolly and maliciously, "I am but speaking the truth. As for killing, let me remind you that two can play at that game. I have a pistol in my pocket, and I believe I am a better shot than you are. But your wife, as you call her, is not worthy the shedding of an honest man's blood! I will keep my weapon in its place, and all I ask you is to confront me with the lady whose honor you are so zealously defending. I think she will not dare to deny that once she claimed me as her *dearest* friend!"

Captain Ernscliffe drew back his hand to strike him in the face, but something in his enemy's words and looks seemed to stagger him. He hoarsely exclaimed:

"I will not pollute the pure air she breathes with your foul presence. As for you, *liar*, beware how you assert things that you cannot prove."

"Hard words break no bones," laughed Leon Vinton, seeming to take downright pleasure in tormenting the other. "I'm determined not to be angry with you, for I do not think the lady we are discussing is worth the trouble. I can prove all that I assert, and more besides."

"How? How?" exclaimed Ernscliffe, in sheer amaze at his unparalleled effrontery.

"I *could* prove it by the lady herself, but since you refuse to admit me to her presence, come with me to my home, a few miles from the city, and my housekeeper shall show you the elegant rooms Mrs. Ernscliffe occupied when she was my dear friend and guest for a year."

The cool, insolent assertion fell on Captain Ernscliffe's ears like a thunderbolt. He staggered back and stared at the calm, smiling villain in wonder mingled with indefinable dread.

"My God!" he muttered, half to himself, "you would not make such an assertion unless you could prove it."

"I can prove every assertion I have made," was the confident reply. "Queenie Lyle ran away with me the day her mother and sisters went to Europe. She lived with me nearly a year. I can prove this, remember."

"You married her!" gasped his adversary, his eyes starting, his face as white as death.

Leon Vinton looked at that pale, anguish-stricken face, and laughed aloud, the mocking laugh of a fiend.

"Married her?" he asked, sneeringly. "Oh, no, I am not one of the marrying kind. She knew that, but she loved me, and was content to live with me on my own terms."

There was a blank silence. Captain Ernscliffe dimly felt that the agony he was enduring was commensurate with the pains of hell.

Leon Vinton enjoyed his misery to the utmost.

"We lived together a year," he went on, after a moment. "At first we were very loving and very happy, but well—you know how such cases always terminate—we wearied of each other. She was a spit-fire and a termagant. She pushed me into the river and tried to drown me. She thought she had succeeded, and ran away home. Her family kept her fatal secret, and married her off to you."

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"This is horrible if true!" ejaculated the listener.

"Come," said Leon Vinton, "go home with me. My carriage is outside the gate. I merely chose to saunter in the park. You shall see her letters to me, you shall hear what my housekeeper knows about the matter."

"I will go with you," said Captain Ernscliffe, rousing himself as from a painful dream. "But if I find that you have lied to me, Vinton, I will kill you!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

"My poor Queenie, my poor child, you erred greatly in the deception you practiced in the beginning. It was wrong to desert your home and family as you did, but I cannot upbraid you now. Your punishment has been bitter enough. May God help you, my little one!" said Robert Lyle, smoothing the golden head that lay upon his knee with a gentle, fatherly caress.

Queenie had come back from that ride which had begun so happily and found her Uncle Robert waiting for her in the drawing-room. He had declined her invitation to make his home with her, and taken quarters at a hotel, but there were very few days when he failed to visit her. To-day when she came staggering in, looking so fearfully white and death-stricken, he saw at once that some fearful thing had happened to her, and started up in alarm.

"Queenie, my dear, what is it? Are you ill?" he exclaimed, going to her, and taking her cold, nerveless hand in his.

She looked up at him, and Robert Lyle never forgot the tearless despair, the utter agony of her white face and wild, blue eyes. They haunted his dreams for many nights after. Yet she tried to smile, and the smile was sadder than tears.

"I—I—yes, I believe I am ill," she said, dropping down into a great arm-chair. "I will sit here and rest, Uncle Rob! I shall be better presently."

"Let me get you some wine," he said. "It will revive you."

"No, no, I will not have anything!" she said. "Nothing could help me."

The tone made his heart ache, it was so hopeless.

He bent over her and removed her hat and gloves as deftly and tenderly as a woman could have done.

His anxious looks, his tender solicitude made her think of her father.

The tender recollection broke down the barriers of stony calm she was trying to maintain. Bowing her face on her hands she wept and sobbed aloud.

Mr. Lyle was greatly shocked and distressed at her vehement exhibition of grief. He brought a chair, and sitting down beside her, put his kindly old arm about her heaving shoulders. [Pg 107]

"Tell your old uncle what grieves you, pet," he said. "Perhaps I can help to set it right."

And after a little more passionate weeping she answered, without looking up:

"It is one of those troubles that nothing can set right, Uncle Rob, but I will tell you the truth, for perhaps you may hear it from other lips than mine soon."

She stole one hand into his and nestled her bright head against his shoulder.

"Promise not to hate me, Uncle Rob," she whispered through her tears. "I have only you now. Father, mother, sisters, husband—I have lost them all. In all the wide world I have but you to love me!"

"My dear, you talk wildly," he said, in wonder. "It is true that your mother and sister have shown hearts harder than the nether mill-stone to you, but you have the noblest and most loving husband in the world!"

"He will not love me any longer when he has heard all that I am going to tell you, Uncle Rob," she murmured through her choking sobs.

And then she told him the shameful story of that missing year of her life as she had told it to Sydney a few months before; but it was not so hard to tell now, for instead of her sister's scornful looks and cruel words, she had a listener as tender and pitying as her own father had been—a listener whose tears fell more than once on the golden head bowed meekly on his shoulder.

And when it all had been told and the weary head had slipped down to his knee, he had no reproaches for the suffering young heart that had already been so cruelly punished. He could only repeat:

"My poor little one, my poor little one, may God help you!"

"And you'll not desert me, Uncle Rob—not even if—*if he* does?" she murmured.

"No, never," he answered, fondly. "I'll stand by you, Queenie, if all the world forsakes you. You never meant to do wrong, I know that, and I will not scorn you because a devil in human shape has made desolate the fair young life that opened with such sweet promise. If Lawrence deserts you, we will go away together—you and I, pet—and wander around the world, restless and lonely, and yet not altogether desolate, for we shall still have each other for comfort and support."

"But, oh, Uncle Rob, I love him so, I love him so. How can I give him up now, when I have been so happy with him? It is more than I could bear. He had as well plunge a knife into my heart and lay me dead before him as to leave me now," cried the wretched young wife, giving way to a very abandonment of grief.

Uncle Rob could only say:

"My poor Queenie, my poor darling, let us hope for the best!"

He did not know how to comfort her, for he could not tell what course Captain Ernscliffe would pursue after hearing Leon Vinton's garbled version of Queenie's early error. He hoped for the best; but he feared the worst. [Pg 108]

He could not bear to leave her in her sorrow, so he remained with her until the luncheon hour, hoping that Captain Ernscliffe might return while he—her uncle—was present, that he might defend her from his possible reproaches. But the hours passed slowly by, and dinner was announced, yet he failed to come.

They made no pretence at eating—these two sorrowing ones. They remained in the drawing-room alone, talking but little, and both on the alert for Captain Ernscliffe's coming. But the lovely, starry night had fallen, and the lamps were lighted before a strange step ran up the marble steps, and a letter was handed to Queenie.

"It is from Lawrence," she said, tearing it open with a sinking heart.

"MADAM," her husband wrote, "I have heard the whole disgraceful story of the year you were supposed to have been absent in Europe from the lips of Leon Vinton and his housekeeper. I need not ask you if he told the truth. Your looks when you met him to-day were sufficient corroboration of his story. No wonder you looked so ghastly at the reappearance of the man you thought you had murdered. Oh, God! to think of it. You whom I have loved so madly, whom I thought so true and pure—you, a sinner, with a soul as black and unrepentant as a fiend in Hades!

"To-morrow I shall institute proceedings for a divorce. I can no longer lend the shelter of my name to one who has so basely deceived and betrayed me!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

The letter dropped from Queenie's shaking hand, and she fell heavily into a seat, her slender form trembling with great, tearless emotion.

"Oh, God!" she moaned, "it is indeed a bitter cup that is pressed to my lips! A disowned daughter and sister, and a divorced wife!"

"What does he say, Queenie?" inquired her uncle, pausing in his weary march up and down the room.

She silently pointed to the letter that lay upon the carpet, where it had fallen from her hands.

He picked it up and read it, then turned his kindly blue eyes upon her with an expression of pity and distress.

"The scoundrel Vinton must indeed have traduced and maligned you to have elicited such a scathing letter from your devoted husband. Let me go and bring Lawrence to you, Queenie, that you may vindicate yourself."

But she shook her head sorrowfully yet firmly.

"No Uncle Rob; he asks for no defense from me; he tacitly accepts all that Vinton has told him as the truth. He will hear nothing from you or me. There is nothing left me but to hide myself somewhere in the great cruel world and die," she said, with inexpressible bitterness.

"Queenie, let me entreat you not to throw away your happiness thus. Let me explain everything to Lawrence as you have told it to me. He could not be hard upon you then. He would see how cruelly you had been wronged, and how much you had suffered for it. If he loves you as much as he has seemed to do he could not but forgive you."

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She took the letter from his hand and glanced over its brief contents again.

"No, no, his love must have been dead indeed before he could write to me so cruelly as this. Let him think what he will, Uncle Rob. The best is bad enough; so why should I try to vindicate myself? He shall have his freedom since he wants it so much."

"But, my dear, surely you will not permit the divorce without contesting it? Think what a terrible thing it would be to remain silent in such a case. A divorced woman is always a disgraced woman in the eyes of the world, no matter how unjustly the verdict was given against her. It must not be permitted. We must engage a lawyer to defend your case. I do not believe that your husband could obtain a divorce from any court in the land if the truth of the matter were rightly known."

"Do you think that I would belong to him and bear his name against his will?" she exclaimed, with all the passion and fire of tone and gesture that had won her fame and fortune on the tragic stage. "No, never, *never!* I will not raise my hand to stay the divorce. I will be silent, whatever they lay to my charge. His quick unkindness, his readiness to believe evil against me, has been the bitterest of all to bear, but I will not speak one word to let him know it. My heart shall break in silence!"

He gave up the point, seeing that it was utterly useless to urge it upon her.

"Since you are determined to sacrifice yourself thus on the altar of Vinton's fiendish revenge," he said, "tell me what I can do for you, my poor child. You will not wish to remain at Ernscliffe's house, of course?"

"Of course not," she answered.

Then after a moment's thought, she said, abruptly:

"Why, Uncle Rob, I shall have to go upon the stage again. I had forgotten until this moment that I am poor, that I have nothing at all to live upon. When I gave up my theatrical career and returned to my husband, I deeded away, with his consent, all my earnings on the stage to build a free church for the poor of London."

"You shall never go upon the stage again with my consent," he answered. "I have enough for us both to live in luxury all our lives. It is true I have lost a few thousands recently by the failure of a bank, but that is a mere nothing. I am a very wealthy man yet. You shall be my dear and honored daughter so long as I live, Queenie, and my heiress when I die."

She thanked him with a silent, eloquent glance.

"And now," he continued, "it will not do for you to remain in Ernscliffe's house any longer than to-morrow. Let your maid pack your trunks for you to-night, and to-morrow I will take you away to some health resort—the mountains or the seashore—anywhere you like, so that I get you out of this city."

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"And I shall never see my husband again," she said, clasping her hands with a gesture of despair. "Oh, how fleeting and evanescent was my dream of happiness! How can I live without him now, when I have been so happy with him?"

Uncle Robert took her tenderly in his arms, and kissed her white forehead.

"It is hard, dear," he said, "but we learn after awhile to do without the things that have been dearest to us on earth. I lost the darling of my heart many years ago. It was very hard to bear at

first, but after awhile I learned patience and resignation."

"You have loved and lost?" she said, looking at him in great surprise.

"Yes, pet. Did you think I was a crusty, forlorn old bachelor from choice? No, no; I was betrothed to a sweet and lovely girl in my early youth, but she went away to live with the angels, and I have been true to her memory ever since."

"Poor uncle! I did not know you had so sad a secret in your life," she said, with the dew of sympathy shining in her beautiful blue eyes.

"Every heart knoweth its own bitterness," answered the kind, old man, sadly.

The next day he took her away to the seashore, hoping that the change of air and scene might divert her mind from its sorrows.

It was a vain hope. Her terrible trouble was too deeply graven on her mind. She became ill the day they took possession of their cottage, and for several weeks lay tossing with fever, closely attended by a skillful physician and two careful old nurses, while Mr. Lyle veered to and fro, his gentle heart nearly broken by this unexpected stroke of fate.

But at length, when they had almost begun to despair of her recovery, her illness took a sudden turn for the better.

She began to convalesce slowly but surely, and one day she turned the nurses out of the room and sent for her Uncle Robert.

"I want to ask you something," she said, putting her feverish, wasted little hand into his strong, tender clasp.

"I am listening, dear," he answered, kindly.

"Has—has that divorce been granted yet?" she inquired, flushing slightly.

"Oh, no, my dear. Your husband has applied for it, but they have been waiting since your illness to know what steps you will take in the matter—whether or not you would engage a lawyer and contest the divorce. I would not give them any satisfaction while you were sick, for I thought you might change your mind."

"I *have* changed my mind, Uncle Rob," she said. "I mean to contest the divorce. There is a reason now" (she blushed and drooped her eyes from his perplexed gaze) "why I should try to save my fair fame as much as I can. Not that I wish to live with Lawrence again, whether there is a divorce or not, but I wish to defend my own honor and leave behind me as pure a name as I can. You will secure an able lawyer for me, will you not, Uncle Robbie?"

"Yes, darling, you shall have the best counsel that money can procure," he answered, deeply moved at her earnest words.

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CHAPTER XXXIX.

Captain Ernscliffe sat alone in the spacious library of his elegant mansion.

The windows were raised, and the rich curtains of silk and lace were drawn back, admitting the bracing October air.

The playful breeze lifted the dark, clustering locks from his high, white brow, and wafted to his senses the delicate perfume of roses and lilies that filled the vases on the marble mantel.

The evening sunshine lay in great, golden bars on the emerald-velvet carpet.

But none of these beautiful things attracted the attention of the master of this luxurious mansion.

He sat at his desk with an open book before him, and a half-smoked cigar between his white, aristocratic fingers; but the fire had died out on the tip of his prime Havana, and the idle breeze turned the leaves of his book at its wanton will.

He sat there, perfectly still and silent, in his great arm-chair, staring drearily before him, a stern, sad look on his handsome face, the fire of a jealous, all-consuming passion smouldering gloomily in the beautiful dark eyes, half veiled by their sweeping lashes.

He had been trying to read, but the strange unrest that possessed him was too great to admit of fixing his attention on the author, yet now he slowly repeated some lines that caught his eye as the light breeze fluttered the book leaves:

"Falsar than all fancy fathoms, falsar than all songs have sung."

"Ah! she is all that, and more," he exclaimed, bitterly, showing by those quick words where his thoughts were.

A slight cough interrupted him. He looked up quickly and saw Robert Lyle standing within the half-open door. The old man moved forward deprecatingly.

"Pardon my abrupt entrance, Captain Ernscliffe," he said; "I knocked several times without eliciting a reply, so I ventured to enter through the half-open door."

Captain Ernscliffe arose and shook his visitor's hand with a cordiality tempered by an indefinable

restraint.

"Pray make no apologies, sir," he said. "They are quite unnecessary."

He placed a chair for the visitor, then resumed his own seat, gazing rather curiously at the pleasant-looking, kindly old gentleman, who reminded him so much of his wife's father.

What had brought him there, he wondered, with some slight nervousness at the thought.

Mr. Lyle looked a little nervous, too. He wiped the dew from his fine old forehead, and remarked that it was a warm day.

"I suppose so," assented the host in a tone that seemed to say he had not thought about it before.

"I have come on a thankless mission, Lawrence," Mr. Lyle said, with some slight embarrassment. [Pg 112]
"At least on an unsolicited one. I wish to speak to you of—of Queenie."

Captain Ernscliffe flushed crimson to the roots of his hair, and then grew deathly pale.

"I must refer you to my counsel, then," he answered, after a pause. "I have nothing to say about her myself."

"Lawrence!"

The gently rebuking tone in which the one word was uttered made the hearer start. He looked up quickly.

"Well, sir?"

"Do you know that you are treating my niece very unfairly in this matter. It is cruel to condemn her with her defense unheard."

"She condemned herself, Mr. Lyle, without a word from anyone else. Her guilt and shame were written all too legibly on her face the moment she looked upon Leon Vinton."

"Let us grant that she had reason to be ashamed of his acquaintance, Lawrence. Still may there not be some extenuation for her fault?"

"None, none! The more I think of it the blacker her dreadful sins appear. Oh, my God, to think of her with her face as lovely as an angel's, and her heart all black with sin! To think how I trusted and loved her, and how basely she repaid my confidence! How cruelly she deceived and betrayed me!" exclaimed the outraged husband, rising from his seat and pacing the floor excitedly.

"I cannot effect any compromise, then?" said Mr. Lyle, irresolutely. "You are bent on a divorce, I suppose. A separation would not content you?"

"Did *she* send you to ask this?" angrily exclaimed Captain Ernscliffe, pausing in his restless tramp to glare furiously at the would-be peacemaker.

"No, Lawrence, I told you I came on an unsolicited mission. Queenie knows nothing of my coming, and would not thank me for having asked that useless question. She asks no favors from you, but she means to defend her honor, and fight the divorce which would brand her with shame."

"My counsel and hers will settle that affair. In the meantime, why this useless dallying for long months on the pretence of illness? Why does she shirk appearing at court in answer to the summons? If not guilty, why does she not hasten to protest her innocence?"

"Queenie is ill, Captain Ernscliffe—has been ill for months. But we hope now that she may soon be able to appear at court and confront her accusers."

"Why does she not instruct her lawyer to manage the case without her if she is unable to be present herself? This suspense is unendurable. If this delay is continued much longer, I shall endeavor to push the matter without her. I am tired of this dilly-dallying!"

They looked at each other a moment in silence. Then the elder man said, with a repressed sigh:

"That is one thing I came to ask you, Lawrence. Grant us this much grace, my poor, unfortunate Queenie, and her fond, old uncle. Do not push the matter for a little while. Wait until she can come into court and tell her own story before her fiendish accusers." [Pg 113]

"But, Mr. Lyle, I am growing too impatient to wait longer. I chafe at the bonds that bind me to that beautiful deceiver."

"They will not bind you much longer," Mr. Lyle answered, sadly. "Either death or the law will soon sever your hated fetters."

Captain Ernscliffe started and looked at the speaker wildly.

"Death," he said, with an uncontrollable shudder. "Why do you talk of death? What is this mysterious illness that has held her in its chains so long? She used to be strong and well. She never talked of weakness."

"I cannot tell what ails her, Lawrence," said Mr. Lyle, rising as if the conference were ended, "but I have the word of her physician to tell you that within a month she will either be able to appear in court, and do what is necessary to defend her rights, or she will be in her grave. In either case you will be free."

The words fell coldly on Lawrence Ernscliffe's hearing, chilling the hot and passionate tide of resentment that hurried through his heart.

He thought with an uncontrollable pang of all that bright, fair beauty he had loved so long and so

fondly lying cold in the grave—those lips that had kissed him so tenderly sealed in death, the white lids shut forever over the heaven of love in those soft blue eyes.

"Will that content you, Lawrence?" asked the old man, wistfully, pausing with his hat in his hand. "A month is not so very long."

"That depends on the mood one is in," was the unsatisfactory reply.

"But you will wait?" Mr. Lyle said, almost pleadingly.

There was a minute's pause, and then the answer came, coldly:

"I will wait."

"Thanks—and farewell," said Mr. Lyle, passing silently out of the room.

The outraged husband was alone once more, the red glow of the sunset shining into the room and touching with its tender warmth his pallid, marble-like features.

He could not rest. Mr. Lyle's words re-echoed in his ears, turning his warm blood to an icy current that flowed sluggishly through his benumbed veins.

"In a month she may be in her grave—oh! the horror of that thought," he said, aloud.

Yes, it was horror. He thought he hated her—she had deceived him so bitterly—he thought he was anxious to sever the tie that bound them together; he thought he never wished to look upon her beautiful, false face again.

And yet, and yet those words of Mr. Lyle's staggered him. He reeled beneath the suddenness of the blow. He asked himself again as he had asked Mr. Lyle:

"What is this mysterious illness that holds her in its chains?"

He did not know, he did not dream of the truth. If he had known it, he must surely have forgiven her and taken her back. He could not have hated her longer, even though she had sinned and deceived him. For he had loved her very dearly, and she was his wife. [Pg 114]

But he said to himself:

"Why should I care if she dies? She deceived me shamefully. She can never be anything to me again. In either case, as that old man said, I shall be free. What will it matter to me, then, if she be dead or alive; I shall never see her again!"

And then when he began to understand that she might die before her testimony was given before the court in her own defense, he became conscious of a vague feeling of disappointment. He knew now that he had been very anxious all along to hear what his wife would say when she stood face to face with her accuser. Perhaps, after all, she could vindicate herself. If not, why was she so anxious to make the attempt?

"Have I wronged her?" he asked himself, suddenly. "Should I have condemned her without hearing her version of that villain's story? Ah! he would not have dared deceive me!"

CHAPTER XL.

Suddenly a serving-man entered with a card in his hand.

"A gentleman to see you, sir," he said.

Captain Ernscliffe took the bit of pasteboard in his hand and looked at it.

He started with surprise as he did so.

"C. M. Kidder," was the name he read.

It was the famous London detective whom he had employed to hunt down Sydney's dastardly murderer.

"What is he doing here in America—in this city?" thought Captain Ernscliffe, in surprise.

"Show the gentleman into this room," he said to the man.

Mr. Kidder came briskly in a moment after.

He was a shrewd-looking little man, well-dressed and gentlemanly.

"You are surprised to see me here," he said, after they had exchanged the usual greetings.

"Yes," admitted the host. "Do you bring news?"

The little man's black eyes sparkled.

"The best of news," he answered, blithely. "I have run the game down."

"That is indeed the best of news," said his employer, his face lighting up. "But I don't quite understand why you are here, in the United States."

"You don't?" said Mr. Kidder, with a good-natured laugh. "Well, I am here because my man is here. I have followed him across the seas."

"Is it possible?" exclaimed the listener, with a start.

"Yes, it is true. I have had a weary hunt for him, but I have unearthed him at last, thanks to Elsie Gray."

"Elsie Gray! Ah, yes, I remember, she was my wife's maid who disappeared so strangely the night of the murder. You say she helped you. Where is she now?" [Pg 115]

"She crossed the ocean with me. She is here in this city, and will be the chief witness in the prosecution. She witnessed the murder, and recognized the criminal at that moment as a former lover of your present wife. She pursued him, and was on his track when I found her."

"It has been almost a year since that dreadful night," said Captain Ernscliffe. "He must have been very clever to evade justice so long."

"He was a cunning, accomplished villain," said Mr. Kidder. "I followed him for weary months, but he managed to elude me every time when I began to think I had run him to earth. I lost him altogether for awhile, and then I discovered that he had left the country and sailed for the United States. I at once secured my witness, Elsie Gray, and followed him."

"But he may elude you here as he did in Europe," said Captain Ernscliffe, looking disappointed.

"It is not at all likely," said Mr. Kidder, laughing, "for I have already had him arrested and lodged in prison. No, do not thank me," he added, as his employer poured out a torrent of praises and thanks. "Rather thank Elsie Gray. But for her indefatigable exertions, and the valuable information she gave me, I might never have succeeded in my undertaking."

"She shall have my thanks, and something more substantial beside. The reward shall be doubled, and she shall share it equally."

"She has already promised to go shares with me," said the detective, so significantly and demurely that Captain Ernscliffe could not fail to understand his meaning.

"So she will marry you?" he said, smiling, and then, gazing curiously at the happy, little man, who was not more than thirty years old, he added: "Pardon me, but you are quite young, and Mrs. Ernscliffe's maid was quite middle-aged, was she not?"

"Oh, no, she was quite young and pretty," said the detective, laughing his happy, good-humored laugh.

"But surely—" began the listener.

"Mrs. Ernscliffe's maid was in disguise, both as to name and appearance," said Mr. Kidder, interrupting him. "Perhaps a bit of her history might interest you, sir, seeing that she has served you a good turn."

"I should like to hear it," said Captain Ernscliffe. "But wait a moment, Kidder, until I ring for lights. It is growing dark."

When the gas was lighted, and the curtains dropped over the windows, he turned back to his visitor and said:

"Go on, Kidder, let me hear Elsie Gray's history."

"Well, sir, Elsie Gray's true name is Jennie Thorn, and she is not more than twenty years old.

"She was a poor farmer's daughter when this man whom she has tracked to his doom deceived and ruined her under a pretense of marriage.

"The poor girl went home to her parents, but her honest father drove her away with curses when he discovered her condition and learned her sad story." [Pg 116]

"Her mother secretly befriended her, and found her a place to stay in hiding until her child was born.

"Fortunately for the poor girl it was born dead, and then she set out upon a mission which she had sworn to accomplish—her revenge upon the man who had betrayed her.

"In the meanwhile her enraged father had shot the deceiver, and thinking him dead had fled the country.

"But the wicked deceiver was proof against his enemy's bullet. He was born to be hung, you see, sir, and he was proof against anything else.

"So he got well, and was clear out of the country before poor Jennie was on her feet again. She was sorely disappointed, but she bided her time."

Captain Ernscliffe began to look as if he took an interest in the history of the farmer's pretty daughter.

"She sought for him everywhere as far as her money would carry her," went on the detective, "but she never saw or heard of her enemy.

"At length her mother came to the city with her, and together they continued their unrelenting quest, for they both had sworn to take a terrible revenge upon the destroyer of innocence."

He paused a moment, and Captain Ernscliffe, half forgetful of his own troubles in this sorrowful story, exclaimed:

"Go on, Kidder. I am very much interested in Jennie Thorn's sad story."

"One night they went to the theater," continued the detective, "and there they saw upon the stage the beautiful lady that is now your wife."

"Ah!" exclaimed Captain Ernscliffe, with a start.

"Yes, sir; you begin to get an inkling of things now," said Kidder. "Well, to go on, Jennie Thorn recognized the lady. She had seen her before, and knew that the man who had wronged her was an enemy of Madame De Lisle. She knew that they hated each other, and that he had sworn to take a terrible revenge upon her. Well, sir, in that minute Jennie Thorn began to see what would be her own best chance to find her betrayer again."

Captain Ernscliffe was growing too excited to keep his seat. He rose and paced up and down the room, his arms folded over his broad breast, his burning gaze fixed on the detective's shrewd, intelligent face.

"She knew that the man would follow Madame De Lisle like her evil genius, and she determined to keep near the beautiful actress. The next day she disguised herself as an elderly woman, changed her name, and went into your wife's service as her maid."

Captain Ernscliffe gazed at him silently. He began to comprehend now.

"There's little more to tell, sir. Jennie left her mother in the United States and followed Madame De Lisle across the ocean.

"At first the actress had an old couple of actors with her—the same that adopted her and taught her their profession—but they both died. [Pg 117]

"The old man sickened first and died, and his wife soon followed him to the grave.

"Then the actress grew attached to Jennie, and would not have parted with her for anything.

"Her middle-aged appearance was a protection to the young lady who was so beautiful and so lonely, and she never suspected that her elderly maid was other than what she seemed.

"Jennie was contented to remain with her; but though she followed her like a shadow she never saw her base betrayer until the night of the murder.

"That night a small boy came to the dressing-room with that fatal letter.

"It was so unusual an occurrence that Jennie stealthily followed him out and saw where he had gone.

"Hidden behind the curtains of a window, she watched the man outside the western door.

"Almost at the moment that she recognized him she saw him spring to the door.

"She parted the curtains and saw the steel flashing in his hand, to be buried the next moment in the heart of the woman coming up to him."

He paused a moment at Captain Ernscliffe's hollow groan; then continued:

"Jennie told me that the wild scream of anguish that rose the next moment nearly broke her heart.

"She thought it was her dear, kind mistress whom he had killed, and she was filled with the fury of the tigress.

"She sprang over the fallen body, and followed the murderer, who was hurrying away.

"She caught him by the arm, and fastened her teeth in his arm.

"He shook her off and ran away. She sprang after him.

"She followed him to a house, but he escaped from it, or eluded her somehow, and she took quarters in the vicinity, and was watching the place when I found her.

"With the information she gave me I succeeded in tracing him further, and finally we tracked him down.

"He is at this moment in prison, and if he gets his dues he will swing from the gallows right speedily. A blacker-hearted villain never walked upon the earth."

There was silence for a time, and then the detective added:

"When I landed herein this city, with Jennie in my charge, we found that her mother was dead.

"The poor girl has not a friend on earth, and she has promised to marry me to-day, and after the trial is over she will return to England with me.

"She is a good, sweet, true girl, and I don't bear any grudge against her because she has suffered from the arts of a villain through her too confiding innocence."

"You have my congratulations, my fine fellow," said Captain Ernscliffe, heartily. "But do you know that you have forgotten to tell me the name of the man who murdered my poor Sydney?" [Pg 118]

"Why, really, have I neglected to mention his name? You must excuse me, Captain Ernscliffe, for it is one of the traits of my profession to be chary of mentioning names. The man belongs right here in this city, and is a notorious gambler and rogue. He is as handsome as a prince, as wicked as the devil, and his name is Leon Vinton."

CHAPTER XLI.

"If there be any whom you have not yet forgiven; if there be any wrong you yet may right, let not the sun go down upon your wrath, my son, for verily, you must forgive as you would be forgiven. Upon no less terms than these can you win the pardon and absolution of Heaven."

It was the voice of the solemn, black-robed priest, and he stood in the gloomy cell of a convicted murderer, who, before the sunset of another day was to expiate his terrible sin by a felon's death.

Even now from the gloomy prison-yard outside could be heard the awful sound of the hammers driving the nails into his scaffold.

Upon the low, cot bed reclined the handsome demon whom we have known in our story as Leon Vinton.

Wasted and worn in his coarse prison garb and clanking fetters, there was still much of that princely beauty left that had lured youth and innocence to their deadly ruin.

But the reckless, Satanic smile was gone from his pallid, marble-like features now, and a glance of anguished terror and dread shone forth from his hollow, black eyes.

Like many another wretched sinner in his dying hour, Leon Vinton was afraid of the vengeance of that God whom he had despised and defied all his wicked life.

All day the priests had been with him, praying, chanting, exhorting, and now the chilly, gloomy December day was fading to its close, and the long, dreary night hurried on—his last night upon the beautiful earth, through which he had walked as a destroying demon, scattering the fire-brand of ruin and remorse along his evil pathway.

"And now he feels, and yet shall know,
In realms where guilt shall end no gloom,
The perils of inflicted woe,
The anguish of the liar's doom!
He hears a voice none else may hear,
It bids his burning spirit pause;
It bids thee, murderer! appear
Where angels plead the victim's cause!"

Almost a year had passed since the tragic death of unhappy Sydney Lyle. Now outraged justice was about to avenge her death.

Conviction had followed swiftly upon the murderer's arrest and imprisonment.

When he had left poor Jennie Thorn, his betrayed and ruined victim, fainting upon the floor, with his demoniacal words ringing in her ears, he had little dreamed how and when he should meet her again.

Perhaps he thought she would pass silently from his life as other wronged ones had done, and never be seen or heard of again. [Pg 119]

Not the slightest premonition of evil had come to tell him that the hatred he had stirred to life in her once loving heart would pursue him to the scaffold.

Yet so it was, and Jennie Thorn had stood up in the witness-box and given, under oath, the testimony that had cost him his life—had given it gladly, triumphantly, without one thrill of pity or regard for the man she had once loved and trusted.

Well, it was all over now—the trial was a thing of the past—to-morrow the sentence of the law would be carried out and his neck would be broken upon the scaffold.

Many a time when he thought of it now with a sick and shuddering horror, he recalled the angry words that Queenie Lyle had spoken to him years ago:

"They cannot be drowned who are born to be hung."

His reckless, wicked career was over. He had cheated men of their substance at the gaming-table, he had robbed women of what was dearer, their peace and honor, without a thought of the retribution that would fall on him from the God he had offended.

But now when the priest came to him and told him solemnly and sadly what terrors awaited him if he died unrepentant, remorse and terror struck their terrible fangs into his guilty heart.

"I have done many wrongs that nothing can ever set right, father," he said humbly to the meek priest. "But there is one black falsehood hanging heavy on my heart, one sin I may in some little way atone for. Will you send Lawrence Ernscliffe to see me to-night? I will tell him how cruelly I wronged the lovely woman he married and how pure and innocent she was then and ever. And Jennie Thorn, father. Will you ask her to come and see me? I will beg her to forgive me."

"I will send Captain Ernscliffe to you, my son, if he will come, but Jennie Thorn—that is impossible!"

"Is she so bitter and unrelenting, then!" said the prisoner, sadly.

"Let us hope not," said the gentle priest. "But she is gone away, my son."

"Immediately after your trial and conviction she left the United States and returned to England as the wife of the detective who effected your arrest."

The prisoner sighed and bent his head.

The priest bowed over him a moment, murmured a benediction and passed out through the heavy

CHAPTER XLII.

A few hours later the heavy iron door was unlocked, then clanged together again, shutting Lawrence Ernscliffe in alone with the condemned prisoner.

They looked at each other in blank silence for a minute, then the visitor said coldly:

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"You sent for me?"

"Yes, I sent for you," said the prisoner, eagerly. "I have wronged you and would make reparation before—before to-morrow."

The fire of rage and hatred that flared up in the listener's eyes was dreadful to behold.

"You lied to me—how dared you do it?" he exclaimed, hoarsely. "Did I not say I would have your life if I found you out?"

"The few hours of life that remain to me are not worth your vengeance," was the quiet reply. "Sit down, Captain Ernscliffe, I would speak to you of your wife."

He pointed to a chair, but the visitor shook his head.

"No, I prefer standing. I can scarcely breathe the same air with you, Leon Vinton! Speak quickly."

"Do not look on me as your enemy now, Captain Ernscliffe," said the prisoner, deprecatingly. "I stand apart from my fellow-men as a condemned criminal about to be executed."

"Think of me as a wretched sinner trying to make peace with those whom I have wronged that I may plead for pardon before my offended God."

Captain Ernscliffe bowed silently, and the angry flash in his dark eyes faded out at the melancholy tone and air of the frightened and wretched criminal.

"I lied to you when I told you that I did not marry Queenie Lyle," said Leon Vinton, looking down and speaking in a low, hoarse voice.

"The day she ran away with me I married her, and the certificate was placed in her hands."

"She thought she was my wife, but the pretended minister who performed the ceremony was only a boon companion of mine who had served me before in such an accommodating manner."

"It was the merest farce, but Queenie thought she was my legal wife."

"She would not have gone with me else. She was as pure and innocent as an angel."

He paused a moment, but he did not look up. He could not bear to meet the tiger glare in the eyes of the man before him. Clearing his throat nervously, he continued:

"I lived with her a year, and then we mutually wearied of each other."

"Her keen intuition soon showed her that she had been deceived in me, and that I was far different from the ideal which she had placed on a lofty pedestal and worshiped for awhile as a god among men."

"She scorned me then, and I hated her because she had found me out. In my rage I told her the truth, and then I tried to kill her."

"My God!" Captain Ernscliffe muttered, clenching his hands as though he would have torn the villain limb from limb.

"I thought I had killed her," pursued Vinton. "I strangled her with both my hands."

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"I threw her down and trampled upon her beautiful face that had been her ruin."

"I hurriedly dug her a shallow grave, covered her over with the wet earth and leaves, and hastened back to the cottage by the river where we had lived together."

"Fiend!" thundered Captain Ernscliffe, springing furiously upon him.

The prisoner, chained as he was, could offer no resistance to his infuriated assailant. He did not even utter a cry.

But all in a moment Captain Ernscliffe remembered himself, and drew back before he had struck the fatal blow he had meditated. He would not harm a defenseless man.

"I will not kill you," he said, hoarsely, "but finish your story quickly. I can scarcely bear your presence."

"It was the first murder I had ever attempted," said the prisoner, after a long-drawn breath. "Naturally enough, I felt nervous over it."

"I walked up and down the river-bank for hours in the rain, trying to excuse myself to myself."

"Then all of a sudden she came up behind me, and pushed me in, and ran away."

"It was then that she went home to her parents. They took her back, kept her terrible secret, and married her to you."

"If I had let her alone then, all might have gone well," pursued the prisoner, "but I hated her for her maddened blow that dark, rainy night.

"I swore revenge. It was I who sent her the bouquet of flowers that caused her seeming death at the altar that night.

"I resurrected her, and made her a prisoner. She escaped the day that Farmer Thorn shot me.

"She thought I was dead, but as soon as I recovered from my wound I started out upon her trail again, still pursuing my hellish scheme of vengeance.

"But she escaped me for years, and I never met her again, until the night that I murdered her sister.

"I had just reached London that night, and went into the theater, full of idle curiosity to see La Reine Blanche, the beautiful idol of the hour.

"The moment she came upon the stage I recognized in the great actress the lovely girl I had treated so inhumanly.

"In an instant I conceived my diabolical plan of revenge. I hurried out of the theater, sent that note to her dressing-room, and waited at the western door.

"The woman who came had the voice, the form, the step of Queenie, and I plunged my dagger in her heart. I killed Sydney, but the blow was meant for Queenie."

He stopped, and there was silence in the gloomy prison-cell, while the criminal waited for Ernscliffe to speak.

"You are telling me the truth?" he demanded, hoarsely.

"As God is my judge, and on the word of a dying man. Let Queenie tell you her story and she will corroborate my words. I have pursued her pitilessly, remorselessly. I have wronged her beyond all reparation, yet she is as pure, and true, and innocent to-day as she was that fatal hour when I first met her, a happy, thoughtless girl, selling her painted fan to buy her simple ball-dress. My terrible sin against her is enough of itself to drag my soul down to the lowest depths of perdition!" added the prisoner, with a hollow groan.

"You have indeed sinned fearfully, and God will punish you," said Captain Ernscliffe, turning to go.

"A moment longer," pleaded the unhappy wretch. "Say that you forgive me before you go."

"Never in this world or in the next!" cried Captain Ernscliffe, furiously.

The grated door unclosing, let in the priest who was to spend the night with the condemned man. He caught their parting words.

"My son, my son," he said, laying his withered hand on Ernscliffe's arm, "forgive the poor soul; he is almost beyond your resentment. Think where his soul will be to-morrow night. Give him your hand in token of pardon."

"No, no," said the listener, shuddering; "I will not touch his hand, but—but"—with a great effort—"I will forgive him."

"Tell *her* to forgive me, too," said Leon Vinton, looking at him with his wild, frightened face. "Tell her I am sorry—tell her that I repent. She is an angel. She will forgive me."

The door closed upon the retreating form, and the gentle priest knelt down and began to pray for the guilty soul so soon to be launched into a dread eternity.

CHAPTER XLIII.

Captain Ernscliffe found that it was almost midnight when he reached home after his visit to the condemned murderer.

He was too excited for sleep, and going to the library he turned up the dimly-lighted gas and prepared to spend the remaining hours of the night among his books.

A pleasant warmth pervaded the luxurious apartment, and the fragrance of some white hyacinths, blooming in vases on the marble mantel, filled the air with sweetness.

They were Queenie's favorite flowers. He remembered the one she had worn on her breast the day he had come upon her in her strange interview with Sydney.

Breaking off a beautiful spray he pressed it to his lips, then pinned it on his coat.

"I wonder where she is now?" he said to himself, with a heavy sigh, as he drew up a chair to the table and laid his head down upon his folded arms.

Something rustled under his touch as he did so, and he looked up quickly.

There was a sealed letter lying upon the table, addressed to himself in an unfamiliar writing. It had been laid there by a servant while he was absent.

Mechanically he tore it open and glanced at the bottom of the page for his unknown [Pg 123]

correspondent's name.

"Robert Lyle," he read, aloud, with a suddenly quickened heart-beat.

Yes, it was from Robert Lyle—a brief note, coldly and curtly written.

"CAPTAIN ERNSCLIFFE," it simply ran, "I arrived in this city to-day with your wife. She is now quite well and prepared to defend her case at any time the lawyers agree upon—to-morrow, if necessary."

That was all. It was brief, cold, and to the point. Yet the reader's heart thrilled with sudden joy.

"She is here in this city; she is well," he said to himself. "Oh, how can I wait until to-morrow?"

But he waited, nevertheless, though burning with anxiety and impatience, and at the earliest permissible hour he was shown into Robert Lyle's private parlor at the hotel where he was stopping.

Mr. Lyle was sitting cozily over his morning paper and cigar, his slippered feet on the fender, his gorgeous dressing-gown wrapped comfortably around him.

He rose in some surprise as his unexpected visitor was ushered in.

"You did not expect me," said Captain Ernscliffe, as they shook hands. "I received your letter at midnight, sir, and came this morning as early as propriety would allow. I want to see my wife, Mr. Lyle," he added, in a trembling voice. "Will you take her my card and see if she will admit me to her presence?"

Mr. Lyle looked at him curiously a moment. He saw that he was struggling with some unexplained agitation, and that he had not come with any hostile intent.

He pointed toward a side door that stood slightly ajar.

"She is in there," he said; "there is no need of formalities. Go in and see her."

With a faltering step Captain Ernscliffe advanced and passed through the partly open door.

He found himself in a beautiful little dressing-room, with hangings of pale-blue silk, exquisitely furnished and pervaded with the delicate perfume of white hyacinth.

Before the bright fire burning in the polished grate a lady was sitting in a low rocker of cushioned blue satin.

He advanced toward her, then started back. He thought he had made a mistake.

For the beautiful woman sitting there in her elegant morning-robe of quilted blue satin was looking down and smiling at something that lay on her arm, nestled close and warm against her breast.

It was the pink face of a very tiny baby, wrapped in costly robes of embroidered flannel, and lace and cambric.

Captain Ernscliffe was going out quite precipitately when a low, startled voice cried out:

"Lawrence!"

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He turned back and looked more closely.

Yes, it *was* Queenie—but then—*that* baby—where on earth—and at that stage of his cogitations something flashed across his mind.

This, then, was the cause of that long, mysterious illness. What a fool he had been not to suspect it before.

He rushed to her side, and kneeling down upon the carpet, put his arms around the beautiful mother and child.

"My darling," he murmured, in a voice so broken by emotion that he could scarcely speak at all. "My precious Queenie, my own sweet wife, shall we mutually forgive and forget all that is past?"

One stifled sob of joy, and then the woman dropped her face upon his shoulder in silence.

One moment of rapturous stillness while she rested in the close clasp of his strong arm and then he whispered, with his lips against her warm cheek:

"Darling, you will forget my cruelty and come back to me—you and the little one?"

Then she lifted her head and looked at him with a happy, little laugh and a very bright blush.

"Lawrence, kiss our little boy," she said, putting the little bundle in his arms. "Is he not a pretty babe? I call him Robbie, for my uncle, who has been so good and kind in all my trouble."

"While I have been so cruel and unkind," he said, remorsefully.

"But that is all past now," she said, hopefully. "Oh, Lawrence, I thought you would never return to me again! What caused you to forgive me?"

"That villain—whom I cannot curse now because he was hung this morning—confessed all to me last night. My darling! you were cruelly wronged, and I was mad and blind to believe all the lies he told me at first."

"The best he could tell you was bad enough," she said, remorsefully. "It was wicked, it was terrible of me to have encouraged that clandestine acquaintance and secret love, deserting my

home and loved ones for a stranger of whom I knew nothing, except that he was handsome, and that his romantic wooing took my foolish heart by storm.

"Oh, the bitter consequences that have followed that act of girlish folly!

"My own deep disgrace, my father's death from a broken heart, poor Sydney's dreadful murder, mamma and Georgina's everlasting alienation from me?"

She clasped her hands, and tears stood bright as dew-drops in her soft, blue eyes.

"Yes, darling," he said, as he laid his little son back in her arms, "your youthful folly has, indeed, worked out a terrible retribution. If your tragic story could be written it might teach many parents to guard their daughters more carefully, and many a thoughtless girl might grow wiser and profit by your dreadful experience. The fitting text for such a mournful story might be, 'Girls never keep a secret from your parents!'"

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"Am I *de trop*?" asked Uncle Robert, putting his gray head and smiling face into the room at that moment.

"Never, Uncle Robert. You are one of us now, and always," said Captain Ernscliffe, bringing him in and giving him a cordial pressure of the hand.

Queenie looked up with the bright tears still shining in her eyes.

He kissed her fondly, then bent over the little babe to hide the dew of tenderness that dimmed his kindly blue orbs.

"I shall have to give up my little pet now," he said, a little sadly.

"No, you shall not, Uncle Robbie. You are to come home with us, and live with us always. You shall not live alone any longer," said Queenie, tenderly and gratefully.

Three years later, when Robbie was the loveliest and most mischievous little, dark-eyed lad that ever delighted a parent's heart, they all went abroad again.

Captain Ernscliffe, who was the fondest and most devoted husband in the world, had taken an absurd fancy that Queenie's roses were fading and that a European tour would improve her health.

So one bright, sunny morning in the month of roses, they found themselves registered as boarders at a famous health resort in Germany.

But after Captain Ernscliffe had smoked his cigar on the balcony, he came into his wife's airy room with a frown on his dark, handsome face.

"I shall have to take you away to-morrow, my dear," he said. "I have found out that your mother and sister are staying here. Of course it would be embarrassing to all parties if we remained."

"Yes, we must go away," she said, but she sighed as she spoke.

It had been a bitter cross to her that her mother and sister would not recognize her.

She loved them still, for the ties of kinship were very strong in her heart.

Now her own motherhood had made her even more gentle and loving than before.

She would have loved dearly to be friends with those proud ones who had discarded her, and to have shown her beautiful little son to his grandmother.

"Yes, we will go away to-morrow," she repeated, brushing away a quick-starting tear. "We must not trouble their peace."

But that evening, when her husband and her uncle had gone out for a walk, and she was alone with Robbie, she heard a timid and hesitating rap at her door.

"Enter," she said, looking up in some surprise.

The door opened, and Lady Valentine came abruptly into the room.

She was paler and graver than of old, and her stately form was draped in the gloomy sables of a widow. [Pg 126]

"Georgina!" exclaimed Mrs. Ernscliffe, starting up.

Lady Valentine rushed forward, and threw her arms about the trembling, hesitating figure.

"Little Queenie, my sweet, wronged sister!" she cried, "will you forgive my cruelty to you, and love your Georgie again?"

"I have never ceased to love you, Georgie," was the answer.

Lady Valentine pressed a dozen kisses on the sweet lips and wavy, golden hair.

Queenie put her gently into a chair, and then she saw a little, dark-eyed lad looking at her with a great deal of wonder.

"What a lovely boy!" she said, "and it is yours, Queenie, I know, for he looks so like your

husband."

"Yes," answered Queenie, proudly; then she led her little son up to her sister.

"Robbie, you must kiss your aunt," she said.

Lady Valentine stayed a long while with Queenie, and many mutual, touching confidences were exchanged by the long-parted sisters. At last she rose to go.

"May I have Robbie a little while?" she asked.

"You may go with your aunt, my dear," said Queenie, kissing the child.

Lady Valentine took his hand and led him away to a room where a gray-haired lady was sitting alone in the fast-falling twilight with a grave, rather sad expression on her handsome old face. Georgie lifted up Robbie and placed him on the lady's knee.

"Grandmother," she said, half-laughing, half-crying, "kiss your grandson."

"It is Queenie's child!" cried Mrs. Lyle, pressing him to her heart, and kissing him, then crying over him in her womanly joy and excitement.

"We must take him to his mother now," said Georgie. "Come, mamma," and Mrs. Lyle followed her without a word.

So when Captain Ernscliffe and Mr. Lyle returned from their walk they found them all together, Queenie's fair face perfectly radiant and every one very happy in this touching reunion.

They were never parted afterwards. When Mr. Lyle and the Ernscliffes returned to the United States Mrs. Lyle and Lady Valentine went with them. Mrs. Lyle had conceived such an affection for her little grandson that she could not bear to be separated from him. Georgina had no ties to bind her to England, so she followed them also. Many years of calm happiness came to Mrs. Ernscliffe afterward, but she never forgot the terrible secret that had almost desolated her life.

She had one daughter, a sweet and lovely girl, who bore the name of one long dead, and sometimes when she kissed and caressed her, Captain Ernscliffe would hear her say, sweetly and gravely:

"Sydney, my darling daughter, you must never have any secrets from your papa and mamma!"

[THE END.]

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Transcriber's Notes:

Images can be clicked to access higher-resolution versions.

Some missing punctuation has been added without being noted below when the original text has extra spacing suggesting that the error could have been caused by light inking of the plates rather than incorrect typography.

Some inconsistent hyphenation has been retained (e.g. "woodwork" vs. "wood-work").

A table of contents has been added.

Some archaic spellings ("hightened", "vender") have been retained.

Front Matter

Added period after "Alex" in listing for "253—A Fashionable Marriage."

Removed unnecessary period after "By" in listing for "207—Little Golden's Daughter."

Removed unnecessary period after "(Barclay North)" in listing 176.

Removed unnecessary period in "(A Wilful Young Woman)" in listing 70.

Bride of the Tomb

Page 2, changed "weath" to "wreath."

Page 4, removed "an" from "an another."

Page 5, added missing period after "testily."

Page 9, changed "ye you" to "yet you" and changed question mark to period after "fair Necropolis of the dead."

Page 19, changed ? to ! after "it was all for you." Changed "Lillie" to "Lily."

Page 27, changed "shubbery" to "shrubbery."

Page 28, added missing comma after "revive."

Page 36, changed "eat" to "ate."

Page 38, changed "pedling" to "peddling."

Page 39, changed "spring" to "sprang."

Page 41, changed "they not the heart" to "they had not the heart" ("had" is missing from Street & Smith edition but was present in original Family Story Paper appearance—thanks to Deidre Johnson for confirming this).

Page 49, capitalized 's' in "She tore off the bed-covers."

Page 53, changed "thererefore" to "therefore" and "terrible" to "terribly."

Page 55, changed "Good-nigh" to "Good-night" and "Lilly" to "Lily."

Page 60, removed unnecessary comma after "well" in "I may as well go then."

Page 61, changed "leige" to "liege."

Page 62, moved misplaced end quote in sentence beginning "No, I won't." and changed "Horace" to "Harold" in sentence beginning "Now, then." The "Horace" error is found in both the original Family Story Paper appearance of the novel and the later Street & Smith reprint; however, it is clearly a mistake as the character is referred to as Harold in every other instance.

Page 71, changed double quote to single quote before "And have you lost your heart?"

Page 72, changed "oblivous" to "oblivious."

Page 77, changed "necessrry" to "necessary."

Page 79, removed stray quote after "the old house with the stone wall."

Page 80, added missing period at end of page.

Page 81, changed "queston" to "question."

Page 84, moved close quote in quoted poem to correct position.

Page 85, changed single quote to double quote after "win him from me!"

Page 87, changed "mein" to "mien."

Page 92, changed "reconnoisance" to "reconnaissance."

Page 93, added missing period to end of second paragraph.

Page 95, changed single quote to double quote after "I have not tasted food for two days!"

Page 96, changed "Colvilie" to "Colville."

Page 98, changed "Lilly" to "Lily."

Page 102, changed "braggadocia" to "braggadocio."

Page 106, changed "deamed" to "dreamed."

Page 107, changed "The" to "They" in "They had lived their evil life."

Page 109, added missing close quote after "home to your mother."

Page 112, changed "frienziend" to "frenzied."

Page 114, added missing quote after "Perhaps so."

Page 119, changed "drectly" to "directly."

Page 120, changed "disorered" to "disordered." Changed "she" to "he" after "Pray explain yourself."

Page 121, changed "Whan" to "What."

Page 124, changed "Collville's" to "Colville's" and "familiar" to "familiar."

Page 133, changed "detect-tive" to "detective."

Page 138, added missing period after "her yearning look."

Page 143, changed "happesst" to "happiest."

Queenie's Terrible Secret

Page 3, changed "to which" to "which to" and rearranged final sentence in paragraph beginning "No, indeed." It was scrambled in the original edition.

Page 7, changed "meantim" to "meantime" and "Erscliffe" to "Ernscliffe." Added missing quotes to separate "so sweet a flower" from "Doubtless you."

Page 10, added missing open quote before "now I begin."

Page 12, added missing period after "perplexing mystery."

Page 13, added missing open quote before "Why, Papa." Changed "Sidney" to "Sydney" and "Georgiana" to "Georgina."

Page 15, changed "Sidney" to "Sydney."

Page 16, changed period to question mark after "wronged you."

Page 18, changed "confied" to "confined."

Page 19, changed "Au contrairie" to "Au contraire."

Page 23, added missing quote before "my head whirls" and changed "cologue" to "cologne."

Page 26, added missing close quote after "about my sister." Changed "stilled crowned" to "still crowned."

Page 27, changed "distaught" to "distraught."

Page 30, changed "CHAPTER IX" to "CHAPTER XI" and "endeaver" to "endeavor."

Page 33, changed "?" to "!" after "Au revoir, Mrs. Ernscliffe." Changed "?" to "." after "screams and cries."

Page 34, changed "sudder" to "shudder."

Page 35, changed "?" to "!" after "touch me."

Page 37, changed "?" to "!" after "declare to gracious."

Page 40, changed "?" to "." after "blushed deeply."

Page 41, changed "Hold you peace" to "Hold your piece."

Page 42, added missing quote after "demented little sister."

Page 46, added missing quote after "I don't blame you."

Page 48, the "h" in "sharply" is accidentally inverted in the original book. Added a missing period at the end of the page.

Page 49, changed "?" to "!" after "I don't know what you mean."

Page 50, changed "?" to "!" after "for this cruel sin." Added missing period after "hundred dollars."

Page 52, changed "quite" to "quiet."

Page 53, Removed duplicate "she" from "she she said to herself" and added missing close quote after "will not tell her."

Page 55, changed "!" to "?" in "Who killed him?" and changed "te" to "to" in "in time to see."

Page 56, removed extraneous ", or" from sentence that originally read "walk, or at a slower and more reasonable gait."

Page 57, changed "idenity" to "identity."

Page 63, added missing open quote before "Ah, Captain Ernscliffe."

Page 64, changed "." to "?" in "Will you take me home?"

Page 67, changed "ligh" to "light." Changed "were" to "where" in "hotel where La Reine Blanche." Changed "pearl-handed" to "pearl-handled."

Page 71, joined erroneously split paragraph (starting "I could not wait") and changed single to double quote after "husband!"

Page 77, changed "did I say!" to "did I say?"

Page 80, changed "dusk" to "dusky."

Page 82, added missing quote before "what ails your husband?"

Page 84, changed "you lips" to "your lips" and "were she was playing" to "where she was playing."

Page 92, removed duplicate "the" from "told him the the truth."

Page 93, removed unnecessary quote before "Queenie lifted her head."

Page 96, changed "availabe" to "available."

Page 99, changed "CHAPTER XXXVI" to "CHAPTER XXXIV."

Page 107, added missing "to" to "not so hard to tell." Changed "?" to "!" after "hope for the best."

Page 108, removed comma from "great cruel, world."

Page 115, added missing close quote after "share it equally."

Page 119, changed "condemed" to "condemned."

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BRIDE OF THE TOMB, AND QUEENIE'S
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